



Case Study

Women's Business Center

Wiscasset, Maine

Marita Fairfield, Director and Business Counselor

The Women's Business Center at Coastal Enterprises, Inc. provides both counseling and training to women who have started or are interested in starting a business in Maine. One recent innovation in service provision has been the creation of interactive, online workshops to teach the basics of e-commerce. These virtual workshops provide rural entrepreneurs with access to training that might otherwise be difficult or costly for them to receive.

History and Profile

Coastal Enterprises, Inc. (CEI), located in Wiscasset, Maine (2000 population 3,603), was started in 1977 as a community development corporation with a mission to develop businesses in rural parts of Maine. CEI has grown over time into one of the nation's premier non-profit organizations serving rural communities. While CEI has always had a strong focus on helping women entrepreneurs, a partnership with the U.S. Small Business Administration's Office of Women Business Ownership to establish the Women's Business Center (WBC) at CEI has added additional capacity to meet the needs of this particular group of entrepreneurs.

The WBC provides counseling and training related to issues associated with general business start up, as well as more targeted assistance in the area of Internet and Web site use. It is in this latter role that the WBC has launched an innovative program to reach more women entrepreneurs – a series of online workshops accessible to entrepreneurs throughout the state. These workshops are interactive, allowing entrepreneurs to engage with the instructor and each other during the workshop. And, entrepreneurs can participate in the workshops from their business or home without spending time and money to travel to on-site workshops.

CEI started doing counseling in telecommunications and developed workshops in this area in the late 1990s. These in-person workshops were offered in Wiscasset, and in satellite offices in other parts of the state. In 2003, CEI created a virtual classroom module, offered first to small farmers and a second time in collaboration with SCORE. The current series of online workshops was launched in 2006 and now CEI sees more online workshop participants than in person.

The series begins with *Introduction to E-Commerce*, building a common understanding of terms and laying the groundwork for the other workshops – planning your Web site success; creating your Web site; marketing and promoting your Web site. Each workshop builds on the knowledge base of the previous sessions and helps to create both e-commerce literacy as well as the skills to develop and optimize a Web site. The workshop on marketing and promoting your Web site deals with the very real challenge that most rural entrepreneurs (and others) face – getting a Web site listed on a search engine and finding ways to promote the site using links and other tools.

Participants register for the workshops and are provided, by e-mail, with detailed information about using the virtual classroom, Ivocalize. Most workshops run for one and a half hours on three consecutive days, at a cost of \$30 per participant. Unlike some online workshops that are self-paced and non-interactive, these workshops permit individuals to see the instruction materials, hear the instructor's commentary, ask questions and interact fully with other participants. The experience, according to some participants, is equivalent to being in the same room with other entrepreneurs.

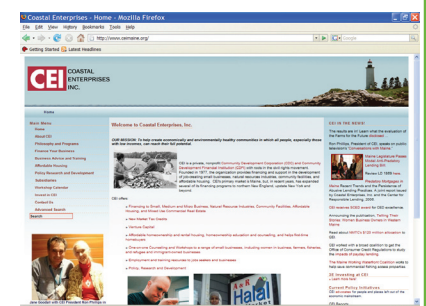
Role of e-Commerce

After several years of working with rural entrepreneurs one-on-one, in traditional classroom workshops, and now in online workshops, Marita Fairfield, director of the Women's Business Center and instructor in the online workshops, has developed some observations about the role of e-commerce for these entrepreneurs. She observed that most rural entrepreneurs who are interested in the Internet need a Web site, not e-commerce. They need a site where they can feature their business and market their products, rather

Area Population: **3,603**

Web site:

www.ceimaine.org



than a site where they can handle online purchasing. Most of the interest in e-commerce assistance from the WBC has come from small artisans who are trying to figure out how to better market their products. They have also had interest from small farmers who are trying to supplement their seasonal production with other products, and are turning to the Internet to help them. More and more, however, e-commerce is important to product-oriented entrepreneurs because consumers expect to have the option of purchasing products online.

Many rural entrepreneurs get into e-commerce in stages, beginning by using PayPal and then moving on to the development of their own e-commerce site at a later stage. PayPal provides a relatively easy way for business owners to accept credit cards and results only in variable costs that can be covered directly by sales. While some entrepreneurs prefer to move away from PayPal, the addition of a secure site with a merchant account to accept credit cards can add to the fixed costs of doing business and may be justified only when sales are expected to increase significantly. Entrepreneurs must understand these costs as they decide how best to use e-commerce tools to benefit their businesses.

One of the keys to helping entrepreneurs develop both their Web sites and their e-commerce capability is planning. As a service provider, according to Fairfield, this involves putting yourself into your customer's shoes and looking at the challenges and opportunities that face this particular business. There is no single way to be successful on the Internet, and entrepreneurs need to make the commitment to doing the time consuming work of figuring out what strategies might work best for them. The online workshops are designed to take them through this planning process and provide information about the many options available to them.

The impacts of e-commerce on the business, as described by Fairfield, vary from entrepreneur to entrepreneur. In most cases, developing e-commerce on a site results in online orders, which lead to increased sales and revenue for the business. In some cases, these increased revenues are also associated with increased employment as the business expands. However, simply creating a Web site is not enough to start this chain of events. Entrepreneurs need to make a commitment to do the marketing and optimization required to make the Web site visible and effective. For small entrepreneurs, many of whom in rural Maine are what Fairfield described as "income patchers," finding the time and resources to spend on marketing the business and the site can be difficult.

Challenges and Lessons for Rural Entrepreneurs

The experience of CEI's Women's Business Center in providing e-commerce services to rural entrepreneurs has generated a number of important lessons for service providers in other rural landscapes:

- In many rural parts of Maine, broadband access continues to be a barrier for entrepreneurs. Although dial-up access is sufficient for entrepreneurs to access the WBC's online workshops, dial-up is limiting for entrepreneurs who are trying to market a diverse array of products online. Web sites that feature quality pictures of products, such as those required by a potter or jewelry maker, present a particular challenge to dial up users – if it takes minutes or longer to simply load a Web site, both the use and updating of the site will be limited.
- While e-commerce may offer a means of expanding sales and increasing income, an entrepreneur must be open to exploring this new marketing vehicle. Fairfield's experience has been that many rural entrepreneurs think about e-commerce as an option for their business, but do not always follow through and develop the skills needed to move forward. The entrepreneur needs to see the value in creating and optimizing a new Web site, and must be committed to making the marketing investment needed.
- Entrepreneurs will take advantage of new instructional techniques, such as the interactive online workshops offered by CEI's WBC, if they are provided at a time, place and cost that work for them. CEI's WBC makes it easy to participate in these workshops, reducing the cost to the entrepreneur. They have removed barriers to participation, such as requiring the entrepreneur to go to a satellite office or computer lab. And, they have provided a virtual networking opportunity that few entrepreneurs will pass up, adding even more value to the workshop that goes beyond its content.
- Entrepreneurs benefit from, and are looking for, assistance from service providers in understanding e-commerce and navigating through the many competing options for building e-commerce capability. The entrepreneurs who participated in CEI's workshops, both on-site and online, described their great value and also suggested how important it was to be able to get information from a service provider who was not selling a particular product or service. This unbiased assistance from a trusted intermediary like CEI remains a critical need for many rural entrepreneurs.

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>.