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GET SMART - Economic Development, Libraries and Smart Communities
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The Canadian Rural Information Service - Past, Present, Future

Introduction

I would like to thank the organizers of the conference for giving me the opportunity to speak about the Canadian Rural Information Service (CRIS). My presentation will focus on the CRIS project - its past, present and future directions. I would like to share the experiences in setting up a new federal government information service that was established to improve access to information for rural Canadians. I will also be touching on some of initiatives within the Canadian Rural Partnership - the federal government's strategy for supporting development in rural Canada.

Background

The idea of a national rural information centre was discussed with stakeholders during consultations that took place at the launch of the rural initiative at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada a few years ago. Information was identified as a necessary tool for community economic development and rural renewal and rural stakeholders gave considerable support to the idea of a specialized service that would improve rural access to information.

In 1996 the Canadian Rural Information Service was launched as a pilot project through an internal partnership of the Rural Secretariat and the Canadian Agriculture Library at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. This partnership presented an opportunity for both partners to provide clients with a new and innovative service. The objective of CRIS was to establish a client service that responded to information requests on the economic, social and environmental issues of concern to rural Canada.

Anticipated benefits

There were several reasons for the Canadian Agriculture Library to be interested in the project. It has an extensive collection in agricultural materials as well as access to the resources available through library networks. Librarians are information professionals experienced in understanding information needs and requests, and experts in locating and getting information to clients. And while it is the foremost agriculture library in the country, the Canadian Agriculture Library was in many ways a traditional library serving a traditional client base - providing information to departmental employees and acting as a resource to supply documents from its collection. The new service that was proposed through the CRIS pilot project would make use of library networks and electronic resources such as the Internet to respond to client requests for information. This was an opportunity to test the feasibility of a "virtual" specialized information centre that would extend beyond the boundaries of its existing clientele.

For the Rural Secretariat the CRIS pilot project was an opportunity to respond to the identified needs of their clients and provide access to a tool vital to community development - information. The Canadian Rural Information Service could determine the practicality of establishing a focal point and clearinghouse for information on rural issues. And the service would provide clients with a value-added feature - a person at the end of the telephone line who would provide a personalized service.

Rural clients would have the opportunity to access a wealth of information and someone there to help them locate the tools that they needed - whether it was a program or service, an expert or organization, or publications.

Context

Fundamental to the pilot project were the following guidelines

- provide a personalized service using the expertise of information professionals.

Important to the objective of CRIS was the "value-added" service - someone with expertise in finding and organizing information would be at the other end of the phone or e-mail. Clients would have direct access to information professionals with whom they could discuss their information needs by telephone, e-mail, mail, fax. This value-added service would make use of the reference interview training and experience of librarians to help clients formulate their information needs. After discussion with the client, who was for example, asking for information on "rural day care" the client and service provider would identify that her community was planning to set up a day care co-operative and needed to know what was available to assist them - then she would be given information on key contacts in the area for government programs and services, referrals to existing organizations, associations and interest groups and experts, print resources such as reports and articles, local contacts, and ongoing initiatives that may be of interest.

- use existing tools and resources to provide an information service on the economic, social and environmental issues related to community development and rural renewal

This was another key component to the original concept of the service - CRIS was established not to build a new "bricks and mortar" library collection but to provide a point of access to information that was already available. The Canadian Agriculture Library had an extensive collection as well as access through networks and electronic means to information from anywhere in the world. A rural information centre would share this access with a wider audience.

- establish the service as a clearinghouse and focal point for rural information and a federal government ?single window? information service

CRIS was to identify and locate a number of resources - programs and services at various levels of government, events, organizations and associations, publications, libraries and special collections and Internet sites that are specific to rural issues. This information was to be organized and made available to clients.

Other Federal Government Initiatives

Several other federal government initiatives were already well established or in development at the same time as CRIS was starting. At Industry Canada, SchoolNet and the Community Access Program, were ensuring that schools and communities had access to new communication technology and the ability to participate in the activities on the information highway. The Canada Business Service Centres were established information service centres accessible by toll free telephone, fax and in-person that provided information on government business programs and services.

Beginnings

CRIS was launched in March 1996 with service available by telephone, fax, mail, e-mail. A small Internet site with some information resources was also developed.

Early Challenges

From the beginning CRIS had a very broad objective - to provide an information service on the economic, social and environmental issues important to rural Canadians - that presented us with many challenges.

What kinds of requests would we receive?

We were prepared to respond to requests such as

- information on government programs and services at all levels - federal, regional, provincial, local
- referrals to experts, organizations, associations
- documents - anything in print or electronic format that we could provide without charge or direct clients to appropriate sources for documents - e.g. libraries, government departments

Who would be our clients:

It was anticipated that clients would cover a diverse group with a broad range of interests

and information needs - - residents, practitioners, business people, community development officers, educators, government agencies at all levels - federal, provincial, regional, municipal, etc.

How would we fill information requests?

The library collection was not rural but ?agriculture? - knowledge of other libraries and information services, government departments and agencies and experts in rural issues would have to be collected and organized. While the Internet was available there was a lack of useful information on it.

How and to whom should the service be promoted ?

With a broad mandate and limited resources promotion of the service was selective - for example a brochure was developed and distributed at appropriate conferences and meetings and departmental contacts were also used to promote the service.

CRIS activities

The activities of CRIS centre on responding to requests for information from clients, developing products to assist clients with their information needs and maintaining a ?virtual? collection of information resources - i.e. an Internet site.

We receive and respond to requests for information that come to us by telephone as well as e-mail, toll free fax, regular mail and very occasionally a client will come into the office. The number of requests we receive has been steadily increasing with most being received by telephone.

We also manage and develop an Internet site. We have had a site since the official launch of the CRIS project and this site has been evolving with the service as our use of Internet resources has increased. We are constantly updating and adding to the information on our Internet site. A large part of the site provides information on rural organizations and associations that we have organized according to subject. We provide contact information for each and link to their web sites if available. We also link to other sites of interest.

In addition we develop tools, primarily information pathfinders on topics of interest to our clients. The topics have been identified through the request for information that we receive from clients. The pathfinders gather together a variety of information on specific topics such as rural tourism, child care, and microcredit. The information in each includes a bibliography, organizations and associations, government programs and services.

What type of questions do we get?

The requests that come in to CRIS cover a very wide range of topics. The topics that are requested most frequently concern

- community economic development - funding for a community centre, developing a heritage tourism site, expanding or starting a business
- C. rural youth - - work opportunities, exchange opportunities, entrepreneurship and job opportunities.
- C. community life - starting a community day care, recruiting a doctor

Where do requests come from?

- we have received calls from all provinces and territories - from rural as well as urban areas.
- C. we have received e-mail from several other countries - from people doing research or looking for opportunities in rural Canada.
- C. we have had clients from all of the groups initially identified - residents, government at every level, libraries, practitioners, educational institutions

How do we answer?

Frequently we identify a few sources of information to respond to questions that we receive.

One type of information that we frequently provide is referrals to

- other information services - e.g. Canada Business Service Centres, community development offices, libraries
- organizations and associations
- program and service contacts
- other levels of government
- subject experts

Occasionally we also provide documents

- from the Internet - e.g. basic information on a program or service
- appropriate government publications - where to get them
- brief bibliographies

We also provide

customized information packages - these would be made up of all of the above - a list of programs and services that would be useful, referrals to experts/organizations, a list of documents or Internet sites that would assist with their information needs. Frequently our clients do not have access to the Internet, a local library, or government offices and we will prepare a package of information that will direct them to services and sources of information and contacts.

- C. bibliographic searches - CD-ROM, on-line, - we have access to specialized information resources and databases and occasionally we will use these to respond to client requests.

Internet site

The website for the Canadian Rural Information Service is at www.agr.ca/cris. We have taken into consideration specific concerns in the design of a site that is directed to clients who may not have advanced computer and communications technology available to them. The site is almost entirely graphic free - eliminating some of the difficulty experienced in loading and using Internet sites. The information is presented clearly and we hope in a manner that makes it easy to navigate. The information and links that are on the CRIS web site are frequently the resources used to respond to queries from clients and the site is regularly updated. The information on the site includes

- a list of events such as conferences, fairs and exhibitions, seminars, and workshops
- directories - The directories are lists of organizations and associations in specific categories - for example - youth, health, women. Links to other sites of interest in these categories are also included in the directories.
- information pathfinders or guides to information resources on selected topics
- news releases from federal and regional departments

Clients can use an on-line form to submit their information requests or they can choose regular e-mail.

Information products

We have been developing information pathfinders on rural issues and topics that we have identified through the client requests and suggestions. These pathfinders are guides to numerous information resources - books, journal articles, Internet sites, organizations and associations, government departments, programs and services at federal and regional levels. Currently we have information pathfinders on rural child care, tourism, microcredit, the recruitment of rural doctors, literacy, entrepreneurship and opportunity for rural youth, rural publications and Y2K. These documents are available on the Internet and in print for clients without access to the Internet.

How has the Canadian Rural Information Service evolved?

When it started the service provided access by telephone, e-mail, and mail. A toll free telephone line was installed at the end of the first year to improve access to the service. This has also served to improve the visibility of the service. Another professional staff member was added at the same time.

Requests have been steadily increasing as more promotion is done for the service. The Internet site has been revised and expanded. CRIS has assumed responsibility for both the web site development and the toll free information service for the Government of Canada rural initiative, the Canadian Rural Partnership, which I address shortly. To assist with these activities a support staff position was added and now a staff of three to respond to requests and develop and maintain the Internet sites.

Where are we going

It has been a very interesting activity to prepare for this presentation and look back at the evolution of CRIS. It has given me the opportunity to look not only at the service and how it has developed but all of the other significant changes that have been influencing access to information and service delivery.

In the three years of the existence of CRIS the impact of the Internet has been tremendous. Searches on the Internet three years ago infrequently turned the information that we needed to respond to requests. Now we are often able to get the information that clients need through a search of our own site or using only Internet resources.

Another influence is the federal government's commitment to a horizontal approach to delivery of service and developing and maintaining partnerships at all levels to improve service to the public. CRIS is well situated to provide this type of information service delivery with the resources that have been developed in the last three years.

We have completed the originally planned three year pilot period. An internal departmental review of the service has recently been completed and recommended that CRIS continue to be a specialized information service and strengthen its links with other rural initiatives. We are in the process of addressing this and other recommendations of the review.

CRIS remains a partnership of the Canadian Agriculture Library and the Rural Secretariat, due in a large part to the foresight and vision of its authors and the flexibility for growth and development that has been given to it by both partners

Government of Canada rural initiatives

CRIS has been fortunate to fall under the umbrella of the Canadian Rural Partnership, the Government of Canada's strategy for supporting development in rural Canada. This initiative is designed to support rural community development by adopting new approaches and practices to respond to rural development issues and concerns.

The Canadian Rural Partnership is, first of all, about operating differently within the federal government to ensure that federal programs, policies and activities provide a coordinated network of support to rural communities. It is being designed and implemented by an interdepartmental Working Group, made up of representatives from 26 federal departments and agencies, and Rural Teams in each province and territory. The Rural Secretariat, within Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, provides leadership and coordination for this cross-government approach. There are a number of activities within the Canadian Rural Partnership.

On February 9, 1998, Minister Vanclief, Minister for Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and Minister Coordinating Rural Affairs announced that all Government of Canada policies will now be scrutinized through a "rural lens". The "rural lens" is a rural impact test for federal policies, programs and services. Decision-makers are being asked to assess the impact of new policies and programs on rural Canada, whether federal programs and services are accessible in rural areas and whether there is flexibility for decision-making at the local level.

Beginning with a series of pilot projects in 1998-99, the Canadian Rural Partnership will work through partnerships that support rural Canadians as they pursue creative, community-based responses that promote self-sufficiency. These partnerships with strategic groups operating in rural areas will include the private sector, the voluntary sector, co-operatives, other stakeholders and levels of government.

The Government of Canada is making a special effort to reach Canadians in rural and remote areas. Through a rural fairs program, community newspapers, radio stations, the Internet and federal points of public access, information about federal programs and services is being made accessible to citizens in rural and remote areas of the country.

A key component of the Canadian Rural Partnership is the Rural Dialogue. From May to July 31, 1998, feedback was gathered from close to 7,000 rural Canadians about their challenges, priorities and opportunities through individual and group submissions of the Rural Dialogue Workbook, and 33 regional sessions held across the country. The input received from these sessions and from Workbook submissions was analyzed and summarized into a paper as a basis for discussion at the National Rural Workshop, which took place from October 2 to 4, 1998, in Belleville, Ontario.

A Rural Dialogue On-Line Discussion Group has been established as one of the means of continuing the Rural Dialogue. It provides a forum for rural Canadians to exchange opinions, ideas, concerns, and priorities community to community. The information posted by rural Canadians through this discussion group is being monitored and incorporated into the ongoing work of the Government of Canada.

In May, Minister Vanclief announced the Federal Framework for Action in Rural Canada which will help guide the actions of the federal government in addressing its commitment to Canadians living in rural and remote areas. Participants in the Rural Dialogue identified eleven priority areas that the government will focus on to build towards its vision of strong and vibrant rural communities. Improving access to federal government programs and services for rural Canadians is one of the priorities. CRIS is well positioned to play a lead role.

CRIS has been able to take advantage of the opportunity to manage and develop the Internet site for the Canadian Rural Partnership. The latest revision to the CRIS site involved amalgamating the information on the Canadian Rural Partnership activities and CRIS activities and products into one front page for federal rural activities at www.rural.gc.ca

Conclusion - Lessons learned

- start small - don't wait until you have a perfect business case and plan but go with the 'build it and they will come' approach
- consultation is very important - consult with partners, clients, colleagues - everyone who can contribute to the project - the end result will be enriched by these contributions.
- the single window may be unrealistic. Perhaps it is more practical and useful to establish one clearly focussed window and to be aware of as many of the other existing windows as possible.
- there is a need for discreet and anonymous client service that will assist people who need information whether it is information on programs and services to help them financially or personally or a referral to other possible sources of assistance

We have also learned there is a need to provide information services to those people who do not have access to the communication technology that is frequently taken for granted in urban areas. CRIS clients rarely have access to the Internet and are frequently a considerable distance from a public access Internet site. And they like to have someone to talk to about their information needs - whether they are themselves experts at finding things or if they do not have any idea where they should start.

And there is a need for "information professionals", knowledgeable in the theories of information storage, retrieval and dissemination and skilled in the use of electronic resources and communication technology. The Internet is a significant new information resource but navigating it to find timely and valid information is a challenge. When the person at the other end of the telephone or opening the e-mail has the knowledge and skills to provide the requested information or direct the client to the most appropriate source it will help ensure that there is equitable access to information.