



Initiatives

CYBI Inc.

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APEX—Personal Service Makes the Difference



George and Kostas Michalis—APEX Internet

Many readers will have noticed that CYBI is upgrading its web site. This is part of a broader goal, to utilise the internet as a primary interface between CYBI, its participants, and its supporters, including NEIS providers and members of the Job Provider Network.

As part of this upgrade, CYBI has asked APEX internet to host our web site. APEX was founded by brothers George and

Kostas Michalis, together with a friend Robert Cohen, and their story gives some insight into the challenges of entrepreneurship in a high technology environment.

Six years ago, when APEX started up, the internet service provider business was very different from today. Customers were willing to sign up with low cost operators, who operated with a mobile phone and post office box. APEX took a different approach – they decided to stress professionalism from the beginning, investing in an office and good equipment, and advertising the operation from day one. ‘We believed this would be a strong marketing point for our customers, who would be a little more certain that we weren’t going to collapse unexpectedly,’ says George, who is CEO of the company.

As it turned out, the decision anticipated the development of the market. Nowadays, the solidity of an ISP has become an important point of differentiation – perhaps because so many proved unreliable in the early days.

Although APEX started with a strategy requiring resources that would be out of the reach of most CYBI participants, one identical problem they faced was the need to put in an enormous amount of work at the beginning of the operation. ‘I remember sitting here night after night until 3 in the morning processing credit card charges,’ says Kostas, who now fills the role of Operations Manager, and leads the Web Design department. When the company started, they had no accounting system – so George wrote a stopgap programme. ‘We had weeks on end where we worked 15 hours a day,’ says George.

From another point of view, the Michalis brothers demonstrated a core feature of successful entrepreneurs – a passion for their business. Importantly, the primary interest in forming the company was not so much its profit potential – ‘It really offered us all a place in the industry,’ comments George.

All the initial partners were highly qualified, and had different careers prior to starting the business, but had strong IT interests. George contributed his management experience, gained in the family building business, as well as law and economics degrees. He had studied Computer Science at the ANU, and had been programming on and off since 1979.

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CYBI focuses on Participant Support

Tony Robinson, who is the CYBI committee member responsible for coordinating relations between CYBI and participants in the programme (see *Initiatives* Volume 1, number 2), has recently been conducting a review of CYBI participant services and relationships with external organisations.

As we have seen from previous issues of *Initiatives*, a common experience of many participants is isolation. Most start-up business owners are totally absorbed in their business, and do not feel they have time to build broader networks in the local business community. However, these missing relationships can be vital to the on-going success of the business, as well as critical to simply allowing the entrepreneur to cope with the pressure.

Tony's review has highlighted this as an area where CYBI can offer unique support. 'CYBI has two main ways of supporting participants,' he says. 'We can guide them to the right people to get specific information for their business (although CYBI is not equipped to offer specific advice to participants), and we can ensure they are in touch with other participants.'

As well as solving specific business problems, these contacts help integrate the participant into the wider

business community, and offer contact with people who are sharing the same problems and experiences.

'We want people to be part of a group activity as well as an individual activity,' says Tony. Contact between participants is initiated primarily through support meetings, which occur every two or three months. Just as important as the meetings themselves, is the opportunity to make later contact with others, developing a community that works beyond the boundaries of these meetings.

CYBI also wants to ensure that they have a good understanding of how participants are progressing, identifying any possible problems early. For this reason, participants will be encouraged to provide some basic

'We want people to be part of a group activity as well as an individual activity'

Tony Robinson, CYBI Committee

reporting information. 'This will help us not only to ensure they are coping,' says Tony, 'but to understand the current position of their business.'

In terms of helping to point participants in the right direction for good advice, Tony sees it as important to



Tony Robinson

ensure a full range of support is available at low cost. 'The ACT Government is generally a good source,' he says. 'For instance, there's the free Business Licence Information Service. Many people just don't know it exists.' Of course, CYBI's association with the BEC's is a significant opportunity.

Providing help is one thing, but it is important not to go too far. 'We want people to be supported, but it is essential they understand that it is their business, they make the decisions, and they are responsible for getting where they are,' says Tony. It is also important that people remain open and receptive. 'If they become protective, it makes it difficult to help them.'

Future issues of *Initiatives* will feature a regular column on the progress of the current group of participants, both as information for CYBI supporters, and as a means to seek support for any problems that may arise.◇

Ponderings

"Small opportunities are often the beginning of great enterprises."

Demosthenes

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Creating Youth Business Initiatives

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www.cybi.org.au

Regional Expansion—Progress

CYBI's expansion into regional areas near the ACT was covered in our special issue in Dec 2003. Since that time, wider access to CYBI has been available through our new 1300 306 390 phone number, and our website at www.cybi.org.au.

In coming months, CYBI will look to extend its coverage into other areas of NSW, including major population centres such as Nowra, Wollongong, and Sydney. CYBI will explore these possibilities with the particular assistance of NEIS providers covering these areas, local Business Enterprise Centres and similar bodies.◊

Networking for Success

One of the benefits of the CYBI programme that is consistently mentioned by past participants, is the network which it opens up of people with similar backgrounds and problems. Networking, we know, also remains critically important for growing small and larger businesses. This month, the free e-newsletter 'The Leading Edge Business Forum' has made networking its theme, and includes a survey of some local organizations that provide networking opportunities.

'The Leading Edge' gives Canberra's small and medium business community the opportunity to exchange ideas and insights. Its aim is to encourage dialogue within the small business sector, in the belief that this interchange will help stimulate innovation and development, as well as provide networking opportunities for participants. ◊



www.cit.act.edu.au/bit/leadingedge

Apex Internet—Personal service makes the difference

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Kostas, who also helped in the family business by day, had made a hobby of web page design 'which he probably spent a lot more time on,' says George. From this initial interest, Kostas gained a lot of Web design experience, backed up by studies in photography and design. 'Also, we all had friends in internet companies,' remarks George.

Nowadays, the company has more than 3,500 active customers, and a reputation for service excellence. 'We know that our big competitors can offer a bundle of services, which we can't,' says George. 'But we can deliver levels of service and an understanding of the customer's internet problems that it's impossible for them to match.'

APEX's professional approach, and high level of technical expertise, offers the company a number of opportunities for future expansion. 'Although our current business is still oriented towards internet access, we see opportunities to expand the web hosting and networking sides of the business,' says George. With its proven track record, APEX now has reason to believe it can once again benefit from customer confidence to continue its growth.◊

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