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# **Delivering Business Expertise To Rural Businesses: A Case Study**

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## **Introduction**

The Old West frontier exists in both spirit and reality in the state of New Mexico, which is becoming a popular tourist destination. However, the state, which ranks fifth in terms of land area and 36<sup>th</sup> in terms of population, is challenged to offer business expertise to New Mexico's far-flung rural tourism businesses. This paper describes a program that has begun to deliver business expertise to rural businesses, outlines the lessons learned, makes recommendations as to the applicability for this program model in other locales, and suggests areas for further research.

## **The Sparsely Populated Land of Enchantment**

With an area of 121,511 square miles and, according to the 2000 census, a population of about 1,819,172, New Mexico is one of the largest states in terms of land area and the smallest in terms of population. Known as "the Land of Enchantment," New Mexico offers residents and visitors an amazing array of attractions, including national parks, archaeological sites, balloon festivals, wine festivals, ski resorts, artist colonies,

museums, acres of chile fields and pecan trees, and natural wonders such as Carlsbad Caverns and White Sands. However, as anyone who has lived in or visited New Mexico can attest, the state is primarily rural. The population of the state's largest city, Albuquerque, is approximately 450,000; while the second largest city, Las Cruces, has only about 75,000 people. It is not uncommon for New Mexicans to drive 50 miles over narrow country roads just to reach an interstate on-ramp. In recognition of these realities, New Mexico State University (NMSU) developed a program to offer business expertise via the Internet to New Mexico's far-flung rural businesses. The program, entitled "Teleliteracy Assistance for Businesses and Communities" (T-ABC's), received funding from Qwest Communications. Six pilot workshops were conducted from 2001 to 2002. This paper describes the T-ABC project, outlines the lessons learned, and suggests further areas for research.

### **Creating the T-ABC Program**

As a land grant university, an important mission of NMSU is to provide cooperative extension services to people and their enterprises throughout the state. And, since tourism is one of the state's most important industries, NMSU is highly attuned to its role in providing technical assistance to tourism-related businesses and the communities in which they function. One of the critical ways NMSU accomplishes this mission is through its Cooperative Extension Service (CES). According to the College of Agriculture and Home Economics web site (2005), extension economics specialists frequently conduct programs to improve rural communities' ability to thrive economically. Several years ago, the university shifted its educational focus on improving the ability of rural businesses to compete in the Internet-based economy. The rural economic development programs of the university's CES provide education, training, and assistance in economic development principles and practices to rural economic developers and local leaders. The program objectives include enabling local leaders and economic developers to develop and implement programs to revitalize local economic potential. Key program components include assistance in conducting economic analyses of the local economy, workshops on techniques for economic improvement, and economic development programming. CES partnered with the Rural Economic Development Through Tourism Project (REDTT) in 2005 to assist in the implementation of electronic commerce by offering e-commerce workshops. REDTT, which also is administered through CES, began in 1992 as a three-year pilot project to promote rural tourism development in five New Mexico counties. Thirteen years later, the project provides technical assistance to 17 of New Mexico's 34 counties. According to the REDTT web site (2005), the organization works with tourism-based industries and community volunteers to promote economic development in rural communities. In addition to providing e-commerce training, REDTT also offers assistance in identifying and promoting tourism assets, event and festival development, and hospitality and customer service training.

### **Planning and Implementation**

In developing the educational materials for the T-ABC program, NMSU staff interviewed business people and community leaders in rural areas throughout New Mexico. One goal of this effort was to identify examples of the successful use of the Internet in e-commerce. Researchers developed a broad array of promotional and educational materials, including a web site, audience workbooks, DVDs, videotapes, CD PowerPoint

presentations with embedded video clips and web sites, trainer notes, and speaker notes. Train the trainer sessions were held with Small Business Development Center leaders and others to develop local trainers.

A training module called “Embracing the e-Revolution: A Call for Rural Internet Activists” was designed by Coppedge (2001) as an advocacy program to educate local business and community leaders about the importance of and potential for e-commerce. The goal of the module was to encourage these local leaders to promote the Internet as essential to rural business and community economic survival. Subsequently, six communities were identified as pilot sites and the training materials were field tested in these communities from 2001 to 2002. In general, attendance at the sessions was small, but participants uniformly expressed appreciation for the program and gave high marks to the program materials. The field-testing revealed that the advocacy program mentioned above was extremely important. The reason for this may seem obvious: rural areas often lack the telecommunications infrastructure, including high-speed Internet access and related expertise. However, before convincing business and community leaders of the importance of working together to overcome these technical limitations, they must understand and embrace the concept of joining the information economy (Coppedge, 2001). In other words, it was critically important that these local leaders understood how the Internet could help rural communities and businesses overcome many of the traditional barriers to viable economic development, such as isolation, low population density, and geographical distances. They needed to recognize the need for broadband Internet access and become convinced that the information economy is rural New Mexico’s key to long-term economic survival.

The advocacy module as well as three other modules (described briefly below) were designed by Coppedge (2001) to encourage rural activism with regard to information technology:

1. **E-as-y Does It! Welcome to the Electronic Age:** This module highlights the many ways that rural New Mexicans can benefit by traveling the information highway. Designed for general audiences, this educational program includes a short video (approximately 10 minutes) in which New Mexicans tell about their Internet ventures and how the Internet is affecting their lives and livelihoods.
2. **Embracing the e-Revolution: A Call for Rural Internet Activists:** This module encourages rural leaders to act together to bring the benefits of the “e-revolution” to their businesses and communities. The centerpiece of this educational program is a video that highlights several of New Mexico’s rural businesses that embraced the e-revolution.
3. **The ABCs of e-Business:** This is an eight lesson module for business owners and entrepreneurs. The objective is for these individuals to learn how the Internet and related technologies can add speed, efficiency, and profitability to their businesses throughout the business process (i.e., from product and market research through sales and customer support). This module features a variety of New Mexico businesses.
4. **The ABCs of e-Government:** This is a five lesson module for community leaders. The objective is for these individuals to learn how electronic telecommunication technologies can improve interactions between local governments and citizens, thereby making local government more efficient and effective, and ultimately more conducive to community economic development. This module features the efforts of innovative leaders in several rural New Mexico communities.

These modules were aimed at four key rural audiences: the general public, business and community leaders, individual businesses, and local government. Each module was developed with the objective of ensuring maximum learning and, therefore, featured the hallmarks of good educational practice. For example, each module specified learning objectives, made liberal use of graphics and visuals, organized the content into comprehensible lessons, and highlighted key points. The modules also included discussion items, note-taking frames, a glossary of terms, and a rich array of reference materials.

### **Lessons Learned**

The T-ABC pilot workshops led to the implementation of e-commerce workshops offered to both tourism and non-tourism based businesses throughout New Mexico. The initial five-day workshop was offered in April 2004. The first three days were directed towards Cooperative Extension Service professionals. Advanced e-commerce training was provided to CES based on a train-the-trainer model. The remaining two days provided e-commerce training to businesses as well as community development organizations. Topics included common mistakes made in web site design and layout, increasing internet traffic to web sites, and how to use the Internet for marketing research.

According to Coppedge (2001), researchers learned two important lessons from the field testing of the modules and subsequent feedback from participants:

Lesson #1: Teleliteracy is not a high priority for many rural New Mexicans. Evidence to support this observation comes from various sources: low turnout at pilot sessions; subsequent meetings with various audiences; and discussions, interviews, and other personal interactions with people throughout the state. While many professionals and local leaders appreciate the importance of the information technology to long-term economic survival, implementation of this technology lags.

Lesson #2: Hands-on learning should be a part of basic teleliteracy training. The program materials initially were designed without a technology component. In other words, participants did not need to go to a computer lab or take live one-on-one Internet tours. It soon became apparent that this was ineffective and that participants wanted and needed hands-on experience with the technology being discussed and proposed.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

It is suggested that attention be given to the applicability for this program model in other locales. In other words, are the experiences and lessons learned in the New Mexico context transferable to other regions? In addition, what effects do such variables as educational level, income level, and so forth, have on user adoption of the telecommunications technology?

The opportunity to structure a wider study that examines the full extent of technology diffusion and its adoption is the next step in the process of bringing NMSU extension services to the people of rural New Mexico.

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