

Web helps business search for answers

New site will be one-stop location for information

By Tim Krohn

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As Bill Blazar and others at the state Chamber visited businesses across Minnesota, they'd always ask if there were things they could do to help them. "About 1 in 10 ask for assistance. The help they need to be successful is just all over the board," Blazar said.

"One person contacted us and wanted to know how to set up a bounty hunter business. A trucking company wanted to add wide loads and wanted to know what permits they needed." With more than 100,000 businesses in the state, the Chamber wanted to find a better way to connect businesses to the assistance they need. It led to an automated Web-based system called Business Connection.

The Web site (www.mnbizconnect.com) is not yet live, but you can see a working model of it by searching "Grow Minnesota Business Connection" in Google and clicking on the top search result.

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Bill Blazar of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce says a new business Web site will continue to grow.

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SITE: Info to grow

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"It's intended to be a onestop shop to answer questions to everyday business problems," said Blazar, senior vice president of public affairs and business development at the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce.

The Web site allows for searchable keywords and has sections such as "I want to start a business," with the most often sought information on that topic listed.

When the site is up and running, the amount of searchable information will continually grow thanks to software that tracks the keyword questions users are inputting and linking information to those keywords for future searches.

"If people can't find what they're looking for on the site, they can e-mail us the question and we'll get them the information," Blazar said. "There's a lot of help out there but it's not always easily accessible. We want this to be a bridge between all of the federal, state and local programs."

In many cases, he said, connecting people to their local Chamber is the best place to start. " The local Chambers have a wealth of information and can often answer the question or point them in the right direction."

The service was developed in conjunction with Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. The service also is part of the Grow Minnesota! network that includes 50-plus chambers of commerce and private-sector economic development organizations including Greater Mankato Growth.

Funds to develop the site came from the McKnight Foundation. And while DEED, which holds a wealth of business-related information, is involved, the Chamber chose to take the lead rather than the state agency.

"It just avoids the problems of having to rely on the Legislature for funding. We will be able to raise private funds to continue it. The big cost were the up-front costs," Blazar said.

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