

The Benefits of Community Web Portals

Andrew Michael Cohill, Ph.D.

The benefits of well-designed, modern community portals are numerous. Among these are:

- Increased traffic for other sites in the community. There is a popular myth that a successful community portal is a "problem" because it may take traffic from other established sites in the community. Anecdotal reports suggest just the opposite. A good community portal, by its nature, drives more traffic to other sites in the community that the portal links to. So there is no reason for the managers of established sites to oppose a community portal effort. In fact, they should support one, as it will likely increase traffic for them.
- One way this works (increased traffic for other sites) is by using RSS feeds. The community portal, by centralizing local RSS feeds from other sites in the community, makes it easier for residents and visitors to find out what is going throughout the community; the RSS feeds increase traffic at the sites that publish an RSS feed. Your important community sites (e.g. Chamber of Commerce, tourism site, local government site) do publish RSS feeds, don't they?
- A good community portal, with other sites in the community pointing to it, makes it easier to find the community on the Web. The community portal has the potential to score higher in the search engine ratings because of its broader and inclusive approach to community information. Search engine rankings and the location of the community in the rankings is especially important for tourism efforts and for businesspeople who may need to travel to the community.
- The community portal is a recruitment tool for families and Knowledge Economy workers, business owners, and entrepreneurs who want small town quality of life. All of these potential residents are using the Web to research places to live. The community portal can be a valuable asset in attracting Knowledge Economy families (often with six figure incomes), or it can be a strong negative (if your community site is years old, out of date, and dusty from lack of use).
- The community portal is a critical part of any economic development effort. The portal is more than a listing of local community groups and meetings; it is a vital part of your economic development toolkit to project an image of a dynamic and "connected" community that has a savvy, tech-ready workforce and an informed citizenry. Businesses want to move to communities that are comfortable with technology and that are clearly making modest investments to stay current.

The community portal markets the community broadly across a wide variety of interests. The portal has a dual purpose.

1. One purpose is to inform residents and businesses within the community about current activities, groups, and commerce.
2. But the second, equally important activity is to let others, from outside the community, learn more about the community itself.

As a marketing tool, the community portal becomes an important part of tourism efforts, a way to get travelers and visitors to stop and spend money on lodging and meals, to market local businesses to customers outside the community, and to project a modern and vibrant image to the world. The community portal is the way the rest of the world sees your community. So if you want your community to be seen as vibrant, attractive, and great place to live and to work, then the portal Web site must be of the highest quality to project that image.

A feature-rich community portal with multiple ways to inform community members about what is happening in the community (e.g. community calendar, discussion forums, RSS feeds, blogs, automated reminders, etc.) has the potential to increase civic participation. Formal and informal studies in Blacksburg, Virginia and in other communities with active community portals indicate that when residents have the right information at the right time, they tend to



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get more involved in the life of the community. In other words, they are more inclined to get out of the house and attend community meetings and to take part in community and civic activities.

The community portal is also a tool for workforce development. With features like blogs for all users and the ability to distribute posting privileges, many people in the community have the opportunity to acquire new skills by using the community portal as an interactive, hands-on learning tool. As residents acquire these skills, their marketability in the workplace increases and the community becomes more attractive to relocating businesses as well as to businesses already in the community.

The community portal project can become an ongoing technology resource for the community at large, constantly reviewing new Internet-based services like RSS news feeds, blogging, Voice over IP telephony, and other developments. The portal can provide evaluations, links, and resources on the site itself to help residents and businesses in the community make informed decisions. As part of the training and education component of the effort, short courses and seminars can be offered on topics of interest to the community. This regular and constant focus both on education and innovation continually increases the capacity of the community to make appropriate technology and telecommunications investments to address a wide variety of public and private needs.

Finally, the community portal project can save money. By becoming a valuable technology resource in the community, residents, local businesses, and local government, over time, should spend less on technology and get more value for the funds that are expended. As an example, the community portal can help raise community awareness about the value of bandwidth aggregation. As more and more bandwidth users in the community use that information to pool buying needs, the community benefits directly by having more funds available for core needs and objectives. Indirectly, increased investments, especially by businesses on the core business rather than on overhead, will, over time, lead to increased economic development, new job opportunities, and a community that is vibrant, livable, and prosperous.

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About Andrew Cohill

Dr. Andrew Michael Cohill is the President and CEO of Design Nine. He is a broadband architect with an extensive background in broadband network design and broadband planning. He has been involved with the design and development of Web sites and community Web portals since 1991, when his group started up one of the first 100 Web sites in the world.

He was the Director of the world renowned Blacksburg Electronic Village (BEV) at Virginia Tech from 1993 to 2002. In the nineties, Blacksburg became widely known as the "most wired community in the world."

He is a widely published writer, and author and co-editor of the popular book about Blacksburg (Community Networks: Lessons learned from Blacksburg, Virginia). His numerous papers and reports are widely circulated, and his technology news blog (www.designnine.com/news) has thousands of readers per month. Design Nine has become one of the best known broadband planning and project implementation firms in the U.S. The company specializes in municipal and community broadband planning and build outs; Danville, Virginia (www.ndanville.net), Palm Coast FiberNET (<http://www.ci.palm-coast.fl.us/PalmCoastFiberNET/>) and The Wired Road (www.thewiredroad.net) are three of the firm's recent community broadband projects.

