

BUSINESS

EDITOR: TYLER OLSEN • PHONE: 550-7908 • E-MAIL: business@vernonmorningstar.com

Tech-savvy students help businesses

BY TYLER OLSEN
MORNING STAR STAFF

When Chris Moxham first heard about Student Connections, he thought it was a job placement service for young adults.

It's not. And it's also not a dating service helping students meet their perfect match — although co-ordinator Sarah Duthie said it has also been mistaken as such.

Rather, Student Connections, as Duthie puts it, "provides low cost, customizing e-commerce training for small- and medium-sized businesses and seniors."

Essentially, the Canada-wide government-funded program trains university and college students to help businesses (and seniors) who need help making the best use of the internet possible.

Last year 12 Kelowna-based students provided 550 clients around the Okanagan with 720 services, a figure Duthie says blew away all expectations.

One of those clients was Community Futures, which hosts a Business Exchange Group for business people hoping to find new ways of doing business. A presentation by a pair of students was very well received, according to Kara Kazimer, Community Futures' community economic development co-ordinator.

Chris Moxham, owner of Chippy Auto Appearance and RV Rental Centre and a member of the Business Exchange Group, missed the presentation. But after hearing about the program, he set up a free personal appointment for a second opinion on his website.

"I was expecting them to come down to the shop, click on the computer look at the website and talk together," said Moxham.

Instead, he was surprised to be handed a hefty questionnaire about his website that asked about various aspects of Chippy's e-commerce setup.

"I was blown away," said Moxham. "I was amazed how much info they gave us — that we should be doing this, this, this."

And for Moxham's RV rental service, the internet is key, he said, estimating that 90 per cent of his sales originate on the internet. But Moxham said that many business owners, particularly those in smaller communities, don't realize the importance of an easy to find website.

"They seem to think 'I'm established here, I'll rely on word of mouth. But if you're on the internet, there's no telling the people you'll attract,'" he said.

That advice is echoed by Kazimer. "The world of work has changed, the world of business has changed so much," said Kazimer.

"There is a huge need for small business to keep current or else they lose out to their competition."

Duthie said most websites can be made much more effective through simple and cheap steps that will pay off in the long run.

Now as Duthie prepares for the coming year, Student Connections is expanding and hopes to hire several Vernon-area students.

"We're hoping in the fall we'll have three or four in Vernon, three or four in Salmon Arm and a couple in Revelstoke," said Duthie, who was one of the original student trainers.

As someone pursuing a bachelor of business administration, Duthie said the job has resulted in a treasure trove of new contacts, not to mention great experience to put on a resume.

"I'm getting completely relevant experience, I'm making a ton of contacts around the community and meeting people I wouldn't otherwise meet," said Duthie pointing out that she's on a first name basis with B.C. small business minister Rick Thorpe.

The program is open to any students —



TYLER OLSEN/MORNING STAR
SARAH DUTHIE (front) is hoping to recruit more student trainers for her student connections program, which last year gave a well-received presentation to a business group overseen by Community Futures' Kara Kazimer (back).

not just those taking business classes. This year, the program will also start charging for consultations. But at \$25 for three hours, it shouldn't break the bank. And it sure won't discourage Kazimer from having the students return. "They'll be back," she said with a smile.