

## **Showcase USA: Build It And They Will Come! An Extension Program Reaches and Teaches Entrepreneurs via the Internet**

**Beth Duncan**

Just a few short years ago the Internet was 'virtually' non-existent, used by only by a few people, mostly computer geeks. Did anyone even relate to the term ".com," much less ".edu?" Few would disagree that the world and how we communicate within it have dramatically changed in recent years; we are fast becoming a "virtual world."

People are listening, buying, selling, trading, designing, watching, dating, mailing, creating, ordering -- and most important to Extension educators, people are seeking and reading information via the Internet. Information of any kind is literally at the fingertips of anyone with access to the Internet, and it can be found in seconds. If Extension educators are going to remain a viable source of good research-based information, it's time for a paradigm shift in the way we reach and teach clients.

According to the National Federation of Independent Business Education Foundation, entrepreneurs are quickly integrating computer technology into their small businesses (77 percent), and 40 percent have Internet access. Given this fact, the [Mississippi State University - Extension Service](#) proposed that an effective way to reach entrepreneurs with small business educational information would be through a virtual forum. This was the premise for developing an electronic newsletter in 1996 that specifically targets entrepreneurs and Extension educators who work with entrepreneurs.

### [Home-Based and Micro Business Briefs](#)

Home-Based and Micro Business Briefs is a newsletter that provides information relating to small business development. The newsletter is published every two weeks via the World Wide Web. User reports indicate that thousands of entrepreneurs and educators from all over the world are accessing the information. There are currently over 70 issues on the site. Each issue addresses a single topic relating to small business development. Dow Jones has designated the newsletter as a "Select Small Business Site."

The site provides an e-mail link for readers to submit questions and comments. Feedback from readers made it clear from the beginning that the online format was working and meeting the needs of many Mississippi entrepreneurs. Shortly after the introduction of the newsletter, the [Home-Based & Micro Businesses in Mississippi](#) Web site went online. This site follows the Web curriculum format used by the [Mississippi State University - Extension Service](#) and includes home-based and micro businesses information organized as follows: Current Situation, Mississippi Profile, Frequently Asked Questions, Publications, and Additional Links. This site serves primarily as a resource for Extension agents at the county level; however, entrepreneurs are accessing it as well.

In addition to reaching the clientele directly, there have been and continue to be many benefits associated with going online. It has increased the respect and credibility of the role Extension plays within the small business and economic development community within the state -- Extension is at the cutting edge in terms of delivering educational information to entrepreneurs. Feedback from Small Business Development Center (SBDC) directors in the state indicates that they are accessing and using the information extensively with their small business clientele. Because it was the first small business educational program to go "virtual," it became the vehicle for the Mississippi Department of Economic and Community Development (MDECD) to put its premier educational piece online. The *Mississippi Entrepreneur's ToolKit* is now accessible online only through the Extension Web site.

The use of technology in programming also led to grants projects. A grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission funded an Entrepreneurial Education Training Center that offers small business programs via distance learning through an Extension virtual center. Another grant from the [Mississippi Center for Cooperative Development](#) funded the development and maintenance of a virtual site for small business cooperatives, which is housed within the Extension Web site.

There is no doubt that the Internet is a viable and effective tool for reaching and teaching entrepreneurs. Future plans to expand home-based and micro business programming on the Web include the adaptation and implementation of the new national curriculum, *Ca\$hing In On Business Opportunities*,<sup>(1)</sup> for interactive online use by small business owners. In addition, preliminary partnership discussions are now underway between MDECD, the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce, and Extension to assist entrepreneurs in putting their small businesses online through a Virtual Small Business Incubator educational program being developed by Extension.

While the traditional ways of disseminating information should not be totally abandoned, given current trends and predictions, it is essential that Extension embrace the use of computer technology as a primary vehicle for disseminating its information and programs. Through the years, Extension has built the reputation of being a good source of reliable information. It is

precisely that reputation that lends credibility to Extension information on the Web -- giving Extension the competitive edge in the educational realm of cyberspace.

(1) *Ca\$hing In On Business Opportunities* national Extension curriculum was developed by the Communities In Economic Transition National Initiative -- Home-Based and Micro Businesses Design Team. For information about the curriculum, contact the [Southern Rural Development Center](#), Box 9656, Mississippi State, Mississippi 39762 (601/325-3207). [Return to text.](#)

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