

THE KENTUCKY ARTISAN HERITAGE TRAILS

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ABSTRACT

The Kentucky Artisan Heritage Trails case describes a program that is designed to stimulate entrepreneurship and growth in the arts and crafts industry in Appalachian Kentucky. It combines mapping software (GIS), business web page development, alliances with other organizations, and a comprehensive marketing strategy in partnership with 300 small businesses. Management issues facing KAHT include budgetary problems, finance, incentives for new members, control problems, training, and the need for an improved e-commerce site. The case is suitable for IS, art marketing, tourism, non-profit, and marketing strategy classes. It is intended to be taught at the junior or senior level.

BACKGROUND

The Kentucky Artisan and Heritage Trails project was developed and is maintained by Eastern Kentucky University's (EKU) Center for Economic Development, Entrepreneurship and Technology (CEDET). The original project was funded in 2003 by an \$183,362 grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) plus matching funds from Eastern Kentucky University, the Kentucky Crafts Marketing Program and private sources. KAHT goals are to contribute to economic development in the state by promoting tourism, create new marketing opportunities for entrepreneurs, and promote technology literacy and usage among small business owners.

The project links artisan/cultural/tourist attractions together by means of custom driving tours (trails). It employs Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software to develop easily followed maps of each trail. In addition, a set of linked business web pages and brochures with scenic photography of the region help participating members to successfully market their products and services. The easy navigability of the scenic roads encourage tourists to develop their own custom driving tour based on their interests and timetable. The National Association of Management and Technical Assistance Centers (NAMTAC) selected the KAHT to receive its Project of the Year Award.

THE KAHT TRAILS

The first five trails were established in 2002-2003 in the counties of Madison, Estill, Jackson, and Rockcastle. All of these counties are contiguous to the Kentucky Artisan Center. This multi-million dollar facility is the centerpiece of the state's efforts to promote the arts, crafts, and culture of Kentucky, and it serves as the official gateway and starting point for several of the trails. The KAC is located along the interstate (I-75) corridor that runs north-south through Kentucky, about midway between Cincinnati and Knoxville, near Berea, Kentucky. At the conclusion of the first year of the project, 82 businesses were participating.

The second phase (2003-2004) added trails that covered 12 additional counties. Eleven of these additional counties are classified as "economically" depressed by the Appalachian Research Commission (ARC). The trails are designed to network with existing institutions and programs that

relate to art and culture such as the Kentucky Artisans Center, the Hindman College of Craft and Art Incubator, the Highway 25 Music Highway, and the “Get Ready Company is Coming” tourism promotion in eastern and southern Kentucky.

THE KAHT WEB SITE

The project’s web site, www.kaht.net, is designed to draw the interest of visitors via interactive online maps, showcasing the area’s natural scenery; its craft shops, galleries and artist studios; historic sites; bed and breakfast operations; antique shops, regional restaurants; festivals and community events; and other relevant tourist information. The KAHT web site does not currently contain an e-commerce component to directly sell participant products; however, it does contain sufficient contact information to allow an interested customer to visit or contact the business. It also has links to many related websites.

The design of the web site groups participating business by product and particular trail on which it is located. Each business in the project is featured on its own basic web site based on a template, and the user can also link to a more detailed site, if it exists. Despite minimal advertising KAHT has been averaging over 500 hits per month. A business may be included in the KAHT Web site for a one-time fee of \$50. In addition, the participants must agree to post a small sign to be displayed at the business for identification purposes. The \$50 pays for the sign and for development of a basic web page and a home page using a template. Most of the businesses in the area do not have an Internet presence. This is a key to the project according to the director of CEDET, Cheryl Stone, because “the future of this business is linked to the Internet, whether we’re talking about developing a customized driving tour or product marketing.” During phase two (2003-2004), an On-line Participant Training component was added. This is a special section of the website that is accessible to business participants. It provides them with a wealth of resources including a newsletter and several training modules. KAHT also promotes other (non-participant) organizations and businesses through the links page. Additionally, it affords these related businesses the opportunity to also be featured on their site.

A consultant was contracted to evaluate the effectiveness of the KAHT web site. While the site received relatively good marks, some problems were identified: a) it was hard to find using the standard search engines, b) sometimes hard to use, and c) the target market was unclear. In addition to using an outside consultant, KAHT conducted a telephone survey of its participants. The survey generated a 17% response rate. The results indicated that: a) 75% of the businesses had a sign; b) 47% said their customers have mentioned the website; c) 83% believe membership in KAHT has helped them attract customers; d) 92% recommend participation to other businesses; e) 94% are satisfied with the site, f) 60% indicate that KAHT is their only business homepage.

There are several challenges regarding the operation and effectiveness of the KAHT web page. As the site grows with more participants, the number of files grows as well, creating a need for an improved database management system. Also, the boxes used to list participants allow visitors to scroll down the list; however, aesthetically, the boxes are unsatisfactory. Additionally, the boxes do not indicate to the visitor that they are “hot linked” to the business home page because the cursor does not change nor does the color. The KAHT signage requirement has been problematic. Participants may state that they will post a sign, but do not follow through, or they have difficulty getting a local sign company to produce their sign. The sign requirement has been found very difficult to enforce.

THE GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SYSTEM (GIS) COMPONENT

The mapping component of the driving trails and the locations of sites continues to be a challenge. A front-page map was created on the web page that is interactive. As a result, a visitor may click on the map and go to the trail. Zoom maps must be added when the density of attractions requires magnification. The maps also show natural features like forests, rivers and mountains to help the traveler understand what they will encounter on their trip. New challenges are faced in the creation of the new trails. The addition of new business members often require the creation of “access loops” that are understandable and that utilize better roads. Also, one or more “spurs” must be added to the trail in order to include something important.

THE FUTURE

Chris Cathers, KAHT’s Director, expressed a concern about the independence of many of the artisans who do not see the value of partnering in the KAHT program. “Some of these folks have been around for years and are perfectly satisfied with their local customer base. Although our evaluations indicate that we are improving tourist trade, some of the trail members don’t see it. This seems to be an image problem more than anything else. We ask them to collect visitor information, but many don’t bother with it. These individuals are the same ones who will not take the time to meet the signage requirement. We are considering developing a subscription program as means of funding the KAHT after our grant money runs at the end of the next phase (Phase four, 2004-2005), but I’m not sure how many would be willing to ante up. We also have thought seriously about adding an e-commerce component to enable our participants to sell directly over the web. However, this could easily create further image problems if we have no control over the quality, delivery, service, and cooperation of the artisans.”

“Also, I find the networking and relationship building takes up most of my time leaving me pressed to plan and develop fresh innovative ideas for KAHT’s future. Right now I’m basically a one-man-band. We don’t have money in our budget for extra personnel. If I get help at all, it is through leveraging volunteers or borrowing folks from the CEDET here at the university. There is also a question of how much money will be required to keep KAHT going. Tourism is up in our service region, but there has been a great deal of money and energy spent promoting the region. Included in our long-term goals is an increase in employment opportunities. At this point we aren’t sure whether we have really created any new jobs since the new trails began. Our goal is 15 new jobs. However, we have not developed a method for determining the impact of this program on job creation in the sector. I really need to sit down and think about what is going to happen when the funding runs out after phase four.”

TEACHING NOTES

Teaching suggestions and student questions can be obtained by contacting the authors.