

---

## DELIVERING MAINSTREET.AU.COM FUNCTIONALITY THROUGH 'LOCAL' COMMUNITY PORTALS

Helen Thompson  
University of Ballarat

### ABSTRACT

The MainStreet.au.com regional portal project, ([www.mainstreet.au.com](http://www.mainstreet.au.com)) has provided its target community in the Golden West Region of Victoria, Australia, with assistance in accessing a range of electronic commerce services. The inclusion of a technical team as a critical element made a significant difference to how the project evolved. Through the project a portal platform was developed that is scaleable, replicable, and flexible. This has made it possible to mirror all the functionality of MainStreet.au.com through sub-communities with the results initially demonstrated through Ararat Online ([www.ararat.asn.au](http://www.ararat.asn.au)) and then Nhill.com ([www.nhill.com](http://www.nhill.com)). Today diverse communities access portal services through the MainStreet.au.com project. Clients have strong ownership of their online activities, maintain their own Web-based information, and are committed to annually investing to sustain the portal infrastructure and the services they access. It is for these reasons that the services of MainStreet.au.com will continue to be delivered long after initial seed funding has been expended.

---

### INTRODUCTION

Electronic commerce has been hailed as the business revolution of the information age with promises of new market opportunities, productivity improvements and efficiencies that can maintain or enhance competitiveness (Earl 2000; Vigo and Arnold 2000). However in a regional and rural context the availability of practical assistance is often limited, and when combined with little local knowledge and experience, the valuation of electronic commerce benefits is often difficult (Ashford, 1999; Papandrea & Wade, 2000; Pattulock & Albury Wodonga Area Consultative Committee, 2000).

In recognition of this, governments have invested heavily in partnerships with educators, businesses, and communities to promote electronic commerce adoption. One area of focus has been the provision of funding to support the establishment of local and regional Web portals. MainStreet.au.com is the product of such a partnership and was established after the project secured grant funding in November 1999 through the Australian Commonwealth Government's Regional Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund, Networking the Nation (NTN).

Across Australia similar initiatives have been funded and implemented with mixed results. Some projects have produced 'static' or 'fixed' solutions. Others have attracted funding without a sufficient understanding of Web portals or local needs. Some initiatives have stalled when

perceived as a competitive threat to the local IT and Web development industry. Others have experienced delays in implementation and lost momentum because of less time and other resources available to promote the actual use of portal services when delivered. Finally, in terms of ongoing sustainability, it is rare to find examples of portals that have 'life' after funding. Most fail to develop sufficient revenue streams or systems that can support the project staff, portal content, and infrastructure beyond the seed-funded period.

The objective of this paper is to disseminate some of the learning from the implementation and outcomes of the MainStreet.au.com regional portal project. The paper describes how the project proceeded based on the recommendations from locally-funded research. It confirms that the project was well promoted with the regional portal launched just six months after funding was secured. While a number of important factors are highlighted, the most successful and unique aspect of the project has been the development of a replicable portal framework. It has been this capability that has been leveraged to cause increases in 'buy-in', participation, and ongoing investment in MainStreet.au.com regional Web-based services.

### PROJECT BACKGROUND

In the Golden West Region there has been a strong recognition of the need to work in partnership to promote electronic commerce adoption. In May 1999 the Golden West

Regional Forum, the Central Highlands Area Consultative Committee, and a collective of Regional stakeholder organizations engaged the University of Ballarat's Centre for Electronic Commerce and Communications (CECC) to research the requirements and make recommendations on how the Golden West Region could capture greater advantages from new information and communications technologies.

Around 13,500 businesses operate within the Golden West Region across ten local government areas. The region extends from Bacchus Marsh, through the regional city of Ballarat, and west through the centres of Ararat, Stawell, and Horsham through to the South Australian border. It also extends north and south including the communities of Nhill, Donald, Warracknabeal, Ouyen, Edenhope and Daylesford (see Figure 1.).

The study identified that although many organizations had developed business practices that worked well in the 'off-line' world, they would require assistance in identifying new processes and practices which could be adopted to overcome obstacles to successful electronic commerce. The research, documented in Victoria's Golden West Portal Project Business Case (Thompson, 1999) involved a number of different stages. These included confirming existing regional Web content, examining community portal developments, identifying portal tools, research potential revenue streams, conducting focus group sessions, and continuing with stakeholder consultation.

The research report described how an environment could be established that would be conducive to the widespread adoption of electronic commerce. Specific recommendations included the following.

- Establishing a membership-based, regional association with a specific focus on electronic commerce.
- Establishing the infrastructure for a manageable and economically-sustainable Internet presence in a way that would encourage and facilitate communities of interest and trading communities, as well as the enhancement of and community service.
- Through a regional portal, achieve better Web content coordination, provide a valuable information source for residents, reduce or eliminate potential frustrations for users in finding Web-based information and services, and also enhance efforts to promote all the attributes of the region.
- Support regional businesses that were still at the elementary stage of electronic commerce uptake by providing access to easy-to-use Web-based products and services.
- Provide mentoring services to businesses that were ready to integrate electronic commerce with their particular operations and business plans.



Figure 1. Area of project focus: Golden West Region, Victoria

Consultation during the research period, through presentations, focus groups, and briefing sessions produced some unanticipated benefits and challenges. While consultation acted to increase awareness of what a regional portal was and how such an initiative could be implemented to support economic and social development, it also prematurely raised expectations. Secondly, it introduced both the importance and challenge of achieving 'a local flavour'. Focus-group participants did not identify themselves as belonging to a single region. How then could a regional portal be developed to be 'the region's' first point of electronic contact?

### ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND FUNDING

The Chamber of Electronic Commerce Western Victoria Inc. (the Chamber) was established to:

- facilitate the advancement of electronic commerce,
- promote leadership on electronic commerce issues,

- facilitate new business development initiatives using electronic commerce,
- implement the MainStreet.au.com portal project,

The fifteen founding members were the organizations that had provided financial contributions to the research. Funding applications were prepared, and in November 1999 the MainStreet.au.com project secured funding of AUD 274,000 through Networking the Nation, with a further AUD 135,000 approved in May 2000. Figure 2 illustrates the relationships between the parties and provides an overview of how the MainStreet.au.com project was to be implemented. The Chamber would manage the project through a committee of management. CECC would be contracted to implement the project because they had the specialist skills necessary to develop the portal infrastructure and services. Affiliations would be strengthened with the region's Community Enterprise Centres, businesses in the IT sector, and with organizations such as regional-development bodies, VECCI, and Australian Industry Group.

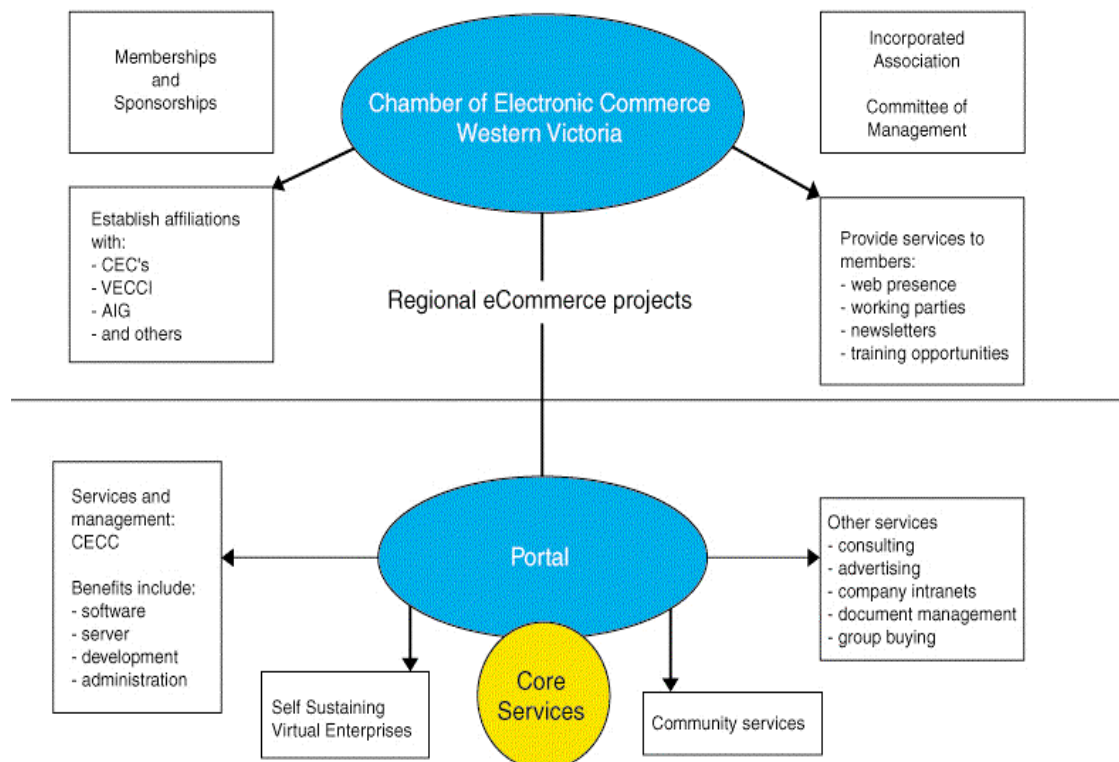


Figure 2. Structure for project implementation.

By June 2000 membership of the Chamber had been increased to fifty with representation across the following sectors.

- Semi government / utilities: 10
- Local government: 9
- Business: 7
- Education: 6
- Business IT sector: 6
- Regional Connectivity and CECs: 5
- Business associations: 3
- Professional services: 4

### **CHOOSING WHETHER TO BUY OR BUILD?**

Many portal projects are 'static' or 'fixed' solutions. Applicants secure the funding, call for tenders, have the portal built, and then encourage the target community to use it. The MainStreet.au.com model, with the inclusion of a technical team as a critical element, was different, but the decision to have this team was significant in determining how the MainStreet.au.com project would evolve. The technical officer and part-time programmers would develop a portal framework based on the core services identified during the preliminary study. All tools would be selected or developed with non-technical end users in mind. The initial toolset would include event calendars; news publishing tools; online registration, payment, and product systems; and access to Web wizards and other Web publishing tools. This would be achieved by incorporating a range of in-house developments with some integration of externally-sourced product.

The core services would create capacities to link regional Internet information and services, construct searchable directories, dynamically generate content like news and weather, distribute publishing and authoring rights, promote community news and events, and provide access to Web wizards and an online payment and product system.

### **IMPLEMENTATION**

During its first year, the MainStreet.au.com project was well promoted with networking and briefing sessions and presentations to stakeholder organizations and through regular media coverage at the local, regional, and state level (Barker, 1999; Delahunty, 2000; Hodges, 2000; Litras, 2000a; Litras, 2000b; Toia, 2000; Verdon, 2000). These activities were important,

as they helped to maintain interest in the project while technical developments proceeded behind the scenes.

The project attracted its first major client early in 2000. The success in securing the Ararat Online project ([www.ararat.asn.au](http://www.ararat.asn.au)) was attributed to involving regional stakeholders right from the project's beginning. Ararat's Economic Development Manager, Ivan Surrige, had participated in a range of activities, meetings and focus group sessions. Though these activities he developed a strong understanding of how MainStreet.au.com offered Ararat something different that could be applied immediately to benefit his local community.

Ararat was already more advanced than most communities with their e-commerce uptake, and wanted to stay in that position. Ararat Online (Stage 1) had evolved from a partnership between Council and the Ararat Community College in early 1999 with students developing simple Web pages for local businesses and community groups. But there were some limitations: there was a lack of site consistency, no searching capabilities, some quality problems, and an inability to easily update sites. Businesses also had no way of progressing to a higher level of e-commerce activity (Thompson, 2000).

The Ararat Advertiser gave front-page coverage to the announcement that Ararat Online (<http://www.ararat.asn.au>) would upgrade its existing site through MainStreet.au.com (Verdon, 2000). The project would include a range of elements, all of which would be delivered through the University of Ballarat's CECC. More than eighty businesses and community groups would directly benefit from an upgrade of their Web presence. They would also be given the opportunity to undertake training so that each organization would gain the skills to manage their own site. A further opportunity would be available for six businesses through an e-commerce mentoring program. Selected businesses would be assisted in the implementation of e-commerce initiatives developed to match their particular business needs.

The value derived for MainStreet.au.com from the Ararat Online project was substantial. First, although the project did not represent a significant 'bottom-line' contribution in the context of the overall project budget, the investment of AUD 8,000 in a regional

e-commerce context represented a significant buy-in in the MainStreet.au.com product. Second, the Ararat Online project provided an opportunity to showcase the full MainStreet.au.com product suite, the technical capabilities the Web products, and the training and consulting services. Third, the project would help to address one of the early barriers: people in the target region had a very limited understanding of what a portal was. The Ararat Online project would provide a 'real' example which it was hoped could be used to demonstrate the value and benefits that were associated with the efficient linking of Internet-based information and services in an easily searchable form. In other words the Ararat Online project would establish the first 'before' and 'after' images. This proved to be a very powerful marketing mechanism for the project.

The project's technical team (however) had their task doubled – they were now expected to build not one, but two portals and to deliver these within very short periods. They had been working to develop the portal framework already described in this paper. But would it be possible to mirror the MainStreet.au.com functionality through sub-communities? To their credit, the technical team took on the challenge enthusiastically, first achieving and then exceeding expectations. They developed a way to replicate the MainStreet.au.com functionality, and demonstrated what the results could be – initially through Ararat Online ([www.ararat.asn.au](http://www.ararat.asn.au)) and then Nhill.com ([www.nhill.com](http://www.nhill.com)).

The original goal had been to establish MainStreet.au.com as the 'point of first electronic contact for the region' (Thompson 1999, p. iv). The vision was that people would find MainStreet.au.com, and from there be able to search and access information about a particular region or locate services of a particular type. What was now understood was that 'communities' would be more motivated if the functionality of MainStreet.au.com could be delivered at a much more local level with local Web addresses and branding. Information could then be filtered up to the MainStreet.au.com umbrella so that client communities could be either accessed directly or through MainStreet.au.com. While this turned the original concept upside down, there was a strong indication that communities in the region were prepared to pay both the establishment and the maintenance of such a service.

This replicable portal framework was a 'product' that had the potential to generate a significant revenue stream; one which was not identified in the original projections. Through projects like Ararat Online, credibility was established by delivering tailored solutions within very tight time-lines. Completed projects were used as examples to attract further projects, first with Birchip Cropping Group with funding through Multi Media Victoria, and then with local councils who secured funding through the Victorian e-Commerce Early Movers program.

A week of activities marked the official launch of the MainStreet.au.com portal in July 2000. The major MainStreet.au.com portal launch was held in Ballarat. In Nhill and Ararat, local portals Nhill.com and Ararat Online were launched, and in the Pyrenees and Moorabool regions information sessions were held to promote the opportunity to join local working groups for portals at the very beginning of development (Han, 2000; Lynch, 2000; Vida-Douglas, 2000)

The portal infrastructure and tools have since been replicated to suit a range of different clients. Appendix 1 contains a selection of URLs for clients including local governments, town-based communities, membership-based organizations, industry groups, and small and medium enterprises. E-commerce outcomes can be viewed through seven community portals, fourteen comprehensive Web sites and over 280 Web wizards. The Central Highlands Manufacturers Web site promotes a further 263 firms (Van Beveren & Thompson, 2002), the Birchip Cropping Group disseminate online services to over 500 members, while the Rural and Regional Research Network connects more than 160 people with an interest in research and economic development.

## OUTCOMES

Findings from NTN supports projects which can contribute in a number of specific areas. The following section provides a review of how the MainStreet.au.com project has contributed to the region.

### Enhanced telecommunications infrastructure and services

The MainStreet.au.com portal is a regional asset which is providing communities within its target region access to a range of tools which make it easier to coordinate and create Web-based information and services.

Tools accessible through the MainStreet.au.com portal have assisted many individuals and communities in advancing their uptake of electronic commerce as they update their own sites, publish event information and news items, or show others how to build simple Web sites. The level of functionality and services accessed is high and, – because clients have strong ownership of their online activities, maintain their own Web-based information, and are committed to annually investing to maintain the portal infrastructure and services, the services – of MainStreet.au.com can continue to be delivered after the initial seed funding period.

### **Increase access to, and promote use of, services available through telecommunications networks**

The MainStreet.au.com project has delivered a variety of training and mentoring initiatives that have promoted the use of Web-based services. Examples include: a ‘train the trainer’ program delivered to council employees, community enterprise centres, neighbourhood houses, and others; Web wizard training for three-page and ten-page, template driven sites delivered to individual business operators and representatives of community groups; training delivery and Web site document production to ensure that organizations that developed comprehensive Web sites understand and utilise the full features, can expand, update, and maintain their own sites. Furthermore, e-commerce mentoring projects were conducted in the Ararat, Pyrenees, and Moorabool Shire regions. In total eighteen businesses were assisted in planning and implementing electronic commerce initiatives developed to meet their particular needs.

The MainStreet.au.com project has also supported and encouraged a staged uptake of electronic commerce. Repeat business has become a significant source of development work, which is a strong endorsement of the MainStreet.au.com product.

This experience strengthens the view that the best way to increase interest and investment in e-commerce is to demonstrate for a particular community or organization the benefits they can immediately receive. Implementing these activities should be the first step with clients who are investing both dollars and time, even if the initial investment is small. This ensures the clients have ownership of the outcomes. The next step is to make sure clients know how to use the services that have been developed.

Training needs to be provided so they can quickly gain experience and confidence. The last step is to offer clients new opportunities to assess whether they are ready to build on their earlier electronic commerce activities. This stage tends to involve a combination of both consultancy and technical services, because activities need to be tailored to the particular business needs or the client.

A number of clients have been assisted through these stages with them becoming increasingly confident in both selecting and investing in electronic commerce solutions. Birchip Cropping Group, Ballarat A Learning City, and the Regional Connectivity Project are all examples of MainStreet.au.com clients who have come back for further development.

The Ararat region also provides a number of examples. Ararat Online was the first MainStreet.au.com sub-community. When this site was launched it was showcased across Australia and beyond. But as MainStreet’s technical team replicated the framework for other clients, a refined and enhanced version of the original model evolved. So, less than six months after the re-launch of Ararat Online, this client was prepared to re-invest to further upgrade their site. Ararat Rural City ([www.ararat.vic.gov.au](http://www.ararat.vic.gov.au)) then established a comprehensive council Web site. The Ararat ABCD ([http://www.ararat.asn.au/skills\\_audit/Web\\_site/](http://www.ararat.asn.au/skills_audit/Web_site/)) project accessed development and consulting services to support aspects of its community-building activities and now a new project is underway which will assist six of the Ararat’s small town communities to launch Web sites that will be linked through the community section of Ararat Online.

### **Reduce disparities in access to services and facilities**

Under most models, the costs to establish (and sustain) a local portal have been substantial, and therefore prohibitive, for small towns and community groups. The MainStreet.au.com portal infrastructure has been developed in such a way that it can be replicated and delivered to both small groups such as Nhill.com and the Birchip Cropping Group, and to larger communities such as Moorabool, Ararat, and the Pyrenees Shire regions.

The portal tools that have been integrated and developed include template-driven Web wizards, event calendars, news building tools,

and online forums. Tools have been designed so that anyone with an interest can register and publish content on their local sites. These tools are both low-cost and easy to use, thus reducing the two most significant barriers to participation that were identified in the original 'Business Case'.

### NEXT STEPS FOR PROJECT

A MainStreet.au.com project briefing session and the Annual General Meeting of the Chamber of Electronic Commerce Western Victoria were held on the 26<sup>th</sup> April 2002. This gathering provided members of the Chamber with the opportunity to reflect on the outcomes of the MainStreet.au.com project and to consider how the infrastructure and clients could be best supported into the future.

Members overwhelmingly supported a proposal that will see the University of Ballarat continue to provide support to ensure that the project is ongoing. Under the arrangements agreed a users group (which will include potential users) will be established. This group will meet and regularly share information and ideas and assist in identifying priorities for future enhancements to the MainStreet.au.com services and infrastructure. Technical and project-management services will continue on a part-time basis while new developments will be staffed on a project basis with technical staff drawn from the project's pool of Web-developers and programmers and from the university's student population.

### CONCLUSION

The distinguishing feature of the MainStreet.au.com project has been the development of the replicable portal framework. Clients have strong ownership of their online activities, maintain their own Web-based information, and are committed to annually investing in order to sustain the portal infrastructure and the services they access. It is for these reasons that the services of MainStreet.au.com will continue to be delivered long after initial seed funding has been expended.

### REFERENCES

Ashford, M. (1999). Online WA: *A Trickle-up Approach to Using Communications to Enhance Regional Economic and Social Development*. Regional Australia Summit, Canberra, Australia.

E-Commerce Umbrella. (2000, August 1). *The Ballarat Courier*, p13.

Stakeholders Spruik Internet Initiative. (2000, July 21). *The Ballarat Courier*, p. 8.

A New Information Source for Western Victoria. The Ballarat Courier. Internet Directory, 22 March 2000, p. 8.

Grants for Networking Projects. (1999, December 4). *The Ballarat Courier*, p3.

Barker, G. (1999, December 20). Internet Revolution Set to Shake the Bush. *The Age*, Technology, p. 1.

Delahunty, E. (2000, January 20). Chamber Aims to Boost E-Commerce. *The Ballarat Courier*, p. 4.

Earl, M. J. (2000). Evolving the E-Business. *Business Strategy Review* 11(2), 33-38.

Han, H. (2000, July 26). Regional Vic to Go Online in Govt-Backed Venture. *Computerworld*.

Hodges, J. (2000, February 28). Grant to Aid E-Commerce. *The Ballarat Courier*, p. 8.

Litras, P. (2000, February 28). E-Commerce for Western Victoria – MainStreet.au Will Provide an Online Directory of Businesses Throughout the Region. *The Ballarat Courier*, p. 3.

Litras, P. (2000, March 14). Opening the Portal to the World of E-Commerce. *The Ballarat Courier*, p. 16.

Lynch, A. (2000, August 15). Easy Entry to CEC's E-Street. *The Australian, Software*.

Papandrea, F., & Wade, M. (2000). *E-commerce in Rural Areas – Case Studies*. Canberra: Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation.

Pattulock, E., & Albury Wodonga Area Consultative Committee. (2000). *Facilitation of E-commerce and Internet use by Regional SMEs*. Albury Wodonga: Latrobe University.

Thompson, H. (1999). *Victoria's Golden West Portal Project Business Case*. Ballarat: Centre for Electronic Commerce and Communications, University of Ballarat.

Thompson, H. (2000, June 19-21). *Capturing the Electronic Commerce Advantage: The Western Victorian Approach*. Paper presented at the Thirteenth Bled Electronic Commerce Conference – The End of the Beginning, Bled, Slovenia.

Toia, L. (2000). Networked Nation. *Bizreview* 2(13) 23-25.

Van Beveren, J., & Thompson, H. (2002). The Use of Electronic Commerce by SMEs in Victoria, Australian. *Journal of Small Business Management* 40(3) 250-253.

Verdon, D. (2000, March 1). Ararat Businesses to Embrace E-Commerce. *The Ararat Advertiser*, p. 1.

Vida-Douglas, J. (2000, August 9). Internet Yields Major Harvest - Web Developer Delivers a Real-World Approach to Community Internet. *Australian Reseller News*.

Vigo, K., & J. Arnold (2000). *The Manningham Online Project: Global Tools for Local eBusiness*. Melbourne: RMIT.



**APPENDIX 1****MainStreet portal URL**

MainStreet.au.com [www.mainstreet.au.com](http://www.mainstreet.au.com)

**Community portal URLs examples**

Nhill.com [www.nhill.com](http://www.nhill.com),  
 Moorabool Online [www.mconline.com.au](http://www.mconline.com.au),  
 Pyrenees Online [www.pyrenees.com.au](http://www.pyrenees.com.au),  
 Central Highlands Manufacturers [www.mainstreet.au/ms/manufacturers](http://www.mainstreet.au/ms/manufacturers),  
 Clunes Online [www.mainstreet.au/communities/clunes](http://www.mainstreet.au/communities/clunes),  
 Rural Regional Research Network [www.mainstreet.au/ms/ub\\_research/Web site](http://www.mainstreet.au/ms/ub_research/Web%20site)

**Comprehensive Web site URLs examples**

Ararat Rural City Council [www.ararat.vic.gov.au](http://www.ararat.vic.gov.au)  
 Birchip Cropping Group [www.bcg.com.au](http://www.bcg.com.au)  
 Ballarat A Learning City [www.ballaratlearningcity.com.au](http://www.ballaratlearningcity.com.au)  
 Chamber of Electronic Commerce [www.mainstreet.au.com/ms/chamber](http://www.mainstreet.au.com/ms/chamber)  
 Central Highlands Area Consultative Committee [www.chacc.com.au](http://www.chacc.com.au)  
 Centre for Electronic Commerce and Communications [www.cecc.com.au](http://www.cecc.com.au)  
 Pyrenees Shire [www.pyrenees.vic.gov.au](http://www.pyrenees.vic.gov.au)  
 Regional Connectivity Project [www.regionalconnectivity.org](http://www.regionalconnectivity.org)

**e-Commerce mentoring program participants URLs examples**

Grampians Event Hire [www.grampianseventhire.com.au](http://www.grampianseventhire.com.au)  
 Ararat Holiday Homes [www.aratholidayhomes.com.au](http://www.aratholidayhomes.com.au)  
 J Ward Museum Complex [www.jward.com.au](http://www.jward.com.au)  
 Westgate Vineyard Country House [www.westgatevineyard.com.au](http://www.westgatevineyard.com.au)  
 Touchwood Farm Retreat [www.touchwoodfarm.com.au](http://www.touchwoodfarm.com.au)

**Web wizards and business directory participants examples**

Avoca Hotel [www.mainstreet.au.com/wiz/avocahotel](http://www.mainstreet.au.com/wiz/avocahotel)  
 Acacia Caravan Park [www.mainstreet.au.com/wiz/acacia](http://www.mainstreet.au.com/wiz/acacia)  
 Ararat Lions Club [www.mainstreet.au.com/wiz/araratlion](http://www.mainstreet.au.com/wiz/araratlion)  
 Distinctive Finish [www.mainstreet.au.com/wiz/distinctive](http://www.mainstreet.au.com/wiz/distinctive)  
 To review further Web wizards [www.mainstreet.au.com/wiz/](http://www.mainstreet.au.com/wiz/)