

www.ashfieldbusiness.com.au

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ABSTRACT

ashfieldbusiness.com.au is the result of a collaborative project involving Ashfield Council, local businesses and the Ashfield Business Chamber. The project created an on line presence for local business in the Ashfield LGA in the form of a business directory which also contains a short prospectus (the reason for doing business in Ashfield) in six languages; the Ashfield Business Chamber web presence; FAQs and statistical information and place information. It is different to other Council sponsored web sites in that it is itself a small business. It has a business plan and revenue targets. Revenue is gained from the sale of banner and display advertising. As a directory the basic listing is free and then businesses can pay to move to a more expansive advertisement. The revenue will be reinvested in the community with economic development activities as a priority. The first project will be the creation of the Ashfield Explorer, a bus which runs in a continuous loop connecting the four very different CBDs of Ashfield. Ashfield is very diverse culturally and although small lacks connectivity. The bus will enable residents and day trippers to sample the Italian quarter at Haberfield, Shanghai Chinese quarter at Ashfield and the old Australian village feel of the Croydon and Summer Hill quarters. The web site will be coupled with buy local campaigns and special events that connect the business communities and provide a stronger base for dealing with change and transition.

This project is about ensuring sustainability through self sufficiency and good commercial investment.

The concept is fully transportable and very inexpensive.

KEYWORDS: ashfieldbusiness, directory, online, revenue, local

1. INTRODUCTION

There are no shortcuts in Economic development, but there are ways to work smarter. An effective economic development orientated web site can provide a very effective tool to achieve many objectives which are common to all areas regardless of size and demographics. Web sites however, which do not attract traffic and/or contain calls to action are simply cyber junk. Businesses and other stakeholders constantly ask, "What's in it for me?" Failure to constantly address that question with realistic value propositions is the beginning of the downward spiral and the stagnation of what could have been a great labour saving, cost effective economic development tool. The "constantly" must be stressed. Through effective communication and servicing the real and perceived value of the resource is maintained and developed.

www.ashfieldbusiness.com.au was developed to facilitate economic development in the Ashfield local government area by providing the following:

- A comprehensive data base of all local businesses searchable by precinct and/or category
- A web presence for Ashfield Business Chamber, the regional business chamber
- A prospectus in six languages, demographics, fact sheets and frequently asked questions to assist businesses considering doing business in Ashfield
- An events calendar that can take reservations and payments on line
- An ability to generate revenue through the sale of advertising
- Promotion of community service providers
- An inbuilt reporting system which collates statistics for easy analysis
- A Microsoft friendly content management system requiring only basic training to operate
- Very cost effective advertising and promotional resource for local businesses supported by local Council.

2. DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Purpose & Scope

Project Rationale

Ashfield Council recognised the need to support and develop the local economy. To do this it was important to encourage all residents to buy locally and businesses to source raw materials, product and services locally where possible.

A comprehensive database of all businesses in the Ashfield local government area (LGA) would assist residents to identify local businesses and business opportunities. It would also assist Ashfield to project its business case to external entities considering relocation to, or investment in, Ashfield.

Initially it was intended to provide all businesses with a free listing. The definition of business included privately owned operations, government agencies and non-government agencies providing business and community services.

The business database contains fields relating not only to location and contact details but also business type and number of employees which will enable council and others to extract statistical information for additional profiling and analytical purposes.

The business database comprises four sections based on business precincts of local interest; Ashfield, Haberfield, Summer Hill and Croydon/Croydon Park. Each of these precincts is in turn segmented by business type similar to the Yellow Pages. Business type segments have a process for the posting of 'specials and deals' which will operate in conjunction with buy local campaigns and other initiatives.

This site is run on a commercial basis with fee based options beyond the free listing such as display advertising of various sizes and quality. It has provision for premium advertising, known as 'banner' advertising, for the introductory pages and other areas of general information.

The database is also used by council for the purpose of general communication in relation to council matters concerning economic development and to determine business confidence levels through surveys and other tools.

Ultimately the business directory will also be available in an annual hard cover publication to cater for those not comfortable with Web based services, and as a general promotional and marketing tool.

Scope

The scope of this project was to:

1. Provide each and every business, government agency and non-government agency with a free listing on the database
2. Create the capability for each and every business to have a display advertisement if so desired
3. Provide the relevant UBD pages for the whole of the Ashfield LGA
4. Provide a business events calendar with update capabilities
5. Provide space for banner advertising
6. Provide introductory page(s) that contain the Ashfield business message in at least six languages other than English.
7. Provide capacity for each and every business to link to their existing web site
8. Provide capability to email businesses directly from their listing

System Requirements

Minimum

- Web based and capable of linking to Ashfield Council's existing web site
- Capable of managing content via user and back end administration
- Capable of allowing businesses to change and modify their details via an administrative approval system
- Ability to link to existing websites
- Direct email contact capability
- Conversion into languages other than English
- Business event calendar

Preferred

- Ability to upgrade individual listings to display advertising
- Capable of being hosted internally on our own server
- Billboards in each business category capable of carrying specials and deals

Managing Council Expectations

The site was procured using a very simple expression of interest process with an undisclosed budget. It was understood that a site of this nature can be accommodated within an *off the shelf* content management software product with some customisation. With this in mind Council asked those wishing to lodge submissions the following very simple questions:

1. Recommend a product to Council,
2. Indicate how much is involved to acquire that product
3. Indicate how much will be involved to customise that product
4. Indicate cost of any ongoing licensing and/or maintenance agreements including upgrades
5. Indicate service levels in relation to any ongoing working relationship

6. Not quote for data population or administration

Council also added the following note:

Ashfield Council is a very small council with limited funds for the purpose of this project. Council will not be providing details of budget but will be making a decision whether to proceed or not on the basis of cost estimates provided. Please be aware that although this project is cost sensitive we ask you to base your responses on the solution required to do the tasks requested and not to downsize capabilities until Council has had the opportunity to consider the cost of a complete solution.

2.2 PROVIDER SELECTION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Knowing that most web developers subscribe to “Tender Search” or similar a very simple four line request for expressions of interest was placed in the Sydney Morning Herald and over forty enquiries were received from all parts of Australia, including one from India. A number of the “tyre kickers” dropped off when budget was not disclosed. Twelve providers formally tendered and prices ranged from \$70,000 down to \$12,500. The successful tenderer was able to direct Council to an existing site which contained 80% of what was required. Subsequent negotiations with the developer resulted in the produce in place today and as the developer also picked up some ideas on how to improve their product a good working relationship developed.

Populating the site took one person around three weeks and only one person is required to maintain the site and add content.

2.3 CURRENT SITUATION

By adopting this user friendly software Council has reaped the following benefits:

1. No ongoing license fees
2. No help desk fees
3. No maintenance contract
4. Inexpensive hosting fees
5. Easy maintenance
6. Ability and flexibility to add improvements over time such as on line payments and registrations through the events calendar

3. CONCLUSIONS

Council has tested all facets of the site and is now rolling it out to determine its full income earning capacity. In the testing stages two banners and ten full page advertisements were obtained at the rates being asked; \$550 x 2 and \$275 x 10, so even in the testing phase \$3,850 revenue was achieved. This site will succeed even if only for the current disenchantment with newspaper advertising. Small business is struggling with newspaper advertising that costs \$300 to \$500 per insertion; \$5 per week for 24/7 world wide coverage is a much better value proposition. The value proposition is further enhanced when existing web sites with shopping carts can be easily connected to take advantage of the traffic being driven through the site by buy local and other promotional campaigns. This web site is number one on the google organic list due to a little expertise in search engine maximisation and is receiving thousands of discreet hits every week. Build the site you need, use it the way it is intended to be used and reap the benefits; practical, simple and most of all it works.