



# Inspire Foundation's Reach Out! and Beanbag

## Enabling young people to go online and get help

The Inspire Foundation, a national nonprofit organisation, was formed in 1996 in response to Australia's then escalating rates of youth suicide and attempted youth suicide.

Established specifically to provide social services for young people, the Foundation uses the Internet to create and deliver new forms of social services. Inspire Foundation manages three major programs, Reach Out!, ActNow and Beanbag. Each of these focuses on service delivery via the Internet or providing access to the Internet.

This case study discusses Reach Out! and Beanbag.

### Using the Internet to keep young people socially connected

The Reach Out! website was launched in 1998 with funding from Microsoft and the Triple J Real Appeal. It presents information, assistance and referrals in a format that is designed to appeal to young people while allowing them to remain anonymous. Reach Out! combines suicide prevention and mental health promotion theories with leading-edge website development and community engagement. Youth participation is integral to the service, with young people giving advice and contributing to the service's development.

The Inspire Foundation chose the Internet as the medium for service delivery for two reasons:

- it overcame several limitations inherent in more traditional services
- it could provide a completely anonymous environment where young people could seek help at a time, and in a place, of their choosing.

After the Reach Out! site was launched and its work had started, it became obvious that many young people would not benefit from the site because they did not have Internet access. In other cases, young people had Internet access but not in a youth-friendly environment where they would feel comfortable exploring such a site. This led Inspire to launch a series of projects aimed at bridging the digital divide for young Australians in disadvantaged areas. Over the past five years these have included the 'Reach Out! Bush Network', the 'Gooris on the Macleay', and the 'Beanbag Net Centres' projects. Inspire Foundation now focuses its work in this area on the Beanbag program, which developed from research published as the Byte Report.



That research investigated young people's Internet access and found that the area of greatest need was young people 'living on the fringes of the capital cities' who had no established programs to provide services for them.

Beanbag was developed with support from Microsoft through its eMpower Australia campaign, and the Coca-Cola Australia Foundation. The program specifically targets Australia's most marginalised young people, those living on the outskirts of our largest and wealthiest cities.



The first stage of the project was to establish ten Beanbag Net Centres in existing youth centres. The centres provide young people with:

- free Internet access
- tailored computer and Internet training (also available for centre staff)
- local community websites developed in conjunction with local young people that provide a positive profile of the local community.

As at 2004 there are 18 Beanbag centres in capital cities across Australia. Twenty will be launched by July 2005. The centres provide more than 1000 young people with computer access skills to improve their education and employment prospects.

Inspire plans to continue expanding the number of Beanbag Net Centres. This will require a broadening of the funding base, with several new sponsors including Samsung and Hewlett Packard contributing funds and in-kind support. Inspire's participation in the Microsoft Unlimited Potential program and continued support from the Coca-Cola Australia Foundation assist this expansion.

I come here two times a week. I come here for my homework to do assignments and research. I go on the net and check my Hotmail and check out the World Cup and see how it's going. And if I have some free time I just go on the net and chat. I really like using computers.

Richard, 15, Marrickville.



## Benefits and success factors

Reach Out! and the Beanbag Net Centres are major successes. Since its launch, more than two million people have visited the Reach Out! website. It currently attracts an average of 50 000 visitors each month.

The site has been shown to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people: an evaluation in 2003 showed that 84 per cent of users reported that they would return to the site if they were having a tough time again, and 72 per cent said they would speak to a medical professional after visiting the site. The young people interviewed said the site's information was succinct, easy to understand and helpful.

Independent market research also found that young people feel connected to Reach Out!, believe the information is credible, and trust the service the site provides.

The Beanbag Net Centres are proving so successful that they have attracted additional sponsorship. This has enabled the program to be extended. For example, one new sponsor, Samsung, has provided digital video cameras and financial support to enable centres to participate in the KickArse short film competition conducted by the Inspire Foundation. The project was created to provide an activity that could run across the Learning Network. Each centre is to create one or two short films that will form the basis of a mini film festival that Inspire will take to each of the centres in November 2004.

In May 2004, the Inspire Foundation won the Australian Information Industry Association 2004 iAward for Corporate Social Responsibility. The award recognises Inspire's partnership with Microsoft Australia and Coca-Cola Australia. Inspire's recipe for success is:



- Choose active youth hangouts. The location for the Beanbag Net Centres must be chosen carefully. In the original rollout of the project, communities bid for the centres and often chose the location themselves. This sometimes led to centres being established in inappropriate areas that weren't youth-friendly, or in areas that were physically isolated or inaccessible. Inspire now only establishes Beanbag Net Centres in active, youth-friendly centres that have proved their sustainability.
- Empower young people to create their own content.
- Let individual agencies take ownership of the centres. Each agency is different and must be able to manage its centre in an appropriate way. Inspire does not impose its style on individual centres.
- Activity is not the only criterion for success in the Beanbag Net Centres. Ongoing commitment between Inspire and the staff at individual centres is crucial to success.
- It is essential that staff understand how to use the equipment provided for the centres. Difficulties can arise if there is high staff turnover and new staff aren't told how a centre operates. Inspire has addressed this by establishing a Beanbag Net Centre Learning Network to facilitate the exchange of ideas and experiences between managers and staff and to provide them with a support group.



## Barriers

The only barrier for Beanbag is one of scalability. Given their geographic spread it is difficult to expand the number of centres beyond the 20 planned while providing a high level of service delivery to those already in the network.

## Key lessons

Technology cannot be dumped into a community. It must be located in active youth centres, appropriate training must be delivered for staff and young people, and the young people must be empowered and enabled to undertake local content development.

## References

ActNow [www.actnow.com.au/](http://www.actnow.com.au/)

Unlimited Potential [www.smithfamily.com.au](http://www.smithfamily.com.au)

Gooris on the Macleay [www.gotm.com.au/](http://www.gotm.com.au/)

Beanbag [www.beanbag.net.au](http://www.beanbag.net.au)

Reach Out! [www.reachout.com.au/](http://www.reachout.com.au/)

Inspire Foundation [www.inspire.org.au](http://www.inspire.org.au)

Evaluations are available at the publications section.

# COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

## More information

In these case studies, communities, nonprofit organisations and groups share their experiences and lessons they have learnt using ICT: enhancing capability and service delivery; supporting and building communities, networks and connections; and overcoming barriers and challenges.

*Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004–2006* emphasises the need to ensure that all Australians can participate in the benefits of the information economy.

Key strategies in 2004–06 will be to strengthen collaboration and capabilities in nonprofit organisations, facilitate the creative use of ICT for building stronger communities and social cohesion, and develop networks, capabilities and tools to enable participation by people who are facing economic, geographic or social barriers.

**For more information visit the DCITA website [www.dcita.gov.au](http://www.dcita.gov.au) or email [community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au](mailto:community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au).**

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