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With help from Portland State students, an energetic local entrepreneur is putting a Y2K spin on an ancient concept—bartering.

Bianca Hein estimates students have provided the equivalent of \$40,000 in assistance to help her develop a bartering site on the World Wide Web—including writing lyrics for an original jingle. “My goal was to launch the e-Trading Post on \$1,000,” she says. “Thanks in large part to the students, it was up and running on \$70.52.”

The e-Trading Post at www.e-TradingPost.com is a trading forum in cyberspace—although those who find something they want and have nothing to trade can always use cash. Hein developed the idea based on a newspaper version she published for expatriates when she lived in Thailand during the 1980s and 1990s.

“I published 5,000 copies every two weeks for 10,000 foreigners,” Hein says. “It was matchmaking for people

who had things to trade or wanted to find something to trade for.”

When she moved to Portland in 1996, Hein spent 18 months working on contract at the Oregon Department of Economic Development. At first Hein fielded up to 30 calls a day from Oregonians seeking money to start or develop small businesses. Although money was typically not available, Hein would ask what the entrepreneur needed to buy. Often she could find free or low-cost sources for their needs.

Hein turned her findings into the Small Business Resource Directory for Oregon, an extensive listing of organizations, services, and programs that offer free and low-cost help. A chance encounter with Portland State added another freebie notch in the directory.

During a trade show for the Economic Development Department, Hein met Brad Robertson, then a counselor and now director of Portland State’s

Business Outreach Program. The program provides counseling for local businesses and matches students and businesses for real-world work experiences or free help, depending on which side of the handshake you’re on.

Learning that PSU offered businesses free help, Hein added the program to her directory and took a fledgling Web site idea to school. For several months Hein had been working evenings and weekends to develop her trading post on the Internet—learning how to design Web pages as a first step.

Working with the Business Outreach Program, Hein got individual business counseling and enlisted a succession of student teams to help her speed up her work. One student helped her develop a business plan to see what she would need to charge to make the trading post viable, and how much potential traders would likely be willing to pay. Another student analyzed equipment costs to help her

Give and Take

An Internet barter service makes its first deal with talented students.

By Melissa Steineger

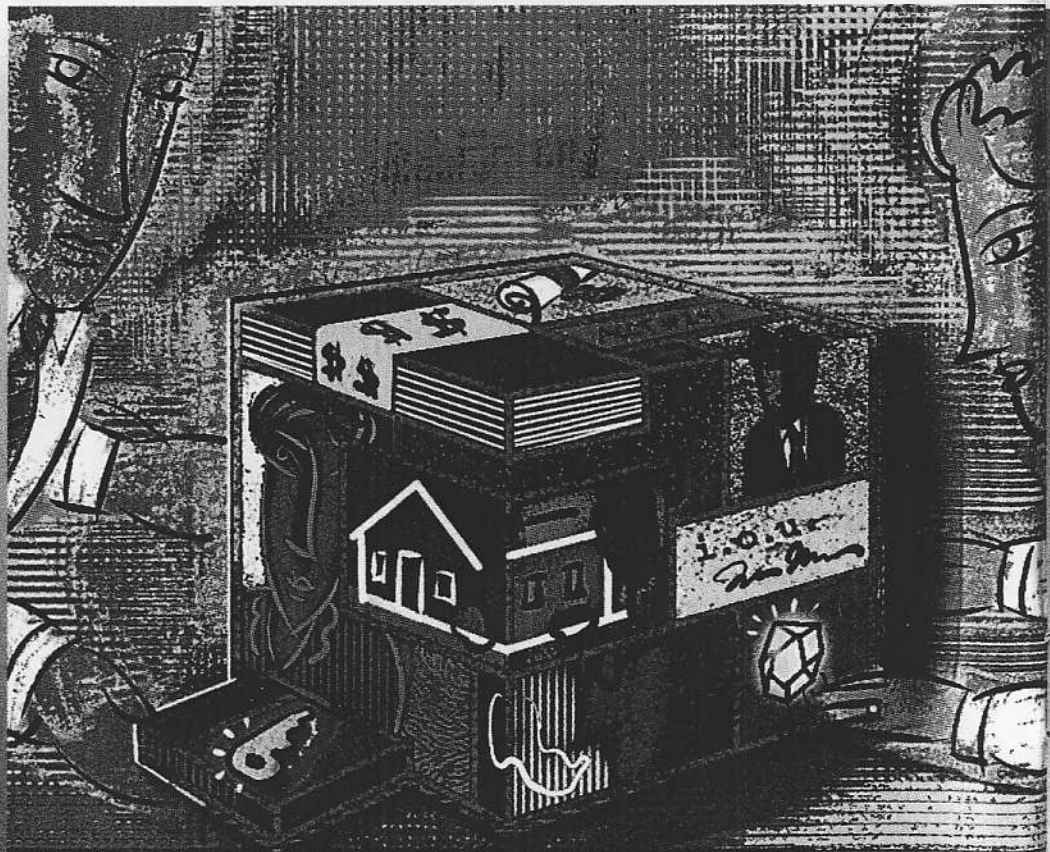


ILLUSTRATION BY SUSAN L'ANARTVILLE

determine what to buy and what to lease. Still others created a database and marketing plan.

Along the way, Hein discovered that the new PSU Center for Excellence in Writing also provides student assistance for businesses as a way to give students real-McCoy writing experience. Hein tapped writing students to develop a procedures manual, a list of media contacts, and promotional materials.

All told, Hein estimates that students have provided \$38,000 to \$42,000 worth of assistance. Other state, federal, and nonprofit service providers contributed additional help for a grand total she estimates at nearly \$53,000 of free services.

But although students are working without monetary reward, they don't see it as a thankless task.

Dan Blanchard '99 undertook a cost-benefit analysis of leasing versus buying a computer server to handle the

e-Trading Post's Web site. Leasing won hands down and so did Blanchard.

"I hadn't done a real-world project before," says Blanchard. "It gave me the confidence to work with a small business owner one-to-one and kind of opened my eyes. There's definitely support out there for small businesses, and you don't have to spend a lot of money to get it started."

Student Gabe Adoff also liked working for free. As part of a technical editing class, Adoff helped Hein write for her site.

"I liked Bianca's bartering idea," says Adoff. "I really liked the concept of people being able to trade goods and services outside the regular marketplace, and Bianca was really organized. You could tell right off the bat she would help you in the project, not just give it to you and say, 'here.'"

The team of four technical writing students edited Web site materials and wrote a procedures manual for the day when Hein needs employees to handle

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the workload. Working about four hours a week on the project, Adoff also wrote press releases and a feature article on Hein published by the *Oregon Business Journal*. He and others on the team also brainstormed lyrics to create an e-Trading Post jingle.

Adoff, a sometimes bass player in Portland's "That Darn Bluegrass Band," convinced the band to record the new lyrics to the music of a traditional bluegrass song, "Salty Dog." The result became the e-TradingPost's jingle, available for listening at the Web site.

So, with both sides of the business-student partnership happy, you might say the future-focused e-Trading Post made its first successful swap the old-fashioned way—in the flesh. ■

(Melissa Steineger, a Portland freelance writer, wrote the articles "Online Anytime" and "She Goes Zoom," which appeared in the fall 1999 PSU Magazine.)

Getting Started

The low-key Business Outreach Program of Portland State's School of Business Administration provides assistance to small businesses by linking them with students—using as little red tape as possible.

Businesses receive all services free from the mostly grant-supported program. However, once a business is established, the owner is encouraged to "give back" by volunteering to help other fledgling businesses find their wings.

"Our role is to assist small businesses—to help them improve in whatever area they need," says Brad Robertson, director of the Business Outreach Program. "We help businesses figure out who their customers are and how to build financial statements along with general operating stuff like bookkeeping and process improvement."

Enrollment in the program is as easy as phoning a counselor. If the business owner finds the chat informa-

tive and wants to continue, he or she fills out an initial questionnaire. That's it.

Counselors in the northeast and southeast Portland community and on campus provide individual mentoring to business owners and would-be business owners. Assistance can range from a phone call every few weeks to student teams that provide detailed business plans. Typically the program has 40 to 50 businesses enrolled at any one time. More than 300 businesses have received help since the program began in 1994.

Each term program counselors select approximately 15 businesses that would benefit from working with a student team. Students in higher level business and capstone classes get the opportunity to engage in community-based learning by undertaking projects for a business. Endeavors have included creating business plans, researching market potential, developing human resource plans,

and developing and implementing financial and accounting systems.

In addition, business owners can opt for free training on business-related software in a fully equipped computer lab at the program's northeast Portland location. Classes are offered in word processing, spreadsheet creation, database setup and management, and creation of marketing documents.

The program also disseminates periodic newsletters and organizes occasional "brown bag lunch" seminars with speakers on business topics.

"Our success stories are typically of a modest nature," says Robertson. "Some companies have moved from being home-based to a storefront. Others are on a bit more solid footing than before the owner's involvement with the program. One customer is now on the cusp of receiving a \$300,000 order. I can't say that's due to us exclusively, but I like to think we helped." ■