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INNOVATION IN THE DESERT: TELLING THE STORIES

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INTRODUCTION

Although small businesses are the lifeblood of desert Australia, there is a lack of readily accessible information on the success factors and special needs of these enterprises. A pilot project 'Innovation in the desert: telling the stories' aimed to raise awareness by providing a forum for operators of successful small and medium enterprises from desert areas to tell their stories of best practice using video, audio and written material on the project website. The project was undertaken in 2003 by CSIRO with Desert Knowledge Australia. A website, promoting project outcomes, is accessible to a wide audience, including our main target groups which are businesses across inland Australia, the education sector and the general public in desert Australia.

INFORMATION RESOURCES

The Desert Knowledge Australia network was used to identify potential stories and to ensure that the material produced during the project would be of value to target groups. This was done through a regional representative group which regularly holds meetings by video conference and actively pursues topics of common interest across the geographical regions of Kalgoorlie, Broken Hill, Alice Springs, Pt. Augusta, Coober Pedy and Mt Isa. An enthusiastic steering committee was established for the pilot project which included representatives from this network.

There are numerous sources of generic information available on how to establish and maintain a business such as Commonwealth and State Government websites. Newsletters, e.g. 'Getting down to business' from the Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources, often highlight new or innovative enterprises. However this material does not address the particular challenges of operating a SME in desert Australia. The steering committee was particularly keen to know what issues concerned business operators in desert Australia and where businesses sought advice. Some of the questions we put to the profiled businesses included: What are some of the challenges you face? How do you address these challenges? How do you address staffing, isolation, technology and social and economic issues? What are some of the key factors in your success? Are there special factors in building a business in desert Australia? How do you recognise opportunities? When you have a small team and a product, how can you keep the team going? We asked a number of business operators during this pilot project where they sought advice. Most nominated personal, local contacts, such as Chambers of Commerce, banks, accountants and people in government agencies as preferred sources for information. Operators consistently indicated that resource material needed to be concise, relevant and presented in accessible forms. They also valued information which came directly from other business operators, whether written or oral, more highly than material which had been 'processed' by intermediaries.

PROFILED BUSINESSES

As there was a large number of potential showcase businesses and only two could be profiled in the pilot project, the steering committee decided that it was appropriate to link the selection process to another credible assessment mechanism. Telstra Small Business Awards were therefore approached and the list of their finalists for 2002 and 2003 was used for the selection process. These businesses had already been through a rigorous judging process. The first business profiled was Littlefish Pangaea, an Alice Springs-based small business which develops easy-to-understand financial reporting

material tailored to remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. In the audio interview Hugh Lovesy talks about the special requirements for doing business with Aboriginal communities. The video clip features a representative from the Urupuntja Health Clinic, situated 300km north east of Alice Springs demonstrating how the clinic uses the material developed by Littlefish Pangaea.

The second business profiled was Diab Engineering, a business based in Geraldton, W.A., which serves the mining industry in remote locations and works in direct competition with city-based operators. In this profile David Payne talks about how the partners built the business by seeking new markets and developing efficient ways to move machinery and people over large distances. David also talks about the value of training local youth.

As well as the businesses profiled and members of the steering committee, a number of local small business operators were involved in the production of the information material through website design, acquiring video footage, audio interviews and the written material.

WEBSITE

The information is hosted on the Desert Knowledge Australia website and contains business profiles as well as links to resources and desert organisations: URL www.desertknowledge.com.au/innovation.

The profiles on individual businesses include video, audio and written material. There are few graphics on the site, to minimise the time needed to load pages. The audio and video clips are approximately two minutes long and are available in two formats, one suitable for dialup viewing and the other for broadband. On Demand streaming was setup for the audio and video content for an initial period of six months. Transcripts of all audio and video material are also included on the site for visitors with slow internet connections.

Information on visitor behaviour and preferences is monitored using site statistics such as the source and duration of hits, web browsers used and referring sites. The Desert Knowledge Australia site received 18,218 hits between October 14, 2003 and March 29, 2004. Of these 2289 were to the innovations site and 21% of these hits were to the page where the video clips are located.

DISCUSSION

The site was launched by Minister Peter McGauran on October 14, 2003 and the positive signals at this time convinced us to submit another proposal for an extended project with three components: 1) to profile a further 18 businesses, 2) to conduct a trial of online tools to facilitate collaboration across geographical and organisational boundaries and 3) to provide contact information on industry specific desert businesses in areas such as horticulture, wildfood, tourism, renewable energy, housing and mining services. This component was specifically requested by members of our steering committee. The initial application was unsuccessful. However there are ongoing discussions with potential sponsors and supporters to continue the development of this project.

Our experience with the pilot project was that innovative desert businesses have interesting and informative stories to tell and are keen to share their experiences with other businesses and the wider community. We are still hopeful that sufficient resources will be found to include more businesses on the website, although we may need to rethink how we 'sell' the message of innovation.

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