



Case Study

WESST Corp

Albuquerque, New Mexico

Clare Zurawski, Albuquerque Regional Manager

The Web site, www.WesstArtisans.com, began operation in 2000 to provide artisans with a collective e-commerce site. The featured artisans were participants in a training program, MARKETLINK, offered by WESST Corp. Since most of these artists did not have their own Web sites, WesstArtisans.com provides a way for them to more readily and inexpensively establish a Web presence to expand their market reach.

History and Profile

WESST Corp, located in Albuquerque, New Mexico, has provided services to start up and existing businesses since 1989 through a statewide system of counselors, about half of whom are located in rural areas. One of the programs offered by WESST Corp is MARKETLINK, a 15-week, 45-hour program focused on helping entrepreneurs develop the “perfect pitch” – a five minute presentation to introduce their products and/or services. The seminar series provides practical information for entrepreneurs, specifically targeted to marketing issues such as pricing and identifying target customers. One session in the series is devoted to e-commerce. One group of entrepreneurs that participated in the MARKETLINK program was artisans.

Through a 1999 grant from the Kellogg Foundation, WESST Corp proposed the creation of a collective e-commerce Web site – one that would feature artists who participated in the MARKETLINK program and were interested in expanding their presence on the Internet. An initial \$15,000 investment was made to build [WesstArtisans.com](http://www.WesstArtisans.com) and ten artists joined the site, featuring 12 to 15 products per person. The Web site went online in 2000 and has featured 55 artists over time, about 25 percent of whom have gone on to create their own Web sites.

The Web site is set up in such a way that artists are encouraged to participate – membership is \$200 per year, including a photographer who will create images of the artist’s work to post online. WESST Corp gets a 25 percent commission on sales – funds that are used to support the development and operation of the site. The artist must provide the products to be photographed and the text for the site. If an artist is unable to participate in the MARKETLINK

program (the series is not offered everywhere in the state), they can work one-on-one with a WESST Corp counselor before joining the site. This requirement is not meant to create a barrier to participation but rather to insure that the artist is committed to doing the work on pricing and other aspects of marketing required to be successful with e-commerce. It is a means of determining readiness for e-commerce.

Role of e-Commerce

Many artists participate on the site because they do not have their own Web site and feel that they need to be on the Internet in order to establish credibility for their work. These artists do not have the resources to build their own e-commerce capable site so the collective nature of [WesstArtisans.com](http://www.WesstArtisans.com) is appealing to them. Participation on the site has helped the artists become savvy about Web marketing and to better understand the importance of marketing – something that can be an obstacle for artists whose interest most often is in creating art rather than marketing their business.

The benefits of joining [WesstArtisans.com](http://www.WesstArtisans.com) vary by artist. According to Clare Zurawski at WESST Corp, the site is a “sales tool for some people, a marketing tool for everybody.” The site provides a doorway or opening for the artists – it has created wholesale exposure for some artists, resulted in custom work for others, and even generated media attention for some. According to Zurawski, most feel that their participation has generated benefits, primarily credibility and exposure, even if sales are limited. In general, an artist would need to appear on the site for about two years in



Year online: **2000**
 Area Population: **448,607**
 Web site:
www.wesst.org

order for WESST Corp to collect sufficient annual membership fees to break even on development costs.

The WesstArtisans.com site may not meet the needs of all types of artists. The site is standardized so that the each artist's information is similar and the format is the same. For an artist who is looking to create a certain image via a Web site, this collective site may appear too generic. For these niche artists, investing to develop their own e-commerce capable site may make sense. However, an artist in a relatively saturated market segment may find that the added sales through e-commerce do not cover the development and operating costs of their own site. For these latter artists, the collective site makes sense.

For all the artists, the Web site is a relationship-building tool. The Web site is built to establish a connection to the artist, providing a biography as well as some background on their connection to New Mexico and their artistic training and approach. Artists can keep in touch with their customers, building a deeper relationship online than if they were dependent on customers coming to their studios, particularly in rural New Mexico. The Web site allows the artist to promote new products, describe new artistic pursuits, alert customers to shows or gallery openings, etc. In essence, the Web site is trying to emulate the experience one might have by attending an art show.

For WESST Corp, the future of the Web site is unclear. WesstArtisans.com operates at a loss currently, if staff time is figured into the business model. The MARKETLINK program is no longer being targeted to artists but to other entrepreneurs as well. As a result, many participants in a MARKETLINK class may be ineligible for the site since they are not artisans, reducing the potential pool of members for the site. Just as entrepreneurs need to continually evaluate their market and business model, WESST Corp will be undertaking this same type of self-assessment regarding the future of the site.

Lessons for Rural Entrepreneurs and Artisans who Use the Site

WESST Corp's experience with WesstArtisans.com offers a number of important lessons to rural entrepreneurs, particularly artists, who are considering e-commerce as a way to expand their businesses, and to the service providers who support them:

- Entrepreneurs need to do the research upfront on their potential domain name to avoid any issues related to intellectual property or trademark

infringement. Ideally, the business and domain name would be one and the same.

- Constructing a new Web site with e-commerce capability is expensive and requires a degree of expertise that not all rural entrepreneurs possess or have an interest in learning. As a result, a rural entrepreneur needs to be able to find someone to work with who (1) has the right skills, (2) is trustworthy, and (3) will be honest with the entrepreneur about how difficult and time consuming it will be to build a site. Organizations such as WESST Corp serve as intermediaries to entrepreneurs who are committed to getting online as a way of building their business.
- Entrepreneurs should not consider investing in the creation of an e-commerce capable Web site unless they are also committed to investing the money and time required to learn search engine optimization tools, so the site can be found by qualified customers. While there are affordable ways to achieve this optimization, entrepreneurs must be committed to doing the work themselves on an ongoing basis, or hiring someone else to do it.
- It is important to be strategic about what you hope to accomplish with your Web site. Entrepreneurs need to be clear about what they want visitors to the site to do, e.g., purchase products, browse a gallery, or learn more about the artist and her techniques, and then build the site to meet the objectives. For example, one of the current artists featured on the site, Gail Golden, is in the process of building her own Web site. She wants the site to reflect both the high quality of her jewelry and the beauty and colors of the New Mexico landscape. While she expects some retail activity, wholesalers and gallery owners are a more important target audience and, therefore, the site must be designed to provide them with the means to view and experience her work – high quality photography presented in such a way that a gallery owner can envision how the work would fit into her gallery.

From e-Commerce as a Strategy for Improving Business Vitality: Lessons Learned from Small Businesses by Deborah M. Markley, David L. Barkley, and R. David Lamie

See related case studies and learn more about e-commerce at <http://srdc.msstate.edu/ecommerce>.