



Using Broadband and E-commerce to Enhance a Rural Retail Sales Store

Brian Whitacre

Assistant Professor and Rural Development Specialist

Interview with Susan Ketter

General Manager of All Clean Services and Supply, Inc.
(Blanchard, OK)

www.allcleansupplyonline.com

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Fact Sheets
are also available on our website at:
<http://osufacts.okstate.edu>

Introduction

Broadband Internet access presents a world of opportunities for rural residents. Because of its ability to transfer large amounts of data almost instantaneously, rural individuals can now work, learn, and find entertainment right at home in their small towns rather than have to commute to larger cities. More and more rural citizens are taking advantage of broadband access to do a multitude of tasks online, including earning advanced degrees, reaching new markets for their business, gathering pertinent information about their job (such as weather predictions for farmers), staying in touch with relatives or friends, or even creating their own information-based job or business. This fact sheet describes one of these rural broadband success stories in detail – an Oklahoma retail business based outside of Oklahoma City that uses the Internet to pull in customers from the nearby metropolitan area. This business takes their website experience to the next level by selling their products online in an e-commerce environment. By using broadband to both advertise to the closest metropolitan area and enable another way for their products to be sold, they are taking advantage of many of the benefits the Internet can offer to rural businesses.

Background Information

All Clean Services and Supply is a full line commercial janitorial supplier located in Blanchard, Oklahoma (population 8,000 – approximately 30 miles south of Oklahoma City). After breaking off from another janitorial service company in 2005, they soon discovered there was a large demand for the products they used while cleaning. So, they opened a retail store in downtown Blanchard selling cleaning products. Being close to a metro area, they recognized the importance of attracting this larger audience to their store – and having a website was a great way to market themselves. The owner set about to create a website, even deciding to include an e-commerce component where customers can purchase cleaning supplies from the comfort of their own home or business. Although they experienced some difficulties when deciding on which domain name and software package to create their webpage, they have been very pleased with the response the website has generated, and typically use their broadband connection several hours a day, making their business more productive.



The following information is based on an interview with Susan Ketter:

Tell us a little about your business and how you got started.

We started off as simply a janitorial service alone, but quickly learned there was a large market for the supplies we used while cleaning. Obviously it helps reduce costs when you buy things in bulk, and we felt that combining our cleaning services with a retail store would be the best way to meet the demand that we saw. We have been in business since about 2005 and were incorporated in 2006. Our retail store, which focuses on supplying the cleaning material to other janitorial services, opened in 2006 as well.

Why did you start using a website?

Well, it really shows that your company is in touch with the times, and that you are serious about your business. These days, a lot of people won't even know that your business exists unless you have a website. Several of the cleaning crews who order from us don't have an office and look for suppliers in nontraditional ways, including the Internet. Combined with an ad in the phone book and billboard advertising, the website really enhances our marketing and helps us to be more competitive. Also, since we are so close to an urban area (Oklahoma City is right up the road), we thought we could extend our reach to that much larger market.

When did you first start thinking about starting a website? How did you go about setting one up?

We first started thinking about setting up a website soon after we began running the business. We just realized how big of a role this technology was playing in people's everyday lives. In terms of setting up our website, it involved a LOT of trial and error. I surfed the web for similar sites and found some things that I liked and didn't like. Even today, I am constantly thinking about ways to make the website better.



Were you initially using dial-up access for your business? When did you make the switch to broadband? What type of access do you have now?

We did start off with dial-up, but switched to broadband once we became serious about creating our own website. Our Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) service is through Pioneer, which we have had some issues with – there have been some relatively long periods of time when we had no connection. Pioneer is currently the only broadband provider available in Blanchard, and we think we might benefit from a little more competition. In general though, broadband access makes our business much more productive by allowing us to have a web presence and do other things online like check out product reviews and send/receive invoices by email.

Did you hire someone to design your website for you or did you do it yourself? Did you know a lot about computers and web design before you started?

We did all of the design ourselves. I did have a fairly good background in computers, having worked with them since the late 1980s. However, I knew almost nothing about web design. After looking at several programs that help in creating a website, I decided on one called "OSC administrator." In hindsight I may have been better off choosing another one, since we have had some issues implementing several of the e-commerce features such as the shopping cart. I would recommend doing a lot of homework before committing to a particular program. Talk to people who have created some websites — see what they are comfortable using. Even consider paying someone to create a site for you if you can afford it! It needs to look professional for people to use it, and that is something you really can't put a price on.

How much did it cost to get your website up and running? Did you purchase the domain name/pay for site hosting yourself? How long did it take to get started?

Well, we probably overpaid in the initial stages when we purchased several domain names close to ours to prevent competitors from buying anything similar. Aside from the domain names and the site hosting fees, there are not really too many hidden costs. We probably have around \$5,000 invested in our website, but a lot of that was spent in the initial stages when we weren't really sure what we needed to be doing. In terms of time, I started looking into the website around May

of 2006 and had it up and running by September. So, it took around 5 months to get it going.

How much time do you spend updating your website? Is it a daily, weekly, or monthly task?

Right now I update the site whenever I have time, it's probably closer to monthly than it is weekly or daily. I should do this more often, but it is very difficult to find the time.

Do you do any advertising on Google or other search engines?

While we don't actually pay for any advertising, we do make sure that our submissions to the major search engines like Google and Yahoo are up-to-date. We constantly update our keywords so the "spiders" sent out by the search engines (which is how these sites rank various web pages) can work appropriately. We are currently on the front page of both Google and Yahoo if you were to search for "janitorial supplies Oklahoma City area." In general, we've found that people just aren't going to look past those first one to two pages when their results come up, so making sure we stay on those first two pages is important to us.

What type of impact has having a website had on your business?

It has led to a lot of contacts! Lots and lots of people have found us online, searched through our products, and given us a call or come to visit our store. Although the e-commerce side of our website is up and running, it is somewhat new and we are still trying to figure out the best way to use it – so online orders have been slow. However, we anticipate that once we find the right storefront environment, online orders will pick up.

What was the most difficult component of the entire website?

Simply finding the time to devote to it! It is just very hard to find the time to complete a website – particularly one selling items online – while running other aspects of the business. In particular, taking pictures of all of our products so customers could see them took so much of our time that we hired a professional photographer to do it – it's harder than you think to take a picture that looks good on a website! Then, re-sizing those pictures to fit in our online store took even more time. But, the response to our website has been very positive and I believe that all of this has been worth the time we have invested in it.

Are there any other contributions that broadband has made to your business?

Well, in addition to the marketing and e-commerce side, we use the Internet several hours a day for things like sending out and receiving invoices, checking out competitors, and finding reviews of products we might add in the future. Additionally, we conduct the banking for our business online and also engage in online bidding opportunities for contracts. Broadband access has, without a doubt, made us more productive. I would highly recommend that more rural businesses look into using it in whatever way they can.

This concludes the interview with Susan Ketter.

Other Broadband Opportunities for Rural Citizens

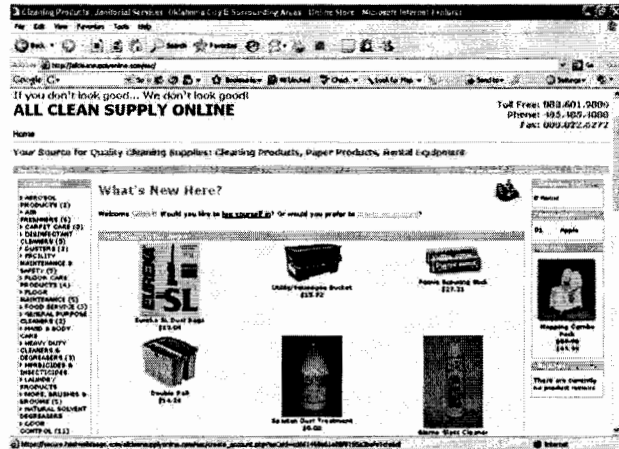
While this fact sheet tells the story of how one rural business used broadband access to extend their reach and create a larger market presence, there are a number of other ways in which broadband access can enhance the lives of rural individuals. These include:

- Job creation:
 - Help desk/customer service
 - Virtual personal assistant
 - Website development
 - Writing/editing
 - Software development
 - Medical transcription
- Reaching new markets
 - Market rural products to previously unserved areas
 - Attract urban customers to rural locations
- Continuing education
 - GED/Bachelors/Graduate degrees available online
- Communicating with friends/family
 - Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP)
 - Email

For more information about broadband access and why it is so vital to rural citizens (including some more examples of rural individuals and businesses that are making productive use of broadband), check out the Oklahoma State Cooperative Extension website located at <http://agecon.okstate.edu/broadband>.

What if My Community Doesn't Have Broadband Access?

There are a number of resources available to assist those rural areas without broadband in bringing some type of ac-



cess into their community. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development Telecommunications Program offers several grants and loans to communities and private firms interested in constructing broadband infrastructure in rural America. These programs include Community Connect grants, Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grants, Broadband loans, and Rural Utility Service loans. Additionally, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service has a program that involves strategic planning to uncover various options for obtaining broadband infrastructure. These strategic planning options include interacting with the local cable and phone company providers, forming a public-private partnership for sharing infrastructure costs, and even operating a municipally-owned broadband system. Other organizations, such as the Oklahoma Technology Council (OTC) and the Oklahoma Municipal Services Corporation (OMSC), are also interested in helping rural areas obtain broadband access. Contact your county Extension director, or any of the rural development specialists or other parties listed in the table below, for additional information.

Table 1. List of Resources for Broadband Access.

Name	Contact	Phone	Website
OSU / OCES	County Extension Directors		
OSU / Rural Development	Brian Whitacre	405-744-9825	http://agecon.okstate.edu/broadband
	Stan Ralstin	405-237-7677	
	Jack Frye	580-332-4100	
OTC	Jim Mason	405-239-3669	www.oktechcouncil.com
OMSC	Alan Holt	405-528-7515	www.oml.org

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service ***Bringing the University to You!***

The Cooperative Extension Service is the largest, most successful informal educational organization in the world. It is a nationwide system funded and guided by a partnership of federal, state, and local governments that delivers information to help people help themselves through the land-grant university system.

Extension carries out programs in the broad categories of agriculture, natural resources and environment; family and consumer sciences; 4-H and other youth; and community resource development. Extension staff members live and work among the people they serve to help stimulate and educate Americans to plan ahead and cope with their problems.

Some characteristics of the Cooperative Extension system are:

- The federal, state, and local governments cooperatively share in its financial support and program direction.
- It is administered by the land-grant university as designated by the state legislature through an Extension director.
- Extension programs are nonpolitical, objective, and research-based information.
- It provides practical, problem-oriented education for people of all ages. It is designated to take the knowledge of the university to those persons who do not or cannot participate in the formal classroom instruction of the university.
- It utilizes research from university, government, and other sources to help people make their own decisions.
- More than a million volunteers help multiply the impact of the Extension professional staff.
- It dispenses no funds to the public.
- It is not a regulatory agency, but it does inform people of regulations and of their options in meeting them.
- Local programs are developed and carried out in full recognition of national problems and goals.
- The Extension staff educates people through personal contacts, meetings, demonstrations, and the mass media.
- Extension has the built-in flexibility to adjust its programs and subject matter to meet new needs. Activities shift from year to year as citizen groups and Extension workers close to the problems advise changes.

Oklahoma State University, in compliance with Title VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Executive Order 11246 as amended, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and other federal laws and regulations, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, age, religion, disability, or status as a veteran in any of its policies, practices, or procedures. This includes but is not limited to admissions, employment, financial aid, and educational services.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert E. Whitson, Director of Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President, Dean, and Director of the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of \$1.35 per copy. 1007