

Chapter III

Readiness for a Web Presence

INTRODUCTION

The new global economy has resulted in the availability of unprecedented opportunities for small business. ICTs in particular have contributed to the underpinning of a revolutionary era of trade and commerce. The Internet in particular, and the ability to use the Web as a virtual shop front (having an online shop without physical premises) has not only allowed new forms of small businesses to emerge, but created an environment where they can compete with their larger counterparts. In what has been commonly become known as the new economy, one of the most fundamental tasks for small businesses is to investigate the usefulness and relevance of ICTs for their business. Furthermore, all small businesses need to assess their capacity to adopt ICTs allowing them to leverage the technology so that they are well positioned to expand their customer base, rationalize business processes and enter new markets. Porter (2001) observed at the height of the dot-com boom that it should be evident for many businesses that it was not whether to deploy ICTs, but how to use them as a competitive part of business strategy.

In this chapter we first look at some of the main barriers and drivers of ICT adoption. We then move on to examine the notion of the “readiness” of small businesses to set up a Web presence. We will also examine previous studies that have examined

adoption of ICTs in small businesses, for the purpose of identifying those drivers and barriers that can affect small business wishing to go down that path.

What is a Web Presence?

Any small business operator who has used the Internet will have some notion of how of much information has been published on the Web. Even a business that has not taken steps towards building a Web presence may in fact have some kind of presence. For example, entering the name of a small business into the popular search engines such as Google™ or Yahoo® will in many cases result in dozens of ‘hits’ (search results) related to that business. These hits may include listings on industry related portals, directories, government associated Websites, blogs (Web logs – sites that capture user generated content through online conversations or postings), references on other business Websites and more. Even where a business has signed up with a third party directory such as the Yellow Pages™, the business may find that they now have some form of defacto Web presence. All these piecemeal listings and components of Web presence contribute to the image of a business. Hence, being aware of the consequences of having a Web presence becomes all the more important for small businesses.

A business’ individual Web presence may be as simple as a home page business contact details. Conversely, the Website may be more intricate and include multiple pages with a catalogue of products, have an e-commerce facility for ordering products, and include interactive elements. Furthermore, the business may have as well as its own Website and a number of ‘extended presences’ that are either directly or indirectly related to the business. This ‘extended presence’ may not be controlled by the business. However, there are strategies that can be employed to promote a business beyond the individual Website presence. This may include affiliating with portals that sell similar products, listings with related interest groups, inclusion in local area Web-based directories of products and services and even active use of online auction facilities or trading Websites such as eBay™. Having a successful Web presence involves more than just having a well designed and engaging Website. The small business Website should not only actively centre and interact with customers through its own Website, but also take into consideration many of the other elements that contribute to the Web presence.

SMALL BUSINESS WEB PRESENCE

Despite the entrepreneurial and flexible nature of many small business operators, they have tended to lag behind their larger counterparts in terms of adopting a

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