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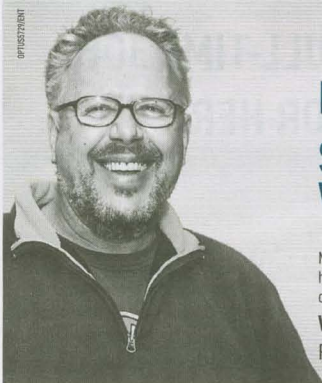
Cut above

Four success stories from the booming personal services sector

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DESIGN

BUILDING UP THE INTERNET

As the web poaches television audiences, business is taking off for developers, writes **Cameron Cooper**

In the often urbanised world of IT, it's a safe bet not many web design entrepreneurs get their start-up funds by milking cows.

For Tim Gentle, however, rural Australia has provided the perfect backdrop for his business, Design Experts, which he began earlier this year in Echuca, Victoria. "We've only been running since February and I think we've just nudged about 100 websites — it's pretty impressive stuff," he says.

Just as notable has been Gentle's determination to make a go of the business after drought affected his dairy farm interests and he ended up "raising a bit of money through milking and trying to get the business up and running". The hard work is paying off for Gentle, who is not alone in targeting a massive need around the nation for graphic design services.

Ed Butler, an industry analyst at business research firm IBISWorld, says an increase in internet use is fuelling demand for design services such as website development. The industry is expected to be worth more than \$3.63 billion this financial year and, as a result, new players are entering the market at speed. IBISWorld forecasts annual growth of about 2.8 per cent in the number of providers. "The ease with which design can be performed now means that more individuals will be inclined to invest in starting their own niche operations over coming years," Butler says.

It is easy to trace the source of such expansion. According to researcher Nielsen Online, earlier this year internet usage hit an all-time high and for the first time the amount of time Australians spent online surpassed that spent watching television. Nielsen says Australians spend about 13.7 hours each week surfing the net and 13.3 hours a week watching television.

For Jason Chipperfield, graphic design provides the perfect outlet for his IT skills. "It's much more creative than traditional information technology," he says.

Chipperfield, who runs the Refresh internet consulting studio in Brisbane, offers services such as website design, development, hosting and marketing and has an ever growing range of boutique clients. In hindsight, his lucky break came after being axed from a Brisbane advertising studio earlier this decade.

"We were victims of the 2001 stock market crash. We got bought up by an advertising agency and that basically dissolved the web design (side of the business), so we all got tossed out on the street."

Refresh is the result. "It's been running for four years and (recently) it's really taken off. I think with the adoption of broadband by most businesses and households, web development and web design has moved again in the last couple of years."

Refresh's growth is an endorsement of Nielsen's internet versus TV findings. "I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that people are actually spending more time on the internet these days than watching TV. Companies are getting better returns from internet marketing efforts than traditional marketing."

Belinda Vesey-Brown, founder and principal designer at RED-I Design in Brisbane, attributes the sector's growth to many businesses focusing on their core skills and seeking specialist design services.

"She says there are two types of SMEs — those that try to do everything themselves and soon burn out, and those that see the value of contracting out. They really see the value of outsourcing and they really value their (own) time and their skills."

Vesey-Brown says a company's branding and imagery must be tied to marketing and an overall business strategy. "It's not just making things look good. It's making them sell," she says. "A lot of people are seeing the importance of that."

In Echuca, Tim Gentle says his success is due to connecting with the community and having an efficient, price-competitive offering. "I drive around Victoria quite often. I make an effort to go to the business itself rather than doing everything over the email and phone calls."

His location helps. "The businesses in the area are forced to keep up with technology. They're attracting tourists from city centres and they're always on the internet looking for the next holiday, they're looking for the next holiday home to purchase or looking for the next day trip to take the kids on, so a lot of the time we're working on tapping into that market."

Gentle has also started conducting seminars through a government-funded network designed to assist small businesses in regional Australia. "They asked me to write a website seminar for all the regional towns, so I did and I've spoken to probably over 500 businesses in the last four months. They paid me to do it and I got a lot of business from that."



Complete package: Belinda Vesey-Brown says a company's branding and imagery must be tied to marketing and an overall business strategy

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