

## Return to Rural proves that you CAN go home again

Patricia Macklin

It has been said that you can never go home again – Return to Rural is challenging that notion. Born of the realization that community and economic development is most successful when developed and nurtured from within the community, SAMDA Economic Partnership looked at their needs and resources and came up with

“Return to Rural,” also known as R2R. SAMDA Economic Partnership is a regional collaboration of the communities of Special Areas, MD of Acadia No.34, Village of Cereal, Village of Empress and the Town of Oyen, that works to advance economic growth and build capacity.

“Like many rural areas, we are facing the challenge of losing our youth,” says Christie, Project Manager for R2R. “They are heading off to the cities for further education and not coming back.” However, there was opportunity in the form of a newly installed broadband network. Recognizing that social media was a popular avenue of communication for young people, and wanting to make best use of their broadband network, the SAMDA team decided to marry the two into a project that could attract young people back to the Special Areas. “But we needed funding, experts and resources to figure out exactly how that could work,” explains Christie. A successful application to the Government of Alberta’s Rural Community Adaptation Program got them the necessary funds to implement the idea.

“We are so thankful that we received the funding. R2R has revolutionized how we approach economic development. It changed the way every municipal partner thinks about it. Even councilors who don’t use Facebook are excited and interested and see the results.”

Christie explains that the R2R view of Facebook is that of a global market: “Facebook is a new facet to business that yields income that businesses wouldn’t otherwise have had. Economic development is often studies in which you hope the long-term outcome is a project leading to job creation, but this project has had an immediate effect of putting dollars in the pockets of our business people. We aren’t *hoping* this concept has positive results for businesses or create work – because we *know* it does. The businesses that have worked with us have increased sales. Ironically, this was the least concrete concept when we started three years ago, but now it’s producing results.”

For example, Stitch Worx, a big clothing store in Oyen, was having trouble moving stock. But as soon as the owner went on Facebook with photos of inventory, she was making more from the street sales. From that success, she is developing a website with online shopping.

A local photographer had a good business, but came to a social media bootcamp and learned a few things about using social media for marketing. Wanting to develop a social marketing strategy, she meet with the R2R business coach and technology coach and started showing her work on Facebook. As a result she is now building a webpage. A number of small businesses don’t use both Faceook and a website because they don’t see the value in going to the expense of developing a good site. “But a



Facebook page is free, and after that they start to see that it is worthwhile to have a website too,” says Christie. As a consequence, a local web designer is seeing an increase in business.

A core piece of the R2R project is the availability of both business and technology coaching. “Nobody knew what to do with a technology coach,” says Andrea Thornton, SAMDA Projects Coordinator. “They didn’t know what questions to ask or really what it was. We needed to get people in our doors for a ‘taste’ of technology coaching. So we set up Facebook 101 and Twitter 101 sessions, after which people could book appointments for one-on-one time with our technology coach for more detail and personal help.” From there, individuals would then meet with the business coach for overall business planning.

The value of the sessions goes beyond learning how to make use of a technology coach. “We have seen attendees from these sessions learn some new skills, access our services and use them longer,” says Christie.

“When we started the project, we were thinking about reaching youth who had left the area, that wasn’t the way to go,” says Christie. “Actually a higher proportion of youth who are contacting R2R are local.” Only now, in the project’s third year, is there a shift towards those who are away. Damien Evens is one of those young people. Living in Medicine Hat, he was interested in coming home if the opportunity arose. His first choice was to contact R2R to investigate possibilities. One existed, the autobody shop in Oyen had closed two years ago. Christie Caskey, R2R’s business coach helped him through the process of developing a business plan, demystifying the bidding process for property – the shop was a bank resale – and networking with funders. His bid was accepted and he and his new family are moving back to his home community to raise their child and run the autobody shop.



Having come to the end of their grant funding, R2R is looking at how they can share their learnings with all of rural Alberta via toolkits, models and best practices. “The situation that sparked the idea here, isn’t unique to the Special Areas,” says Christie, “many rural places are looking at how they can bring back young families. If our knowledge and experience can help them do that, so much the better.”