



Adding the Internet to Your Business Recipe

Workshops for farm-business owners

UVM Center for Rural Studies
& Women's Agricultural Network (WAgN)



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Background

- Agricultural micro-businesses are numerous in Vermont, but research shows that many of these entrepreneurs are unaware of, or intimidated by, the prospects of incorporating electronic commerce (e-commerce) and information technology into their marketing and business practices. The potential of e-commerce to help these entrepreneurs span rural distances to market and sell their products is largely untapped.
- In 2005, the Women's Agricultural Network (WAgN) wanted to investigate the demand among its participants for a new training module on information technology and e-commerce in the broader context of overall business planning and management. An investigation of use of information technology among women agricultural entrepreneurs and an assessment of their level of confidence with such technology led to the development of an e-commerce outreach and training effort conducted by the Center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont, in collaboration with WAgN.
- Sessions were held in Burlington, St. Johnsbury and Randolph between November 2006 and November 2007.

Curriculum

E-commerce covers a broad spectrum of activity ranging from posting an order form that customers print out and mail in, to an e-mail link for people to submit orders, to an interactive online store that consolidates ordering, payment and shipping.

The workshop curriculum emphasizes overall business planning and avoids presenting e-commerce as a separate issue or function. It illustrates how having an online presence can increase the visibility of a business, allow for more efficient order processing and improve the connection with customers – all without changing the flavor of the enterprise.

Most importantly, the curriculum encourages participants to think critically about the Internet and e-commerce and determine what features are appropriate for their businesses.

The curriculum was developed by CRS Senior Outreach Professional Will “Chip” Sawyer, with contributions from Jessica Hyman of CRS, Beth Holtzman of WAgN, Ken Becker of UVM's Department of Community Development and Applied Economics and Gregg Banse of 7th Pixel. Each session consisted of a mix of lectures, group discussions, small-group work and guest speakers with question and answer periods. Participants were actively involved in the discussions and asked questions freely.

The content included basic Internet and e-commerce information, tips for effective and efficient Web site development and design and strategies for incorporating e-commerce elements. The October-November 2007 session added more Web site planning information, such as search engine strategy and keywords, and included a hands-on workshop on the final day where participants learned how to manipulate images for the Web and created a simple Web site layout.

Speakers

Guest speakers were chosen for their experience with e-commerce as farmers, Web site developers and online sales and search engine specialists. One of the farmer speakers in

the third session had been a participant in the first session and subsequently launched a full e-commerce site.

The farmers spoke about how they developed their Web sites, how the sites fit into their businesses strategies, their successes and challenges and how having an Internet presence affected their businesses.

Participants

The workshops were initially marketed to WAgN members through its newsletter and a mailing, then announced to the general public through e-mail distribution networks, press releases and calendar listings in local newspapers.

There was a total of 29 participants for the three workshops, representing a wide range of businesses, including diversified family farms, value-added producers and new business owners. There was a wide range of experience and familiarity with the Internet and Web site development among the participants. Eleven of the participants had established Web sites before the workshop.

The participants cited numerous reasons for their interest in e-commerce, including plans to add an online store, to maintain contact with customers, to increase viability and sales, to expand their market and upgrade current Web sites.

Evaluation

Participants were asked to complete an evaluation form at the end of each session. The questions focused on five areas: anticipated Web-site-related changes, plans for measuring success, plans to network, preferred learning styles and the workshop structure.

A three-month follow-up Web site check and participant interview was used to evaluate progress and collect participants thoughts about the workshop and the effects it had on their businesses.

When asked to identify what elements of e-commerce would benefit their businesses, workshop participants responses ranged from full e-commerce sites to static “brochure” Web sites. Based on their thoughtful responses, it is clear that the workshop achieved its objective of educating the participants about how to make decisions about their online presence.

Also, participants with established Web sites all said they planned to make changes to the text and photos on their sites based on what they learned about keyword strategy and photo usage and formatting.

When asked about the specific skills they acquired during the workshop, most of the participants said the workshop gave them a better understanding of the Internet and how to develop an effective Web site and said they gained technical skills and an understanding of search engine procedure.

Overall, there was a high level of satisfaction with the workshops. The participants said they liked learning from peers as well as “experts.” The farmer speakers were especially well received. One participant commented that “the farmer speakers were good to show that people can do it themselves, it seemed less daunting.”

Due to the wide range of experience and comfort with the Internet among participants, some said some topics were too elementary, while others said some topics were too technical. Similarly, some participants said they would have preferred more individual attention while others wanted more broad discussions.

Here's a sampling of quotes from evaluation questionnaires and follow-up interviews:

“The workshop was a great springboard.”

“I learned so much! I now appreciate the use of keywords and have a vastly improved understanding of how a search engine works.”

“(The workshop) helped me see the implications of selling products online and how it may change a business. The class was very valuable, but I'm not ready.”

“I learned things that are so basic: I need to get serious about a shopping cart and the importance of looking at other sites.”

Discussion

The goal of the e-commerce workshops is to give participants the information and tools they need to think critically about the Internet and e-commerce and determine what features are appropriate for their businesses.

There are many levels of e-commerce, from posting an order form that customers print out and mail in, to an e-mail link for people to submit orders, to an interactive online store that consolidates ordering, payment and shipping. E-commerce is not right for all businesses. The owners must have a shippable product, the business infrastructure to maintain online sales and the time and energy to manage their Web presence.

The workshop participants who did not feel ready to initiate full e-commerce sites were encouraged to create basic Web sites or modify their existing sites to include interactive elements such as product information, event calendars or recipes.

Not all participants made progress in creating or enhancing their Internet presence. Some participants were not at an appropriate stage in their business planning. For example they did not have a firm grasp on their products or target customers. Others did not have the time, skills or financial resources to meet their Internet goals.

The target audience for these workshops was not the “early adopters” so the workshop participants tended to be more risk adverse. Future workshops may include more immediate follow-up and guidance to help the participants meet their goals.

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