

# Education Business Connections Limited

## EBC

Mar 2007 - Mar 2009

### How did the project start?

Our website was originally developed through our membership of Sunderland Community Development Network when part of the support offered to network members was to tackle the upskilling of the sector and to develop the web presence of 'communities of interests'. As a member of the Network EBC was able to access expert support from the e-government section of the City of Sunderland's through its e-champions staff team (who subsequently took on a lead role in the city council's successful entry in the national Digital Challenge competition) to design the basics of our site, and most importantly the training of in-house staff required to manage and update the site. It was crucial that we could manage the site ourselves within existing resources and not tie ourselves into expensive external contracts which could not be sustained financially. (An element of the training originally provided was funded by Business Link). From the bones of a website the e-champions staff - primarily Chris Foreman of the City of Sunderland, our expert adviser - continued to provide advice and guidance, and on-going training. The whole project was linked to recognition that we needed to become digitally enabled and to turn traditional paper-based marketing packs into digital versions (thereby reducing costs and ensuring currency of information in a fast changing environment. A new corporate identity, including revamped PDFS giving details of our 40+ programmes was created by a key partner, Colliery Chronicle Media, a Community Interest Company which we had supported in its development stages when it was receiving ERDF funding.

### What options did you consider?

Initially our site was developed to meet the needs of two key audiences - our business supporters recruited to help us deliver activities around enterprise education and work related learning and the schools who 'buy into' our activities. We already had a comprehensive paper-based marketing pack but our business team recognised the need for an on-line presence and this was confirmed through a regular review of our progress by our external 'critical friend' - Carol Meredith.

### What help and expertise did you receive?

The e-champions unit of the City of Sunderland provided considerable support to EBC as part of its on-going programme to support the VCS in the city. Initial training was given on how to update the website as well as ensure its compliance with DDA and how to maximise visits to the site. In 2007 EBC secured a ONE NorthEast contract to run a regional competition among schools to design a Flag celebrating the North East which would be flown on the QE2 when she sailed into the region as part of her 40th anniversary voyage. Thanks to the expertise provided from the City of Sunderland we were able to promote the competition on-line, our links with Cunard, the region's 'Passionate .....' straps, etc. We were even able to put a link to the QE where ever she is in the world thanks to the camera on the bridge of the ship. This has been followed up with support from the city council to launch a second regional schools competition - Our Place 2020 - which has allowed us to build significant on our skills. We now have a huge range of resources and links on the site aimed at both business supporter and the schools involved. We have also been able to provide funders another way of recognising their support and an additional opportunity to reach new audiences through links to their websites and use of their logos. In addition we have been able to create an online calendar demonstrating the level of our activity and enabling potential business supporters to find out at the 'click of a mouse' what we're doing, when and where. Equally a schoolscan not visit bespoke areas of the site to see what EBC can offer and how it can meet their needs.

### Did you face any challenges or learn any lessons?

One of the most important issues we had to face was how to ensure than the site was not so sophisticated that it would fail to meet our customers' needs. By 'sophisticated' we mean an over use of flashing images, etc, which look attractive but can hinder the effective use of a web-based information and management tool. For example we were aware that whilst business supporters would probably have state-of-the art computers and the highest speed internet access, schools (our other key audience) would probably be coping with older, over used computers, slower internet access and unreliable servers. There was the additional issue around the use of language on the site - even fairly innocuous words (or parts of words) can lead to the site being blocked at a school's end because of tough controls and firewalls by Local Authorities, with most schools signed up to using such firewalls. Equally important was the need to be aware that in the teaching profession not all teachers, particularly the older ones who often hold senior positions in schools, are yet fully 'internet savvy', so we needed to make it as easy as possible for them to both visit our site and find out what we were offering. Finally we had to consider the very important issue of use of images of young people on the internet and ensure that all permissions were in place for such use and that any photographs used on the site were safely embedded in the relevant file format.

### What are the outcomes and how has it improved your business?

Obviously it has brought EBC into the digital age and provided us with another marketing tool to complement our face-to-face work. It has allowed us to tightly control costs - inserts from our marketing pack are now only downloaded on an as-needed basis, or sent electronically, for example. It enables us to up-date our information almost instantaneously i.e. press releases, our calendar, new funders, etc. Using our website as an information source supports the work of schools we are involved with i.e. our Our Place 2020 competition and to provide additional resources we have gathered from our own research. For example we intend to upload a number of useful documents we found on 'event management' on the ONE NorthEast website and place them on our community page - which will benefit other members of the Sunderland Community Network. (This is an audience which we feel would not normally be reached by ONE North East). The website has improved our credibility and our reach and led to a number of new business leads and partnership opportunities opening up to us.

### What are your plans for the future?

We are busy completing the team profiles on the 'Contacts' page and have the bones of a 'How You Can Help Us' section which will be developed to cover both gift aid, payroll giving and other charitable giving pages. These will be aimed at securing private sector cash support for our work to supplement our on-going fundraising. We also want to increase the number of teaching and information resources placed on our site for both local schools and community. We hope to expand the visual sides of the site through more 'photo albums' of participants involved in EBC activities.