A Study of a Wine Industry Internet Portal

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INTRODUCTION

A simple definition of a portal sees it as a special Internet (or intranet) Web site designed to act as a gateway to give convenient access to other related sites (Davison, Burgess, & Tatnall, 2003). Moreover, portals can be grouped or classified based on genre, with a diverse number of different types of portal types being based on alliances, geographic regions, special interest, and communities. Regional portals that are of particular interest in this article tend to be a special type of community portal centred on a specific locality. As such, they have a utility in providing various advantages for the participants, allowing them to feel as if they are part of, and contribute to, the local regional community. Moreover, there are significant benefits that portal participation provides in allowing firms to interact with other local businesses, allowing not only physical products/services to be transacted, but also in fermenting new business relationships (Sellitto & Burgess 2005). Indeed, regional portal participation contributes to the goodwill factor that manifests at the local business level and invariably, also at the social level throughout the regional community. This article introduces some background on portals, and provides an illustration of how a real-world regional wine cluster adopted an Internet portal to strengthen and benefit their regional partnerships. Arguably, the research is one of the few published works on industry clusters and their association to Internet portals.

BACKGROUND

Portal functionality can be diverse; however, an intrinsic element of all portals, as suggested by Eisenmann (2002), is to address five fundamental areas related to searching, content publication, community building, electronic commerce, and personal-productivity applications. Furthermore, businesses need to decide whether portal participation will allow them to provide their products/services on a more cost-effective and efficient basis than they could traditionally expect to achieve. Various portal features and their commensurate benefits have been identified by Tatnall, Burgess, and Singh, (2004), these benefits tending to incorporate improved security, a seek and search facility for easier information access, the strengthening or creation of business relationships, and a strategic value that might allow smaller firms to reduce resource requirements. A summary of Tatnall et al.'s (2004) benefits are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Benefits and features of portals (Tatnall et al., 2004)

Portal Feature	Adoption Benefits
Building Relationships	Portal features that have a community-building dimension include instant-messaging services, FAQs, chat rooms, message boards, online greeting cards, Web applications, and services such as digital photos. These benefits directly impact on local businesses subscribing to the portal.
Partnerships	The advent of Internet commerce enhances the opportunities for businesses to sell directly to new buyers, bypassing intermediaries. Paradoxically, there is a corresponding ability to engage the "cyber" supply chain, resulting in the capture of new business, offering of complementary products with other businesses, and the electronic procurement of goods. Suppliers of large organisations have an opportunity to participate in online bidding processes.
Seek and Search	Search engines and directories and "shopping bots" that list the portals automatically enable Web users to find the gateway to online businesses via these portals, saving substantially on costs. Advertising on portals is generally in the form of banner advertisements linked to certain directory entries or search keywords, and sponsorships of contextually relevant content.
Security	Portals provide a secure online environment to businesses to set up a Web presence. The capital outlay for e-commerce can be significant, but is eliminated in part by being part of a portal, enabling the business to concentrate on customer-focussed services. Many portals have a payment infrastructure that enables businesses to integrate their accounts receivable and payable to the portal backend systems
Strategy, Management and Business Trust	Small businesses are usually constrained by resources and expert advice on online business, which leads to a lack of strategy for the management and implementation of e-business. Portals enable small businesses to uptake a common structure for e-business that assists them with the management, support, and the sharing of ideas with other business entities.

PORTALS AND WINE INDUSTRY CLUSTERS

Martin and Sellitto (2004) examined the knowledge elements of the Australian wine industry, and documented important supplier and service industry linkages to Australian wineries, as well as uncovering some of the formal and trade-based interdependencies amongst wineries. Earlier work by Marsh and Shaw (2000) also indicated that wine industry clustering was an associative process that involved identification of critical linkages between suppliers, as well as facilitating collaboration amongst participants. The Australian wine industry has been found to collectively interact within a well-defined group of suppliers, distributors, logistics groups, and regional tourism associations, as well as wholesalers, retailers, and restaurants (Sellitto, 2001). Sellitto (2004, 2005) further expanded this wine cluster phenomenon, proposing a general Australian winery cluster as a basis of e-commerce adoption. Sellitto suggested that Australian wineries collectively interact within a cluster of specific industry suppliers, tourism entities, wine organisations, and industry distributors—a cluster relationship that is depicted in Figure 1.

Arguably, the establishment of a regional winery portal should, in effect, represent these linkages. Specifically, the relationships displayed by the real-world winery cluster would ideally be represented as online features in the Internet portal environment. Hence, a question investigated in this research: are features encountered on a regional wine industry portal an electronic representation of the relationships encountered in the real-world wine cluster?

THE STUDY METHODOLOGY

This study is centred on a cluster of small wineries in the region of Gippsland, which is in the South West of Victoria, one of the Southern states of Australia. The area contains many small wineries that are the focus of regional development through their tourism attributes. Furthermore, the region provides the visitor with different natural environments ranging from scenic bushlands, winter snow-capped mountains, and golden-sand beaches. Gippsland is also known for the diversity of food offerings that are locally produced—foods that include dairy produce, fruits, wine, and beef. The area also contains historic gold-mining townships, national parks, and wetlands that are populated with an abundance of wildlife (Tourism-Victoria, 2004). The study investigated a regional cluster/portal relationship using a portal site set up by a group of wineries in the region, the WinesOfGippsland.com site, as a focus. The site was selected after being identified in a broader study (Sellitto, 2004) that examined Internet adoption by wineries. As such, this site was identified as an important conduit that allowed a group of Gippsland wineries to collectively use Internet technology to facilitate e-business best practices. The previous study did not specifically examine

Figure 1. The wine industry cluster (Sellitto, 2004, 2005)
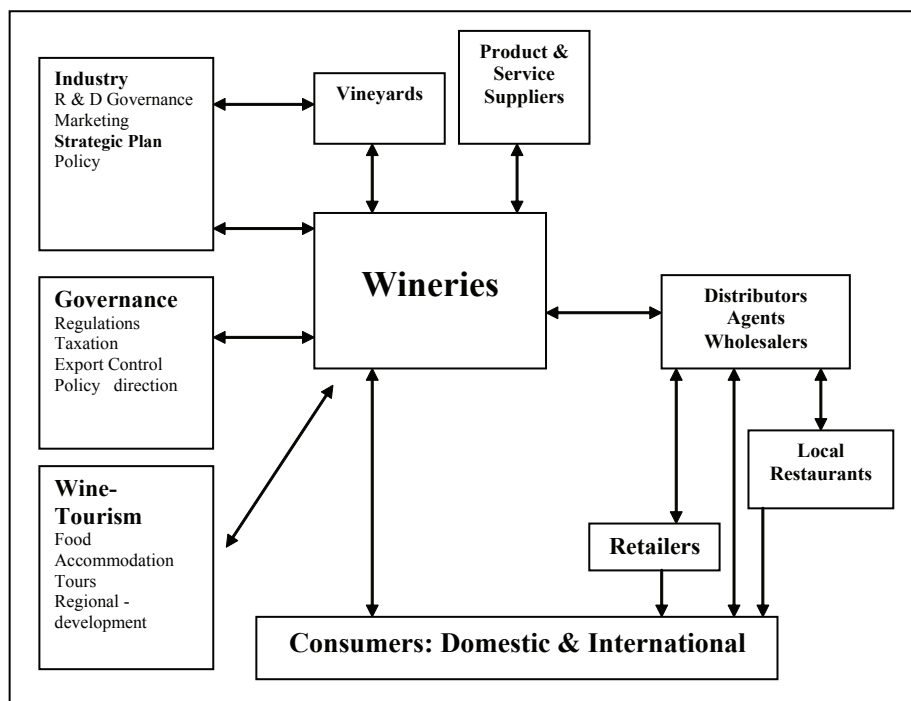
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