



Earth Share Australia Foundation eGive portal

Facilitating sponsorship and donations for small environmental organisations

Earth Share is a national foundation established to assist environmental and other nonprofit organisations. It aggregates the purchasing power of small organisations to develop ICT applications, such as the eGive online donations website.

Sharing costs to raise funds online

Earth Share has a core membership of 11 environmental groups: Arid Lands Environment Centre, the Australian Conservation Foundation, the Conservation Councils of Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and the South-East Region and Canberra, Environment Victoria, Friends of the Earth, The Nature Conservancy Council of NSW, Tasmanian Conservation Trust and The Wilderness Society.

Earth Share is governed by a seven-member board and has a small staff of volunteers, with an executive director, a programmer and a bookkeeper.

Its purpose is to support small to medium sized community organisations. With fundraising an ongoing concern, it aims to facilitate sponsorship and donations through ICT. Earth Share's strategy is to amortise the associated costs over a large number of small organisations. This method of sharing costs has opened up a range of opportunities which these organisations would not otherwise have been able to afford.

The original focus was on payroll deduction schemes, but the program did not develop quickly enough, and the focus was shifted to online giving for the current planning period.

Earth Share has three principal programs: establishing partnerships to support community groups via workplace donations; eGive, which provides Internet-based donation facilities; and GreenNet, a program to raise money through commissions paid on telecommunications services.

Earth Share maintains a website that provides basic information about the organisation and access to all of its services for small community organisations, including GreenNet and the eGive portal. It also carries out other work such as auspicing small community groups, developing projects with organisations and helping to raise funds for those projects, and assisting with training programs.

Earth Share developed the eGive portal to bring organisations and potential donors into direct contact with each other, and to provide an online framework for building entire campaigns.



Developed using ASP (active server pages) within the Microsoft.Net e-business development framework, the core of the eGive service is its contact or customer relationship manager (CRM) database. Services can be purchased individually or as a total package, and include:

- a donation service, allowing visitors to the website to make one-off or recurrent donations via credit card or recurrent donations via direct debit

- e-commerce and membership facilities
- an electronic newsletter service (including the ability to sell newsletters online)
- a range of tools such as fax action facilities with which to manage campaigns.

Credit card transactions are made via a direct connection to the bank and are made in real time. Direct debit transactions are more complicated and not yet fully automated. For added security, no credit card details are stored at all and banking details are held offline.

The eGive Portal is hosted in a secure environment by EZ Solutions. It was originally hosted on a free service but restrictions on the programming environment meant that the developer could not use the full range of development tools available. It was preferable to pay for a more flexible service.

Earth Share plans a number of improvements and new modules when funding is available. The major improvement would be to interface eGive's database directly with the systems of its member organisations. Alternatively they could provide improved import and export



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functionality. This would enable members to realise efficiencies in their operations.

Three additional modules are under consideration: an automated version of the OzProspect newsletter system available to all organisations, an online raffle ticket system and an integrated volunteering program matching quality volunteers and their skills to opportunities and organisations.

Benefits

To date, eGive has been operating for a year and has been promoted only by word-of-mouth. Twenty-two nonprofit organisations, including eight environmental groups, three educational groups and two providing services for children, have signed to the service and the most successful one is raising \$3500 per month. Traditional methods such as direct mail are labour and cost intensive relative to online fundraising. While they can raise large amounts of money, these funds are erratic, depending on periodic mail-outs, and typically carry overheads of between 20 and 40 per cent of the funds raised.

Earth Share deliberately adopted a limited promotional strategy as it believed that the service had to establish its trustworthiness and sustainability before it could expect small organisations to participate. Having done that, it is now embarking on a wider promotional campaign, and it aims to double the number of participants within three months.

Success factors

- **Understand the audience's needs.** As an organisation established to provide services to small nonprofit organisations, it was essential that Earth Share have a thorough understanding of the sector and its needs,



and to be able to devise a system capable of meeting those needs. Without that, regardless of the sophistication of the product being offered, it would not be taken up.

- **Be able to communicate those needs.** Not only is it necessary to devise a system based on the audience's needs, it is necessary to be able to communicate the design of that system, and the context in which it is to operate, to the developers, in order for the organisation to keep control of the project and its outcomes.
- **Employ appropriate staff.** Finding a skilled programmer who understood the sector and who was prepared to work at cost was essential given the limited funding available.

Barriers

Earth Share is a very small organisation. The biggest issue it has faced has been attracting funds. Seeking funds is time consuming in itself and diverts limited resources from serving the purpose of the organisation. The Myer Foundation provided some seed money.

Only limited funding was available for the development of what is quite a sophisticated system. It was necessary to find a programmer who would undertake the work at cost, and this eventually took 18 months and introduced other problems. There was a long lead time required to get the system up and running, as the programmer had to give the project a lower priority if full-paying work came in.



EarthShare also had insufficient funds to undertake exhaustive testing of the system and had to live with it despite some suspected remaining minor problems, making use of understanding clients to help finalise the testing process. This was not ideal, but given that full promotion of the service could not be undertaken until it had established itself, it was practicable.

A lot of nonprofit organisations are still conservative in their approach to ICT and the system will only achieve its potential when they are prepared to embrace it. Before that could happen, Earth Share needed to establish both its trustworthiness and sustainability, which takes time. Having been in operation for a year, Earth Share has made a significant step in that direction but will need more time to consolidate its position.

Key lesson

- Organisations collaborating to develop ICT applications can gain advantages through sharing costs and sharing ICT knowledge.

References

EarthShare www.earthshare.org.au

eGive www.egive.org.au

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 or email community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au.

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