

Small Business Connections: Using Technology for Small Business Outreach in Eastern Ontario

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rural areas have long been handicapped by awkward road networks and small populations spread over large territories. The shape and dimensions of Eastern Ontario counties and townships are one factor. The less than central location of larger towns in which services are clustered is another. Both work against small business outreach by municipal governments and agencies such as community futures development corporations and business enterprise centres.

A growing access to high-speed internet in rural eastern Ontario brings opportunities for change in group dynamics by opening windows to the use of electronic communications.

Skype and its competitors are providers of **Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP)** as an alternative to long-distance telephone or conference calls. These online video, voice, text and file sharing services, reduce long distance charges and enable virtual meetings between individuals and small groups. Readily available as a free service, they lend themselves for training and mentoring with their capability for integrating a webcam with voice and text. Because quick meetings can be arranged without scarce time lost on driving, they are effective for reaching small business owners, staff and youth trainees. And their function can be broadened when used for discussions between municipal staff and councillors, or for enabling absent members of a Board of Directors to participate in meetings.

Webinar services have emerged in the past five years. More demanding in effort, they enable live seminars and workshops to be shared across regions, and archived for later viewing by anyone, anywhere, anytime. With a low cost monthly subscription for small numbers of online viewers, the initial investment is for a webcam and microphone. One or two tech-savvy volunteers help by managing a laptop computer, online registration and incoming questions. Webinars require a transition in thinking and planning from live audience to an online delivery model, but that in itself can be learned.

Many Eastern Ontario counties are so large that one part scarcely knows its neighbours. Notwithstanding, they all share common issues that relate to governmental interaction, effective small business practices, training and meetings. Learning how to use the capabilities of modern electronic communications for these purposes is a vital next step as access to high-speed internet becomes more widely accessible.

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