



Online “guide to life” aims to link local community

A website is helping to connect the community on the Isle of Wight as well as promoting what the island has to offer to a world-wide audience.

Web-based directories, much like massive online phone books, are nothing new. As with their paper-based counterparts, their use is to simply supply the contact details and a few specifics about a business or a service to potential customers. While they may not require half a forest to produce, that’s about as much as differentiates the online directory from the thick paper phone books of old.

That is until recently. Believing that such directories should be more of an online meeting place for the local community than just a listings service, David Acheson has launched Locallife on the Isle of Wight. Locallife is a growing network of websites that started in Southend and is now expanding internationally. It describes itself as a “guide to life” in the UK with each site having its own tailored content and local flavour.

David Acheson bought the franchise for the Isle of Wight in 2006, launching in November that year. He believes that the community focus is what sets Locallife apart from its online competitors. Since launch, it has already publicised over 550 community services, sports clubs and charities for free. The site is also helping to promote what the island has to offer to an international audience – this has included, for example, an online campaign focussing on windsurfing, kite surfing and sailing.

A gateway for tourists

The online directory has also been providing a boost for tourism. “The web is accessible to anybody in the world and holiday-makers today like to plan in advance so with the website, people can not only get the contact information about a restaurant but also menus and prices, they can see what sporting activities are available, or what gigs are on,” says David. “If you type ‘Isle of Wight local events’ into the Google search engine the link leads you to our directory with all the events for the whole year on the island listed. That sort of page is invaluable and will help fill up a pub for a live music evening, for instance. Boosting business in this way has got to be good for the community.”

Every industry on the island is covered, and for businesses new to the internet, Locallife has been helping them with the first steps of building a website. The service, which comes as part of the advertising package a client buys, includes a few graphics, a map and other snippets of useful info. “We’ve had a lot of feedback from clients to say it has increased business and they’ve come back to us a few months later to have a more comprehensive site built,” David adds. “A lot of companies on the Isle of Wight haven’t had much experience of the web and we are introducing them to a whole new experience as well as a whole new customer base.”

The website has been designed to be user-friendly so that those new to the online world can find what they need easily. You can obviously search by business type but there is also a useful feature that allows you to search by street so if you are planning on a trip to a certain area, you can see where the nearest place is to get your hair done, where you can meet friends for lunch, and where the nearest bank is to pay for it all. You can also find all the related services so if you are interested in photography then it will list all the categories around that: a model agency, picture framing, photographers and so on.

Getting a Strong listings

David points out that what is particularly powerful about the idea is that it gives local businesses the chance to get a strong listing on a major search engine, which they wouldn’t be able to get alone. “If someone types ‘Isle of Wight Entertainment’ in to Google there are hundreds of thousands of websites that come up and not everybody can be on the front page. A big directory is much more likely to get on the front page, and therefore this increases exposure for a small business or organisation that is part of that directory.”

The site is proving popular with the number of visitors increasing month by month: “When we started, we had about 25,000 hits a month and in January this year that had gone up to 92,000, which is a huge number of people,” says David. The Locallife concept is a strong one – David points out that nationally 89% of clients have renewed their contract.

For Locallife on the Isle of Wight, David sees the site expanding still further. “The site should get up to 3 or 4 million hits and become the most powerful site on the island. This is comparable to what happened to the Southend Locallife, which gets just under 3 million hits at the moment and the Isle of Wight is slightly ahead of where Southend was in the same time period,” says David.

While such figures may be of little significance to the Isle of Wight community, one thing is for sure – the website is helping both locals and visitors to make the most of everything our island has to offer, and that can only be for the good.

www.locallife.co.uk/isleofwight/