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Tap youth as E-commerce resource



E-BIZ

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I have spent this week as the keynote speaker for a number of full-day electronic commerce events organized by the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, a federal body that encourages economic development in the region.

The events in Newfoundland attracted standing-room-only audiences, an indication of the business interest in the role and potential of the Internet and E-commerce.

But there was a dichotomy in the people attending. In Clarenville, a town of about 5,000 people a two-hour drive north of St. John's, the room was half-filled by middle-aged baby boomers looking for opportunity in the wired world.

The other 50 per cent were young people, most below the age of 20, many of them students or recent graduates in the emerging field of E-commerce.

During the question and answer session, several people wanted to know how a small business can get help with E-commerce. Replies from the speakers offered the usual solutions — Internet service providers, Web site consultants and multimedia companies.

One elderly man then commented on the obvious — why turn to outsiders for help when right in the community are a number of young experts, eager for employment or contract work?

He raised a good point. Through my own travels across Canada, I often encounter seasoned executives who are trying to comprehend the complexities of electronic business. At the same time, they're literally surrounded by students and recent graduates of universities and community colleges who have developed specialized E-commerce degrees.

It is troubling that many business operators aren't aware of the skills available from today's youth; and that many of these graduates aren't connecting with those who obviously need their help.

Consider this: At the session in St. John's, one young man commented that while he had just graduated with a degree in E-commerce, he believed he would probably have to leave the province to find work. Yet he lives in a city where many businesses are just realizing they need to take advantage of E-commerce, and are looking for the skills to help them.

It's a bizarre situation that shouldn't continue. If you're thinking of getting into E-commerce, one of the most logical starting points may be to look around your own community. Approach your local university or community college to see whether they have a related program. They may even have an internship plan.

Keep in mind that there are some formalized ways to match Internet-savvy youth with entrepreneurs, such as the Industry Canada Student Connection Program. Details are at **www.scp-ebb.com**; you can avail yourself of some valuable skills at no charge.

Finally, think about the community perspective. Local business groups, ranging from boards of trade to economic development agencies, should encourage regular contact between area entrepreneurs and youthful E-commerce experts. Established business operators can benefit from the skills and enthusiasm of a younger generation.

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