

entre WOMEN

www.entrewomen.ca



By CLAIRE KERR, SARAH LUK HILL, & JANICE DUNBAR

What would you like to see, to do, and learn on a website for women entrepreneurs?

This was a question posed to women in focus groups throughout Ontario in 2000. After three years of hard and exciting work, Women and Rural Economic Development (WRED) provided a solution on May 30, 2003 with the launch of *entrewomen.ca* – the Canadian website by and for women entrepreneurs.

Started ten years ago, WRED is a community-based organization experienced in promoting economic opportunities for women. Through the years it has become increasingly evident that there are some unique challenges that rural women entrepreneurs face:

- *Access to information and support.* The centralization of services in rural and remote communities and a lack of transportation mean that women are particularly prone to experience isolation.
- *Lack of information, organization, and capital.* Traditional lending institutions are not equipped or inclined to provide small loans to individuals who are short of experience and collateral.
- *Access to training.* The lack of training opportunities entrenches and intensifies the polarization within self-employment.
- *The need to encourage self-employment and small business.* Crucial to economic self-reliance and family living standards is

the opportunity to patch together an income through a variety of means.

The World Wide Web has obvious potential for addressing these issues. How could WRED harness the power of the internet to tackle them?

The First Step

The first step towards developing a website for women entrepreneurs was to find out what Canadian women wanted to do and see online. WRED received funding of \$25,000 from the Office of

find government resources, financing information, and the latest trends and demographics. Women wanted to learn how to write a business plan and how to market products. Most importantly, they wanted to be able to find the information they needed without having to wade through the internet's clutter.

Focus group participants were also interested in creating and maintaining networks with other women entrepreneurs. They favoured the notion of a discussion forum as well as a marketplace for goods and services and resources

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Learning Technologies (OLT) of Human Resources Development Canada to research and develop a business case for an "online learning community." We then organized six focus groups at which female business owners were asked to describe their "dream" website. Their comments were as varied as the businesses they managed.

According to the women polled, the first priority, was finding information on the web. Participants wanted to be able to

specific to Canadian women. Far too many of the most popular "portal" business websites cater to American concerns. When would a website focus on cutting-edge business tools for women in Canada?

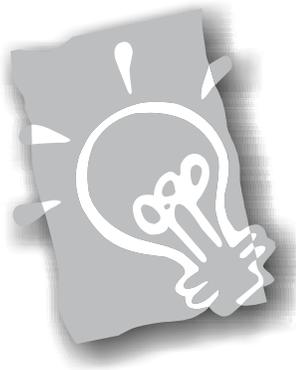
(Top) Consultation, testing, and re-testing with the primary intended users – like these entrepreneurs in Thunder Bay – has been central to the planning and development of *entrewomen.ca*. Photo: Women and Rural Economic Development.



The Vision

To address these needs, the idea of a virtual resource centre for female business owners began to take shape. But what would such a website look like? Ideally, it would be easily accessible to all Canadians. It would provide women with training and business information and would facilitate the growth of entrepreneurial alliances. And naturally, WRED wanted these tools to be free, although we were mindful about how we would sustain this venture after the pilot phase.

We formulated a proposal describing a structured 3-year process for the website's development and promotion.



Entrewomen.ca is now a reality, yet already sustainability is an issue. As a nonprofit website, can entrewomen.ca maintain operations after funding has been exhausted?

"Entrewomen.ca" we called it – both the project title and web domain address – as a play on the word "entrepreneur," and because it means "between women." In the first stage, entrewomen.ca would be built and feature a variety of interactive components. The next step would be to beta-test it to ensure that visitors would get the most out of their experience. Creating and testing the website prior to its launch would represent the most complicated part of the project.

Staff, Consultants, & Advisors

In June 2000 WRED received \$261,725 over three years in funding from the OLT's Community Learning Network Program to cover the costs of two WRED staff (a project co-ordinator, and content developer for entrewomen.ca) and web design and development costs. The vision was beginning to become a reality.

WRED contracted with Meta Strategies of Toronto to provide web design and the online and interactive tools requested during focus groups. Meta Strategies is a business that supports not-for-profits by developing online tools that enhance the capacity of these organizations to serve their clients. The process of building the various products included many drafts of mock-ups and web layouts, in-person and phone conferences, test websites, and input from the entrewomen project team.

An OLT Advisory Committee supported and monitored the development of the site. Drawing on existing WRED partnerships and creating new ones, we composed a committee in which

the worlds of technology, economic development, and women's issues all found representation: the Ontario Network of Employment Skills Training Projects (ONESTEP), PARO, Social and Enterprise Development Innovations, A Commitment to Training and Employment for Women (ACTEW), Canadian Women's Foundation, and the Ontario Native Women's Association. For the past two years this group has met quarterly in person or by teleconference to discuss project issues. We have also developed an online discussion forum to permit ongoing discussions. The committee has been invaluable in keeping the entrewomen.ca project team focussed on its vision and providing input and direction.

The Launch

The website launched in May 2003 with five components.

Information Resources

A Resources Database was the first interactive tool on the website to be completed. Articles, website links, and other materials of interest to Canadian entrepreneurs are grouped by category in a database accessible by a flexible search structure. Visitors to entrewomen.ca can submit their own resources to the database (the most popular submission being website links). At this point, almost 300 suggestions from staff, partners, and our women entrepreneurs have been reviewed and posted. The content developer of the entrewomen.ca team receives and reviews each one. Due to the flexible design of our database we have the ability to create new categories and amend others – without requiring further programming.

Discussion Forums

Forging links between women entrepreneurs was one of the most popular topics of the focus groups, so the Discussion Forum was next on entrewomen.ca's list of priorities. Visitors to the website can now register to post messages online. What's the best thing about this tool? All that's necessary to access it is an email address and the desire to connect with other small business owners.

Events Calendar

This database-powered function allows visitors to upload descriptions of community events, training sessions, networking meetings, or other dates of interest for posting on the website.

The Marketplace

The most powerful – and fun – interactive component on entrewomen.ca is certainly the Marketplace. Women entrepreneurs can create their own websites, and will even be able to choose their own unique URL within entrewomen.ca to promote their goods and services.

The Marketplace has been programmed "from scratch" by the staff at Meta Strategies using Cold Fusion, a powerful tool for developing Web applications. Keeping "ease of use" at the forefront the database allows a member to describe her business, products, and services through a simple registration process. She can also upload her logo and product pictures for her "online presence." A database of



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art: Teyana Slautina

marketplace businesses allows users to search the registry to find products and services in a wide variety of categories.

As with any major online tool, the Marketplace requires a considerable amount of explanatory text, Frequently Asked Questions, and Help files to guide users. WRED is now writing, revising, and testing this crucial content.

Online Learning

Focus groups indicated they would like the opportunity to take workshops and tutorials online. This would be a particular benefit to rural women who could then download learning materials at home instead of making a trip to an urban centre. The fifth interactive feature of entrewomen.ca, the Online Learning section will do just that - translate WRED's workshops and training courses to the web and give women all over Canada the opportunity to access WRED's experience in business consulting, career awareness, and skills training. This is a huge task for which we are investigating additional funding options.

The Future

Entrewomen.ca is now a reality, yet already sustainability is an issue. As a not-for-profit website, can entrewomen.ca maintain operations after funding has been exhausted?

The answer to this question will depend on the efficacy of the project itself. With the project vision to become the best Canadian site "by and for" women entrepreneurs, generating traffic and creating visitor loyalty will be essential to sustainability. The original focus group participants made it clear that they did not want this to be a fee-based site as that would deter our many microentrepreneurs. We will spend the next year exploring sustainability through developing partnerships/alliances with interested organizations.

From focus groups to HTML code, entrewomen.ca has been developed based on the needs of women entrepreneurs, with a special sensitivity to rural women in Canada. It has also been developed out of the conviction that internet technologies have the power to meet many of those needs. Do they? We will know if the site grows. Do we have an active and expanding Marketplace? Are our resources timely and relevant? Do people engage in online discussion in our forums? We have a group of women entrepreneurs who have agreed to allow us to follow them closely (online) over the next year to measure the impact of the site on the growth and development of their business.

The road to launching a website may be long, but the journey is always interesting. Come and check us out! 

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SARAH LUK HILL (volunteer@wred.org), a native of Stratford, Ontario, is fortunate to have worked in most areas of a not-for-profit organization - fundraising, marketing, publicity, volunteer development, and information technology. Sarah has an Arts Administration degree from the University of Waterloo and a Computer Programmer diploma from CDI College. She joined WRED last year as the information co-ordinator for the entrewomen.ca project.

JANICE DUNBAR (research@wred.org) has been part of several community economic development projects in rural Ontario over the last seven years. Since 2000 she has been project manager of entrewomen.ca on a part-time basis while continuing her involvement in CED and Sustainable Livelihoods work with other groups.

Visit Entrewomen at www.entrewomen.ca. For more information about Women and Rural Economic Development go to www.wred.org. The website of Human Resources Development Canada, Office of Learning Technologies is olt-bta.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca.

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