



Online boost attracts new folk to real-ale pub

Les and Heleena Ivall have had their names over the door of the John O'Gaunt Inn since 1976. As a 'wet-trade' focused real-ale venue, they've survived the worst of the credit crunch and recession. But Les was keen to increase the inn's profile and exploit its niche as a folk music and local club venue. Business Link's advice and a rural pub grant made it possible.

The Challenge

"I've been in the pub trade for 37 years and in that time I've never had a website," explains Les. "So, when we started getting emails asking about birthday bookings and group events, the potential for growth using the web was a real revelation!"

Les and Heleena (pictured below) are landlord and lady of The John O'Gaunt Inn, in Sutton, near Sandy in Bedfordshire. They have been pulling pints behind that particular bar for 33 years.

"We're very much a community pub and have strong relationships with the towns and villages in the area," continues Les. "The John O'Gaunt is the meeting venue for over 30 clubs and societies – from rambling clubs and shooting teams to theatre groups." And Les, who is an enthusiastic folk singer and musician, hosts regular folk-music events at the inn and village hall.



According to Les, these close community ties and the focus on the 'wet trade' are what have insulated the inn from the worst of the credit crunch. "But like any rural pub, our high fixed costs mean we must maintain a steady cash flow, so we were keen to increase repeat business."

He continues: "We also saw opportunities to grow our customer base from the many new local estates; to capitalise from being on numerous ramblers' routes; and to attract more folk enthusiasts." So, when Les read about the East of England Development Agency (EEDA) campaign to support local pubs – called Open for Business – he contacted Business Link for help.

The Solution

Business Link Adviser James Stancombe quickly got in touch and arranged to visit. "Les already had some good marketing ideas. He was keen to advertise in a local lifestyle magazine and was getting coverage as a columnist in a local newspaper," he says. "But when I explained how a website could be highly

effective at attracting clubs, ramblers and folk music enthusiasts, Les became very interested, especially when I mentioned that the costs of the website could be covered by a rural pub grant from EEDA.

The new website has increased our business and, without Business Link's advice and the rural pub grant, we would not have considered going online

Les Ivall, John O'Gaunt Inn

Les enlisted the support of a web agency listed on Business Link's database of suppliers, the Supplier Brokerage Service (SBS). The agency, Activ Web Design, happened to be run by one of the inn's regulars – John Holden! According to John, the John O'Gaunt's already packed itinerary has resulted in a content-rich

online presence: "The website was designed to feature the many activities hosted by the inn, and to allow regular updates, so visitors always know what's on."

Once the site was live, James then asked Business Link colleague and Special Adviser in IT and E-commerce Keith Padbury to work with Activ Web Design on search engine optimisation. "Statistics from Activ Web Design show that the website went from a standing start to over 250 unique visitors in a month," says James, "and Les now has list of visitors who have opted-in to receive regular updates."

The Impact

Les is delighted with the results of the website: "It's a fantastic business-building tool," he says. "Within a week of going online we had a booking for a birthday lunch with 19 guests, from someone who didn't know we existed until finding us on the web."



The news gets even better, as James explains: "Another tranche of funding is currently available and I'm working with Les on a new proposal." Les is keen to expand on his newfound IT literacy and wants to upgrade the computers at the pub so he can spend more time developing the inn's web presence.

He is also planning to increase productivity by using IT for online tax and VAT returns, stock control and accounts. "The website has been a revelation," he says, concluding: "There's no way we'd have ever thought of starting a website if our Business Link Adviser had not suggested it."

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