



E-Comm-AWARE!

E-commerce awareness program for regional communities

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Introduction

Increasing the levels of awareness of e-commerce in regional and rural areas has been identified as a major catalyst to encourage the usage of online technologies in rural communities. E-Comm AWARE! is one such pilot project focusing on providing rural communities in Australia the opportunity to develop expertise in online technologies to become 'smart' communities and more competitive in the global marketplace.

Electronic Commerce is fast becoming the catch-all phrase for electronic means of communicating information and business transactions. The fastest growing area of electronic commerce in Australia and the rest of the world is the use of the Internet and online services for exchanging knowledge, for advertising and marketing, for selling and buying, for banking, and for the emergence of entirely new ways of doing business and communicating with individuals and organisations. Electronic commerce is levelling the playing field for small companies to trade as if they were much larger corporations, in a global marketplace, and for regional businesses and communities to participate in cultural, social and commercial networks in a seamless and borderless way.

E-Comm AWARE! is a project that will prepare regional communities to understand the possibilities, to use the technologies and to then participate in local, state-based and federal government electronic communications and commerce initiatives. The project will support sustainability of regional communities and be a model electronic community awareness program that can be transposed to other regional areas across Australia.

The project is funded by the Commonwealth government of Australia, with a local government organisation (La Trobe Shire) and a major educational institution (Monash University) providing cash and in-kind support. The project will be piloted in the La Trobe Shire in Gippsland in the South Eastern corner of Australia, and is managed by the Monash Centre for Electronic Commerce.

Background

The Commonwealth of Australia through the Department of the Communications and the Arts have introduced a five year \$250 million Networking the Nation Regional Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund (RTIF) to assist Australian regional, rural and remote communities to identify their communications needs, and develop and implement telecommunication, communication and infrastructure projects that meet the needs of regional communities. This fund is the major cash contributor to the project.

La Trobe Shire Council, (a local government organisation) in conjunction with Monash University Centre for Electronic Commerce, has adopted as a key strategy, the development of electronic commerce and communications in the La Trobe region as a means of enhancing community collaboration and development. The shared vision for

electronic commerce is also consistent with La Trobe Shire's drive for a clever, greener future for the region. Monash University Centre for Electronic Commerce was the first Centre of its kind in Australia, and provides leadership and expertise in the area of e-commerce.

E-Comm-AWARE! will support a primary objective of the La Trobe Shire Council's Strategy for the development of Electronic Communications and Commerce. That objective is to improve the social and economic environment of the shire, which has been impacted greatly by unemployment and social dislocation following the restructure of the Power Industry in Victoria. E-Comm-AWARE! will also facilitate equality of access and opportunity for La Trobe business and citizen communities, and, flowing from this, the mitigation of greater Gippsland's traditional isolation.

It is against this background of groundswell toward adopting new and emerging technologies to facilitate improvement in public sector management and community development that the La Trobe Shire Council and the Monash University Centre for Electronic Commerce formed a strong partnership to initiate electronic communications related projects, of which E-Comm AWARE! is one. Other projects include the GI Extranet, which is a pilot project to establish an Extranet between 16 engineering SMEs and the GippsComm project which is a telecommunications audit project that will recommend and implement a set of telecommunications solutions to increase connectivity of business and citizens throughout the Gippsland region.

What is E-Comm AWARE! ?

The aim of E-Comm-AWARE! is to raise the level of awareness and encourage the development of the Regional Electronic Community. The project will establish a "network" of e-commerce aware business and citizens as a model community which may be transposed in similar regional communities across Australia.

It is a comprehensive programme of awareness, training, community skills-audit and live project involvement, through the development of a number of products and services to support this aim.

The project commenced in April 1998 and is expected to be launched in April 1999. A comprehensive project plan and business plan has been completed, with the training needs analysis and database components of the project currently underway. The training needs analysis includes conducting extensive business and community surveys and consultation, and analysing existing research of similar projects being undertaken nationally and internationally. A number of databases are being developed to capture information on alliance organisations, potential distribution channels and product developers which will assist a number of processes throughout the project. An online skills database of regional e-commerce and IT skills will be developed as a regional skills resource, to attract business and investment to the region and market the skills of the region globally. The products produced throughout the life of the project will be piloted on 20 regional SMEs, with results feeding into the refinement of the end products and services.

The results of the research will form the basis of the program design which at this stage may include:

- Video
- CD Rom
- Web Site
- Starter Pack (hard copy information on what e-commerce is, where to get further information, initiatives, ISP contact details in region, free ISP sample kit etc.)
- Regional seminars (12)
- Train the trainer pack, and
- "How to" guide (for other regional areas)

These products will be packaged and distributed throughout the pilot region, La Trobe Shire and the wider Gippsland region, and then extensively throughout regional Australia at the end of the project. Summative and formative evaluation and marketing will be undertaken throughout the project. E-Comm AWARE! will prepare regional communities in Australia to understand the possibilities, to use the technologies, and to then participate in local, state-based and federal government electronic communications and commerce initiatives and will assist the community to move toward internetworking the region with its constituents and the rest of the world.

If you would like to further information on this project contact Mary-Anne Goldsworthy at the Monash Centre for Electronic Commerce email: cec@buseco.monash.edu.au