



Creating Websites to Support Entrepreneurship: Insights from SourceLink Virginia

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In today's economic development environment, a variety of local, state and federal resources are available to support small businesses and entrepreneurs. However, the wide variety and geographical dispersion of agencies, programs and organizations providing services can prove confusing for even the savviest individuals and institutions. As a response, many states and regions, and municipalities have launched websites to serve as resource and information "one-stops," "hubs" or "portals" to help make sense of the landscape. This publication provides a case-study example based on the experiences of one such web-based resource, *SourceLink Virginia*, an online portal project that was started in 2014 to support and connect small businesses and economic developers across the Commonwealth. During its 5-year existence, SourceLink Virginia emerged as a value-added resource and as an example of one way to leverage internet sites to facilitate the start, growth and management of small businesses. The lessons-learned from that initiative may enhance the chances of success for those agencies and organizations considering the development of such resource websites.

Background

In 2013, at the behest of a variety of state agency and university partners, Virginia Community Capital (VCC), the state's largest community development financial institution, conducted a survey of over 70 highly-regarded economic development professionals and community leaders from across the Commonwealth of Virginia. This study was designed to gauge their individual and collective interests in improving various programs and services available to support Virginia's small businesses. Among the highest in-demand needs identified by the survey were:

- Creating a website where individuals could find business building resource organizations in Virginia, searchable by geography and services offered
- Creating a shared online calendar of trainings and community events, searchable by location
- Creating an online directory of organizations involved in community development initiatives, searchable by location and category

The VCC survey helped inform the creation of the Virginia Community Economic Network (VCEN), a nonprofit education, advocacy, and networking organization that promoted entrepreneurship and place-based approaches to economic development. VCEN adopted the

survey as part of its program development research, and in response, launched the *SourceLink Virginia* online entrepreneurship portal in August 2014 (it was initially found at www.sourcelinkvirginia.org). This project was initiated in conjunction with partners at Virginia universities (including Virginia Tech), state development agencies, and corporate foundations who provided financial and in-kind sponsorships.

SourceLink Virginia was based on the nationally-regarded *US SourceLink* program model that was created by the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 2003. With support from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation and US Small Business Administration, the US SourceLink platform earned national recognitions from organizations such as the International Economic Development Council, the National Urban League, and the Global Entrepreneurship Network. In 2006, the model expanded into other states via NetWork Kansas, an entrepreneurial initiative jointly hosted by Fort Hayes State University and Wichita State University, to launch its first Affiliate. By 2014, the US SourceLink model had expanded to over 20 states via 40 affiliate organizations, including the Commonwealth of Virginia when VCEN became a US SourceLink affiliate.

In 2017, VCEN underwent a major change in board and staff leadership which necessitated the transition of its programs to a viable partner. Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) emerged as that partner, and in 2017, management responsibility for SourceLink Virginia was transferred to VCE at Virginia Tech. Funding to support the continuance of the program was provided by the BB&T Charitable Foundation and Wells Fargo Foundation. This allowed the program to operate for an additional two years before ending project operations in July 2019.

Key Features

During its operations, the *SourceLink Virginia* website had three main components:

1. A searchable database of business assistance programs from across the state
2. A calendar of local and statewide workshops, conferences and other training events
3. A blog featuring news and information about pertinent activities in Virginia

Access was provided free-of-charge for both service providers and businesses. Service Providers included nonprofit, university or governmental organizations providing direct assistance to entrepreneurs, as well as, regulated or accredited for-profit entities primarily supporting entrepreneurs. The website was beneficial to both audiences in a number of ways:

For Providers:

- Low-impact online or paper intake process with continuous feedback options
- Easy integration into existing websites via coding script
- Free publicity for services and events
- Data to support policy advocacy and ecosystem mapping
- Discovery of new partners and collaborations

For Entrepreneurs:

- Information on providers sorted by geography including outside of immediate vicinity

- Simple online interface free of banner ads, pop-ups, etc.
- No collection of personally-identifiable or proprietary business information
- No unsolicited communication from SourceLink Virginia or third parties
- Data to support creation and/or reform of business assistance programs

To facilitate greater access to the information, VCEN partnered with 12 local and/or regional partners who voluntarily embedded the *SourceLink Virginia* resource directory into their own websites. Some of these partners also embedded the events calendar. Both options were provided at no-cost to the partners, and this feature was highlighted as a best-practice at the 2015 US SourceLink annual conference in Kansas City.

Website Usage Data (2014-2019)

From its launch in August 2014 to its closeout in July 2019, SourceLink Virginia generated the following website traffic according to its Google Analytics data::

Year One (8/1/14-7/31/15)

- 1,994 unique visitors, 2,952 sessions, 9,816 page-views
- Average session: 3 ¼ minutes, 3 ¼ pages/session
- Traffic: 87% new users, 13% returning users
- Activity Sources: 33% Website Referrals, 28% Organic Search, 36% Direct, 3% Social Media

Year Two (8/1/15-7/31/16)

- 6,649 unique visitors, 9,251 sessions, 24,794 page-views
- Average session: 2 ½ minutes, 3 pages/session
- Traffic: 73% new users, 27% returning users
- Activity Sources: 57% Website Referrals, 23% Organic Search, 18% Direct, 2% Social Media

Year Three (8/1/16-7/31/17)

- 4,800 unique visitors, 6,500 sessions, 14,500 page-views
- Average session: 2 ¼ minutes, 2.2 pages/session
- Traffic: 73% new users, 27% returning users
- Activity Sources: 52% Website Referrals, 22% Organic Search, 23% Direct, 3% Social Media

Year Four (8/1/17-7/31/18)

- 3,500 unique visitors, 4,600 sessions, 10,500 page-views
- Average session: 1 ¾ minutes, 1.3 pages/session
- Traffic: 89% new users, 11% returning users
- Activity Sources: 57% Website Referrals, 18% Organic Search, 23% Direct, 2% Social Media

Year Five (8/1/18-7/31/19)

- 2,700 unique visitors, 3,300 sessions, 10,000 page-views
- Average session: 1 ¾ minutes, 1.2 pages/session
- Traffic: 92% new users, 8% returning users
- Activity Sources: 52% Website Referrals, 12% Organic Search, 33% Direct, 3% Social Media

Total Five Year (8/1/14-7/31/19)

- 17,773 unique visitors, 23,793 sessions, 59,453 page-views
- Average session: 2 ¼ minutes, 2.5 pages/session
- Bounce Rate: 59.43%
- Traffic: 89% new, 11% returning
- Activity Sources: 52% Website Referrals, 10% Organic Search, 25% Direct, 3% Social Media

For over five years, the *SourceLink Virginia* project supported communities and regions across the Commonwealth in their efforts to launch and grow entrepreneurship-based economic development practices. Over that time, the breadth and depth of startup ecosystem activity grew and matured in nearly every corner of the state. The website served over 50,000 users and generated thousands of online referrals to service providers such as your organization. The landscape for entrepreneurship support in Virginia is quite different now than it was when this project was initially launched, and *SourceLink Virginia* and its related initiatives likely played some part in these positive developments.

For more information on the *SourceLink Virginia* project, contact Conaway Haskins at chaskins@vt.edu or 804-527-4247.

Works Consulted

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