



HuttCity.com

The Business and Community Portal, 2006 Implementation

THE NEW ZEALAND POST MANAGEMENT EXCELLENCE AWARDS 2007

The New Zealand Post Community Relationships Award

HuttCity.com is a portal website that hosts an unlimited number of independently designed and operated sub-sites. The HuttCity.com project is about getting community groups and small businesses involved in using the internet for communicating and doing business by offering free web space and site management tools. The target group is not necessarily familiar with technology and the sites are likely to be their first web presence.

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Brief Background to the Project

The intention of HuttCity.com is to provide businesses and community organisations with a shell and a set of easy to use wizards from which they could build a basic website.

The first two implementations of the site were piloted in 2003 and 2005 was using software that later proved to have many problems. Only 20 businesses had registered by February 2006 and there were major concerns from staff about the increasingly negative feedback and support requirements that were making little progress in resolving fundamental usability issues. A review of the project including an assessment of the site issues was undertaken.

It was clear from feedback received that there was demand for a HuttCity.com site provided useability issues could be ironed out. Fortunately only a small number of retailers were involved in the first two implementations and so it was decided to commit to the project and to set about identifying a suitable solution.

Meeting the Award Criteria

The need for and expected benefits of the project and how it furthers the council's vision and strategic direction

The Hutt City Vision is "A great place to live work and play". To achieve this, the city has 39 outcomes to achieve the desired social, economic, environmental and cultural well being of the community. These Community Outcomes are linked to nine Regional Outcomes developed with all Councils in the Wellington Region under the Wellington Regional Strategy, a 50 year growth strategy for the region. HuttCity.com links to three Regional Outcomes, *Community Prosperity* and *Strong and tolerant communities*, *Connected* and five underlying Hutt City Community Outcomes as summarised in the Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Regional Outcomes and Hutt City Community Outcomes linked to HuttCity.com.

Regional Outcomes'	Hutt City Community Outcomes'
Connected	- <i>Good telecommunications systems</i>
Community Prosperity	- <i>Attraction and nurturing of high quality businesses</i> - <i>Local businesses being supported and promoted</i>
Strong and tolerant communities	- <i>A city that is friendly and welcoming where people experience a sense of belonging</i> - <i>Encouraging community involvement and engagement in civic life</i> - <i>More celebration of tangata whenua and multi centralism in the city</i>

There are over four thousand businesses (84% employ 6 or fewer FTE's) and an estimated one thousand community organisations Hutt City. Because of their large numbers and limited resources for Economic and Community Development available, even though they are stake holders there are few initiatives that can directly and meaningfully assist smaller organisations

Many smaller businesses and community organisations do not have the skills or financial resources to establish a web presence. The minimum \$2000 to \$3000 upfront cost or equivalent in volunteered time has been a prohibitive factor along with ongoing training and site maintenance requirements.

Smaller businesses can struggle in a limited local market. Some may be based from home relying on word of mouth or other limited forms of exposure and unable to justify the promotion expense required to increase economic gains. Similarly, many clubs and other groups relying on volunteers face stiff competition to attract new members. With the responsibilities often falling on few members and limited resources, making valuable

activities, events and new membership information available is difficult and contributes to stifling organisations' growth. HuttCity.com is a facilitated response to a perceived community need that encourages sustainable economic development, gives residents information and greater access services and facilities, encourages a strong enterprising and diverse business sector, provides jobs and opportunities and the opportunity for stimulating knowledge and information.

The HuttCity.com concept -to get community groups and small business involved in using the internet for communicating and doing business by offering free web space and site management tools- also supports the Government Digital Strategy.

"It is important for New Zealanders from all walks of life to be able to create and use their own digital content in order to create value (social, cultural, and economic) for themselves, their communities, and our nation". -Government's Digital Strategy

Effective project management techniques

To highlight the successes of the final solution and project management techniques of this project it is important to have a historical perspective. By late 2005 a complete turnover of all Council staff involved in the project had occurred. The concept was sound, but the previous technology choices and implementation had been poor. A number of other Council's and organisations have attempted or are attempting a similar HuttCity.com concept but to date there is no evidence that any other attempt has been successful. After an analysis of the history and current state of the project a meeting was held to identify a 'kill or cure' solution.

A priority was to learn from mistakes of the past. Users of the previous HuttCity.com sites were engaged to analyse issues and to be part of future design decisions. Nine 'showstopper' issues were identified leading to the requirement to completely re-develop the system. A Council project team managed by web services personal with representatives of business and community stakeholders and the site developers was established.

The project team took a "technology first" approach. If a suitable technology was not able to be found to allow Hutt City users to easily create and manage their own sites, the project would not continue. Using significant user feedback business requirements were defined leading to a decision to identify a software product or solution that would meet fundamental requirements with no modifications. *Dot.Net Nuke* open source software that allowed more detailed requirements to be accommodated by third party plug-in or module functionality was chosen. The immediate and most important benefit of this approach is the easy upgrade path and maintenance of the framework.

The project was well managed and the vendors delivered on time and on budget. The initial choice of technology vindicated the extensive work that had happened in the preceding six months developing an overall view of Hutt City Council's website activities. From initial discussions HuttCity.com was developed quickly taking only six weeks, of which only four weeks were development time. The implementation of the project has been so successful that post launch bug resolution time is 0 hours.

The project team met regularly to discuss issues and the proposed development. All project team members were issued with their own HuttCity.com sites to develop and learn the software allowing the team to think through the issues from the user perspective, and providing valuable insight across a range of computer usage competencies. Post launch, the project manager acts as the central liaison point with the development company, makes decisions about the priority and benefits of potential developments and co-ordinates requirements generated by the project team.

A participatory approach to communicating and getting 'buy-in' from stakeholders associated with the project.

Feedback from businesses and the community strongly influenced the decision to proceed with HuttCity.com despite past failures. The concept was sound but had been poorly executed, with past failed attempts it would have been easier to walk away from the project. Council's project team included Community and Economic Development members who led

consultation with their respective stakeholders. Operating in this way three key issues were identified to ensure the success of HuttCity.com and community stakeholder's buy-in.

An Effective Solution

Prior to 2006 the community demonstrated a need for HuttCity.com but had not received an effective technological solution. HuttCity.com now benefits from smart technology choices including a cost-effective open-source framework, an 'off the shelf' modulated product to minimise the need for modification (and allow added functionality) and commonly used Microsoft technology for user's and developer's ease of use.

Dot Net Nuke provides a genuinely robust, sustainable platform for the portal concept that provides the site owners with more flexibility and the project team confidently envisage being able to provide long into the future.

Publicity

With confidence in the technology, publicity of the HuttCity.com to businesses and groups became a priority. To thank past users for their perseverance and encourage their support for HuttCity.com, previous users were encouraged and assisted in creating new sites. Working with this group provided valuable feedback to the developers which formed the bulk of initial online help and tutorial material. There was a 90% take up of this offer from past users, as well other key groups including Grey Power and Retailers Associations were targeted to assistance in creating a HuttCity.com website and encourage recommendations to members.

Further down the track advertising has been employed to continue the sites growth. Currently Council receives an average of 4 site requests per week. A number of initiatives have been undertaken and an indication of the results and are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Promotional initiatives undertaken to date

Initiative	Result
Email footers in HCC external emails produced <i>"Do you want a FREE website for your Hutt City based business or community group? To find out more or to apply online www.huttcity.com"</i>	1 -2 requests for a site per week
Message on HCC after hours phone recording produced	1 requests/ week
Advertising in Council newsletters	Approx 6 requests/ issue
Word of mouth advertising and contact with Council staff	Generated 30 site requests
Articles using people who've successfully made pages	Approx 20 requests

Ongoing development and support

Effective project management in its 2006 launch also required that HuttCity.com be accompanied by a comprehensive committed development and support programme.

While financial reality restricts the amount of direct staff support that can be provided innovative ways have been developed to assist site owners. Online help pages and a CD starter kit are available and Council's libraries are utilised to give free access sites and tutorials to users. Through an online forum users are encouraged to assist each other by sharing experiences and knowledge. The project team also create and distribute a quarterly newsletter to site owners which informs them of developments.

The decision to restrict users staff contact to a generic e-mail address has had the benefit of ensuring that all communications about the project are documented, and creating an audit trail has been simple. The success of the recent development, matched with limited direct assistance requirements has meant that support time has been directed at improvements and usability.

Innovation and originality in the specific award category area - Community Relationships Award

The challenges of HuttCity.com are demonstrated by Council's and others unsuccessful attempts however careful planning and management has turned a potentially failed project into a community success story. HuttCity.com is the only effective model in the country and is attracting interest from Councils across New Zealand. Talks are taking place with other Council's and organisations (EMA Wellington) in the Wellington Region to offer the portal regionally. A Council in Auckland has copied the model exactly with Hutt City Council's blessing. Council encourages all councils to consider the idea and is has shared without cost its project experience, and development knowledge.

Council provides limited resources for Economic and Community Development activities. By necessity activities must be prioritised often meaning limited resources are available for small business and community groups. HuttCity.com is a free resource unlimited available to all small organisations without discrimination (in terms of resource allocation). The project has provided a successful innovative solution including tutorials and site support and promotion to a wide range of businesses and groups making achieved on a budget below \$40,000.

Support for users is a key feature of the HuttCity.com framework. Free start-up tutorials, CD tutorials and by enabling users to help each other through online forums the site have been effective low cost solution alternatives to ensure user functionality. Getting groups in touch with each other has the added benefit of encouraging group cooperation beyond their HuttCity.com needs.

The technology used in the development of HuttCity.com is an innovative choice. Dot.net nuke in open source software, this means Hutt City Council can share the project with other groups at no added cost. Being freely available the Dot Net Nuke technology is popular. A number of resources are available free of charge and the system is future proofed with many "out of the box" features able to be added to the site. Council is also able to share its development with peer Councils at not cost to them.

Successful results, in both financial and non financial terms.

There are approximately 200 registered and 150 public sites on HuttCity.com. The estimated cost for businesses and community organisations of establishing a professional looking, working website is around \$2000 - \$3000 depending on site features. This along with ongoing expenses can be prohibitive for many small business and community groups. HuttCity.com enables all Hutt City businesses and community groups (without prioritisation) to have access to free professional website building and hosting resources.

To date the project has been achieved on time and on budget. Limited complications have been experienced with the new software allowing for additional development to occur within existing budgets.

In line with the Government's Digital Strategy HuttCity.com has provided a mechanism and encouragement for organisations to get involved in communicating and doing business on the internet. Site owners have demonstrated overwhelming approval for the site and are responding by promoting the site by word of mouth and by assisting others with development issues. Many have reported to Council their successes in having an online presence.

That the project was a 'good, sensible and right thing to do'

In late 2005, when the HuttCity.com project group met, despite the soundness of the concept, scrapping the project if a viable technology solution could not be found was given serious consideration. Limited development resources were available. The Project team agreed to persevere with the project based on a good business case, project plan and a reliable cost effective technological solution.

Alongside its technical solution the project team committed to a series of promotional and support initiatives including finding and involving past users in the project development. This was followed by a more public promotional campaign targeting likely users and organisations

and assisting them in starting their first HuttCity.com site. The media and Hutt City Council promotional resources were used as well as targeted articles to lift the sites profile locally and encourage public use.

User support was understood at the project's inception and resources were allocated to develop support material and run tutorial sessions. Council was able to make use of its library resources for the tutorials and to allow the public access to create their websites.

Only by applying necessary promotional and support activities to a good technological solution was the project a success. The reward for Council committing to the project has been an unprecedented uptake of HuttCity.com sites. By involving the past HuttCity.com users the project team has harnessed their knowledge to identify issues and help in future development enlisting a potentially sceptical group to ensure the project success.

Conclusion

The current deployment of HuttCity.com has been very successful with an increasing take-up within the target group. From earlier and final implementations a number of lessons have been drawn that demonstrate the differences between ineffective and effective project management.

Accurate evaluation of the concept, its value to the community and the required commitment were factors in the third implementation that ensured the project's success. In attempts at the concept the scope and benefits were not clearly defined and documented at the inception of the project (prior to the first implementation) so it was difficult to ensure that they were delivered. Lack of defined milestones meant the initial project proceeded on an ad-hoc basis, yet benefits were clearly not being achieved either internally or for the site owners.

By engaging with previous users of the site the project team was able to understand user issues and get users to aid the project team in developing future technology requirements. No assessment of the potential target groups or consultation was undertaken in earlier versions and assumptions were made about their ability to use the provided technology with limited support.

Selection of appropriate technology that could be deployed with no core system modification was vital to technology success and managing the project within limited financial boundaries. Earlier development was undertaken using a software product that had not been measured against any criteria of "fit-for-purpose" or usability in prior implementations and underwent significant upgrades at Council's expense to fix issues.

Organised promotion and user support was carefully planned at the project's outset despite limited financial resources. The project team targeted past users of the site and utilised their input in developing tutorial tools prior to the site's more public launch. Release to public only occurred when all issues identified in testing were resolved with an over-rather than under-estimated need for testing. Clearly the launching of two earlier versions was premature and under delivered on what the site was publicised as.

Finally, at the projects inception there was limited evidence of strong management in marked contrast to the projects final implementation. In it's third implementation an experienced project manager and team accurately evaluated the project, managed the scope of development, made smart technology choices and took on a user-centric view of the solution to deliver a successful project to the community.

Please see HuttCity.com Supporting Diagrams Appendix.