



## **Municipal Starter Kit**

**January 2005**

### **Introduction**

Mycommunityinfo.ca opens a local window that looks onto municipal, community (public sector), Provincial and Federal information. The supporting technology and service programs ensure that citizens first see local information and service options from their own community. This approach is the “my” in mycommunityinfo.ca. A second choice is to view other participating communities’ local information (e.g., Waterloo Region). The supporting technology is easily scalable to include more than SW Ontario municipalities. Implicit in the mycommunityfo.ca design is self-serve access to relevant Canadian government information, at all tiers, from the local perspective.

Information at the community level is a powerful driver for agencies promoting Tourism, Economic Development and civic satisfaction. Mycommunityinfo.ca supports and encourages synergies among regional agencies.

Mycommunityinfo.ca is not a stand-alone agency that competes with its partners and clients for citizen attention. Searches of the mycommunityinfo.ca indexes currently may be launched from the web sites of City of London, Middlesex County, Region of Waterloo, London Public Library, as well as from the main mycommunityinfo.ca web site. It is an information utility that conjoins community, municipal and other government information resources with multiple points of access. As an information tool, mycommunityinfo.ca is a valuable resource to general advisory and referral staff who respond to citizen concerns by telephone and by personal over-the-counter interactions.



### **What is mycommunityinfo.ca?**

- A cost effective Citizen First gateway to local, regional, provincial and federal information and services
- Support network for Internet, person-to-person and telephone channels of access
- Application of leading edge search engine technology
- Programs of interaction among community groups leading to enhanced service capacity for local agencies
- A planned approach to increase traffic to existing general information and advisory services sponsored by participating organizations
- A no cost service to community organizations



## **mycommunityinfo.ca Services & Programs**

- A. Localized Search Services**
- B. Life Event Information Bundles
- C. In-service Skills Development

MCI uses Google search engine technology to provide a form of Knowledge Management for government and community information. Until quite recently, the only approach to providing comprehensive information support was through building a database. Local community information centres or stand-out volunteer organizations such as public libraries acquired Internet-friendly database software and then the services of full-time, part-time and summer student help to fill up these databases with local storefront information.

There are few among IT professionals who would not agree that building and maintaining a database of government and community information is both a) expensive, and b) yields a product never up to date. The approach of hiring or assigning staff to enter basic data about organizations in the community and to subsequently verify and endlessly re-verify the accuracy of that data is simply a misuse of talent and resources.

It is a management issue to answer the question, “Why would anyone want to go to the trouble of applying for a grant to hire summer student(s) to renew a database that is always out-of-date (until that brief moment of sunshine after the next grant opportunity rolls around)?”

The Internet is host to millions of web sites paid for and maintained by government and community organizations. These web sites contain contact data, mission statements, explanations of service parameters, descriptions of events and often extras such as maps and meaningful multi-media offerings including interactive maps, photographs and video. The organizations that publish these web sites put their best efforts into maintaining them. The sub-strata of public sector organizations that operate on a shoestring and cannot afford to mount a separate web page are almost always picked up by umbrella organizations and provided with a description and contact information. In this regard, the role and active participation of umbrella organizations cannot be over-emphasized.

The MCI answer to the self-serve community information problem is an Internet search engine that looks at local public sector web sites.



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Following late 1990s developments in Europe, especially the U.K., and in Australia, the Canadian Federal and the Ontario Provincial governments have published Life Events Bundles (LEBs). In Europe and Australia, LEBs were preceded by a decision to “join up” government agencies to facilitate services for citizens. In Canada, LEBs have been service finder tools. By any name, these information bundles will be immediately recognizable to librarians as a variation on traditional library pathfinders.

While the Federal and Provincial LEBs represent a giant step in the direction of citizen-friendly service, they fail at the local level. Federal and Provincial LEBs cannot provide local storefront information (e.g., the street address of the local passport office for every community in Ontario) without falling prey to the ills of database scoping and maintenance. MCI viewed the problem as an opportunity and stepped forward to develop local LEBs. For the most part, MCI LEBs extend the reach of Federal and Provincial versions, but also have broadened to accommodate community issues as well.

So far, MCI has published five LEBs, all prepared by area librarians.

- Dealing with Spousal Abuse
- Moving to Middlesex-London
- Next Steps After High School
- Retirement
- Lost Pets

The two most popular MCI LEBs are Next Steps After High School and Lost Pets, largely because of an effective low cost advertising campaign based on post-it notes distributed to high school and college counsellors, and to animal shelters, pet food stores, veterinarians and so forth.

New topics under consideration are First Jobs (babysitting, summer camp counselling, neighbourhood entrepreneurship, library page, etc.), Having a Baby (local extension of an Ontario LEB), Volunteering (opportunities for volunteers and agencies using volunteers) and Living Safely in Middlesex-London (a one-window access to police, fire, emergency and victim services in the area).



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Service partners in the Middlesex-London area include London Public Library, Middlesex County Library, Ontario Government Information Centre, the Concierge Desk of London City Hall and the GAIN Centre in the town of Strathroy. The GAIN Centre (Government Access Information Network) pre-dates MCI and is itself a consortium of government and community agencies that is sponsored by the Middlesex County Library, and which offers a broad spectrum of person-to-person services.

The challenge for MCI was to discover the means to support cooperative service among these very different agencies. The City's Concierge Desk, for instance, is wholly focused on referral services for City information, while the Ontario Government Information Centre's mandate is limited to information published by the Province of Ontario. What was very clear from the beginning is that from the citizen's perspective it matters not a whit who provides the relevant information but that the information be provided via the shortest path possible.

MCI hosted a series of daylong in-service sessions for front line staff and supervisors in June 2002. The sessions featured topics such as "Federal Information Resources," "Provincial Information Resources" and so forth, as well as a review of search engine strategies specific to Google. The core agenda was to facilitate personal interaction among the staff of the different organizations.

These initial sessions were followed by a job-shadowing program between staff of the Ontario Government Information Centre and staff of the Middlesex County Library in 2003.

One significant outcome is that based in part on the success of MCI's cross-agency program, the Information and Services Branch of the Ontario Ministry of Consumer and Business Services signed an agreement with the Libraries and Heritage Branch of the Ontario Ministry of Culture to conduct two pilots in rural settings to build working relationships between libraries and nearby Government Information Centres. The six-month pilots concluded successfully in October 2004 and the two ministries are now working toward implementing the program in an additional 30 libraries across the Province in 2005. Rod Sawyer, of the Libraries and Heritage Branch says, "we are hoping that this 30+2 represents an incremental roll-out to more and eventually all public and First Nation libraries [in Ontario]."



## Getting Started with mycommunityinfo.ca

### 1. Localized Search Engine Services

Google has stipulated that all organizations/municipalities whose web sites are indexed by mycommunityinfo.ca should agree to be indexed. This requirement creates and ensures an opportunity for building relationships and synergies among participants.

When agreement has been reached, a service contract is signed by both parties. Normal course agreements are between the mycommunityinfo.ca Treasurer and an upper-tier municipality on behalf of the lower-tier municipalities within its jurisdiction. The intent of this approach is to minimize the number of contracts to be signed. Service agreements are on a year-by-year basis, prorated to a start date of January 1 of the year in which the service agreement is executed.

The local contact (often the IT Manager for an upper-tier municipality) then forwards a list of the URLs to be indexed to the mycommunityinfo.ca Project Manager. The list of URLs is subjected to a test crawl and when the test is complete and successful the collection of URLs becomes available for public searching (a process that may take several days).

Several adjustments to the mycommunityinfo.ca web site are then made:

- 1) A new radio button with the upper-tier municipality's name appears on the top mycommunityinfo.ca web page;
- 2) Java scripts for the mycommunityinfo.ca Searchbar are sent to the local contact for inclusion on the top page of each participating upper and lower-tier municipal web site (as required);
- 3) The mycommunityinfo.ca web site is further adjusted to ensure that a resident user from the new client is channeled into information resources appropriate to the user's community. In essence, this process of fine-tuning ensures that the local citizen receives simplified access to local information.

Implementation time will vary. Variables include the following simple realities:

- 1) The upper-tier organization is offering its lower-tier constituents a no-cost leading-edge tool for local web site search functionality plus an aggregate tool for all area municipal and/or community

information. Explaining the concept may take some time. The mycommunityinfo.ca Project Manager is available to help in this process, if required.

- 2) On the mycommunityinfo.ca side, technical implementation can be measured on a yardstick marked off in hours.

## **2. Life Event Information Bundles**

Developing Life Event Information Bundles is essentially a process of building partnerships within the community. Critical success factors include:

- 1) Identifying an area content steward. This role is ideal for a public library, whose staff are trained to provide equitable access for both content providers and consumers.
- 2) Identifying topics of interest within the community.
- 3) Achieving consensus among participating agencies on the content of the Life Event Bundle.
- 4) Resolving graphic design and publication venue issues (for instance, should the completed pages reside on the upper-tier municipal web site).

The mycommunityinfo.ca experience indicates that a reasonable estimate of required staff time per Life Event Bundle is 40 hours, plus approximately 5 hours per year thereafter for maintenance.

The mycommunityinfo.ca Project Manager is available on a consulting basis to expedite development of Life Events Bundles.

## **3. Cross Agency In-service Skills Development**

Developing familiarity and trust among agencies that share a mandate for general advisory and referral services is relatively simple and yields very powerful results.

Through a skills development program, staff achieve greater awareness of resources and special expertise available within the community. The objective is to create a new environment in which staff from different agencies share resources and make more informed referrals within the community.

The mycommunityinfo.ca Project Manager is available on a consulting basis to expedite development of a cross agency in-service skills development program.



## **Costs**

### **Localized Search Engine Services**

The current annual fee is \$15,000 for a localized collection of URLs up to 40,000 web pages, January 1 – December 31.

The annual fee includes general consulting advice on best practices of content management for municipal Internet publishing, as required.

### **Life Events Information Bundle Development**

Consultation to be arranged on an as required basis.

### **In-service Skills Development Program**

Consultation to be arranged on an as required basis.



## **mycommunityinfo.ca: Background**

MCI began as a brainstorming exercise in 1999 with representatives of the City of London, County of Middlesex, Ontario Ministry of Consumer and Business Services and Human Resources Development Canada (or, HRDC as it was then called). The question before the group was, "How can we provide a cost-effective integration of information service offerings from three levels of government." The solution proposed was, "Use search engine technology; do not build databases." The idea of including community information came somewhat later.

Startup funding was provided by the Ontario Management Board Secretariat and HRDC. Ongoing in-kind support is provided by the City of London's Technology Services Division for the Google Search Appliance and by the Middlesex County Library for project administration.

The Project Manager was hired in June 2001. Several search engine products were evaluated and the Google Search Appliance was identified as the technical solution in 2002. Preliminary interactions with various community partners occurred in that year. The technical launch was in October 2002 and the Media Launch in May of 2003. The municipality of the Region of Waterloo became a client in 2004.

Project governance is by consensus. There is a Senior Advisory Committee comprised of regional Federal and Provincial Directors from several ministries, Chief Administrative Officers and other senior municipal staff. The senior group meets infrequently on advice of the Working Group, the members of which are delegates of the Senior Advisory Committee. The Working Group meets 3-4 times annually, but communicates via Email often on a daily basis. The Project Manager serves as Secretary to both the Senior Advisory Group and the Working Group. The project is not incorporated. It has no Board that separates it organizationally from the founding partners. Strategic and operational decisions are based on goodwill and consensus of Federal, Provincial and Municipal partners because all agree that citizen-centric service is a primary government objective.

Service delivery partners in Middlesex-London include: London Public Library, Middlesex County Library, Government Information Centre, GAIN Centre (Strathroy), and London City Hall's Concierge Desk.