

The Albany GateWAY - A Regional Portal

See <http://www.albanygateway.com.au>

Albany is a town in the Great Southern Region of Western Australia. [The Albany GateWAY](#) serves the town and surrounding region.

A statistical overview

In the 2001 Census, two Statistical Local Areas covered Albany. In aggregate, 23 per cent of Albany's population used the Internet at home and 31 per cent from any site during Census week. Internet use in Albany was on par with regional Western Australia, but significantly below levels for the State as a whole. Albany's population profile mirrored that of regional Western Australia.

Internet use in Albany, 2001 Census			
	Total Population	Internet use	
		At home	From Any Site
Albany (C) – Central	15,589	21%	30%
Albany (C) – Balance	13,908	24%	32%
Total	29,497	23%	31%
Regional Western Australia			
Australia	348,907	22%	31%
Western Australia	1,851,275	28%	38%

Background

In 1999 Albany GateWAY swung open to the Great Southern region of Western Australia. This was a bold experiment to showcase the region globally, while building local awareness of the possibilities of new communication technologies for both economic and social development.

The project started with a \$75,000 [ITOL](#)¹ grant from the National Office for the Information Economy to fund the pilot project. From the beginning the aim was to create a single entry portal to the electronic environment of the region that could become a one-stop shop for goods, services and information. Rather than having a purely business focus, the Albany GateWAY recognised that the strength of these small regional communities lay in the intersections between commerce and community. The elements that were designed into the technical and administrative infrastructure included local management, sustainable funding, simplicity of use and maintenance, community appropriateness and e-commerce viability. The Albany GateWAY assumes that tools and structures for community driven content are essential for the portal to succeed and the GateWAY was never planned as a static, centrally managed information based web site.

Portal Manager Gill Sellar has approached the project with vigour and determination. She has done extensive research on the theoretical and practical aspects of community gateways, and has now completed a PhD based on the project. She identifies '5 C's' necessary for a successful online portal: community, content, commerce, collaboration, and courage. This project profile looks at each of these elements and how they combine to form a viable online electronic community.

¹ Information Technology On Line. This is a Commonwealth Government grant program administered by the National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE) aims to accelerate the national adoption of business-to-business (B2B) e-commerce solutions, especially by small to medium enterprises (SMEs)

<http://www.noie.gov.au/projects/ebusiness/developing/ITOL/index.htm> .

The book by A.J Kim, *Community Building on The Web*², has been a strong influence on her approach. It states three fundamental community design principles: design for growth and change, creation of feedback loops and empowerment of individuals within communities. This potentially leads to empowered communities, but only as a bottom up process.

Community

Community means different things to different people. People can also belong to multiple communities. Part of the Albany GateWAY learning experience is that there are new ways to congregate, communicate, buy and sell through an online presence. The aim is to provide an online space that nurtures community-building relationships and through this, regional resilience.

This learning can be encouraged through new forms of leadership. This involves not just the provision of goods and services, but also access to new technologies, training, marketing and e-commerce solutions to move local goods and services, encouraging online engagement and building community awareness. The Portal Manager describes the ‘codes of connectivity’ as *openness, inclusiveness, skill sharing, and use of multiple media*. From the outset GateWAY had to be as much about empowering rural/regional people, as it was about the roll out of better telecommunications facilities.

Content

For web sites, it is commonly said that ‘content is king’. The Albany GateWAY has an abundance of content, all locally provided and updated. Town attractions, poetry, a calendar of events, directory, local news and features such as ‘business of the week’ and ‘topic of the moment’ help to unify the region’s online presence, as does a clickable map of the Great Southern region. Not an ultra tidy site, its organic diversity reflects the diffuse inputs into its content. There is a continually changing personal profile and a community profile section.

Local contributors individually edit every page directly online through GateWAY’s distributed publishing system (WebIT), which has become the crucial application in enabling the growth of the community online. GateWAY averages between 1 000 – 1 450 hits per day, and there are 133 editors managing content remotely throughout the community.

All software applications for the portal have been created from the ground up using local expertise and ideas. This way they believe they get exactly what they need and also assist the local computing boffins develop their skills.

A popular feature is the ‘[Top 10](#)’ listing³ of most visited pages on the portal. This is generated dynamically from the GateWAY’s databases, and by making site performance transparently available to all, a healthy competition that keeps content fresh and reflecting local community activity is encouraged.

² Kim, A.J. (2000). *Community Building on the Web: Secret Strategies for Successful Online Communities*. Peachpit Press.

³ <http://www.albanygateway.com.au/Top10.asp?sw=747>

The Paper is an [online publication](#)⁴ for the portal that has a paid editor and is responsive to broad communication needs. These can be anything, from acting as an online ‘soapbox’, providing a forum for discussion groups or operating as an online market place. The editor backs underdogs, promotes the rights and issues of differently abled people and encourages the expression of creative, alternative viewpoints.

Promotion

If content is king, marketing is surely ‘queen’ for community networks. But this is a more sophisticated form of social marketing. It includes the promotion of ideas and training and the process of networking, which goes well beyond merely promoting the GateWAY as a ‘product’.

Ms Sellar travelled the region, with presentations and visits to all the major local towns. She met with local councils, tourist bureaus, community groups and local residents, and encouraged communities of interest and practice as well as geographical groups to ‘colonise’ the portal by establishing their own sections. This was complemented with print and radio media exposure, reciprocal arrangements of a banner ad for an equivalent number of TV commercials and a newspaper running the GateWAY logo and website address. Training was also promoted, particularly for the distributed publishing system. Someone in every town was offered training to ensure there was a local editor.

Groups interested in partnerships included regional retail cooperatives, community banks, the Albany Chamber of Commerce and Industry, as well as the Great Southern Tourism proprietors. People responded enthusiastically as they realised that the GateWAY would help develop the region’s social capital.⁵

The portal can function in an environment of friendly collaboration that does not exclude healthy competition. Just as competition between sporting teams leaves them able to have a return match, so can businesses work together to ensure a vibrant online marketplace.

Commerce

The commercial side of the portal has been somewhat slower to emerge than the more socially oriented content. It has taken a while for the region to feel comfortable with the new technologies. The GateWAY has become a Cooperative, and now has 247 paid members. These members choose various options such as listings, advertising or websites for their organisations. The Cooperative also offers \$50 lifetime shares, which makes members eligible for nomination to Board membership and able to nominate others. As ownership remains in the hands of the local community any spare funds go into portal development.

The basic model is that non-profit organisations do not pay for content, but commercial organisations pay for web space and advertising. There are cost-effective membership options and advertising opportunities.

⁴ http://www.albanygateway.com.au/home/the_paper/new5

⁵ Social capital refers to the collective resources required for individuals, groups, organisations, businesses, and communities to be sustainable in a changing environment. These are the networks, shared interests, shared visions, trust and sense of belonging that are central to any true community.

A number of initiatives are under way to encourage local businesses to 'try local, buy local'. GateWAY GOPHORS help sign up other businesses and gain benefits for each one.

These GOPHORS are encouraged to set up their own businesses promoting GateWAY and as this initiative develops, so do employment opportunities.

Electronic commerce capability has been planned from the outset with the intention of making the online marketplace an experience as well as a transaction. The design of the interface reinforces the Portal Manager's perspective that there is no sharp dividing line between community business and community activities. Full credit card facilities will be available on the site, and several businesses are offering their services through the 'shopping cart'. This will expand over time to include the dozens of businesses already listed in the directories for the GateWAY.

Towards the Future

In early 2002, the [Networking the Nation program](#)⁶ provided a grant for \$100,000 to further advance the E-GateWAY as an e-commerce platform for local business.

A small consortia of three organisations - the University of Western Australia, Albany Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Albany GateWAY - assisted by the Great Southern Area Consultative Committee, received Australian government funding to build the 'eCulture Continuum'.

The Intelligent Search (IS) System will work in tandem with GateWAY's developing commercial areas. This will be an application for streamlining online business information and assistance throughout the region, using industry and location specific data to increase business opportunities for local business and industry. An audit survey of over 500 regional businesses is part of this project. This will ascertain the skill levels, needs and other IT relevant information pertinent to the building of the IS System.

Here is an example of how the IS System will work:

A wildflower farm in the small town of Cranbrook, a Walpole herb farm and an Albany florist all provide the 'intelligent system' with profiles of their businesses and a list of their current goods and services. The florist secures a major contract to provide all floral arrangements for the 2005 ANZAC Festival. She requires native flora for 40 dinner tables, rosemary and wildflowers for lapel buttons for over 1 000 marchers and other products for memorial wreaths. She enters her requirements into the system and attends to the daily duties of her business. The system locates the appropriate suppliers, including the Cranbrook and Walpole businesses, and emails or faxes their details for her to follow up. The search is conducted while all three businesses are at work or after hours. All transactions and communications can be done online.

The IS System has the potential to make huge savings in costs and time. It will give Great Southern businesses a 'first mover' advantage over other States and national competitors. All businesses will be encouraged to source locally. Eventually the

⁶ Networking the Nation is the Australian government's five-year \$250 million Regional Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund, designed to help bridge the gaps in telecommunications services, access and costs between urban and non-urban Australia. http://www.dcita.gov.au/Article/0,,0_1-2_3-3_461-4_106337,00.html

system will be designed to link into other developing systems and networks such as the [Government Electronic Marketplace \(GEM\)](#)⁷.

Other long-term issues are the ownership and legal status of the online content, and processes for the management of the Cooperative. Members are being encouraged to think about a 3-5 year business plan, and to work out what they want to achieve or access through the portal.

This includes working to ensure good local call access to the Internet. Longer-term issues such as line speeds and broadband will require awareness, collective action and lobbying.

Outcomes

As it stands, the Albany GateWAY is a successful and ongoing research project that is an Australian benchmark for the possibilities of community development online. The Portal Manager is now receiving invitations to help other rural communities copy the design principles that can make such projects sustainable.

Ms Sellar believes the essence of any type of successful community development is the empowerment of individuals within that community to have access to the skills, own the decision-making processes and use existing and new knowledge as a platform for growth and prosperity in their community. She says, "Community online projects cannot be created as stand alone events. The very nature of community building at any level requires networking and sharing of ideas and processes."

Prepared by NOIE in Feb 2003 with information provided by Gill Sellar, Portal Manger Albany GateWAY <http://www.albanygateway.com.au> More detail about the business and technical aspects of this project are available from keeper@albanygateway.com.au

⁷ <http://www.gem.wa.gov.au/Gem>