

Online key to business survival

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Nelson businesses are cashing in on online opportunities, with leaders saying the trend is changing the face of local firms.

Several businesses based in the region say they have only been able to survive because of an online presence rather than a street shopfront.

Business consultant Laura McIntyre said the number of customers requiring a digital presence had doubled every year since she started in 2005.

"I started small, but since then I have worked with more than 200 individual businesses, mainly husband and wife teams running a small business in Nelson.

"It's amazing what people are doing out the backblocks of Tapawera and Riwaka. They are the ones recognising they really need to change how they do things and get online."

For Nelson freelance writer and independent travel broker Sue Farley, creating a web-based business was a big challenge, but she said her business would never have developed had she not embraced the digital era.

"I'm probably an older person embracing this stuff, but I love it.

"It's fun and amazing ... someone can book a six-month trip around the world and not have a single piece of paper other than a passport," she said.

Using digital devices, Mrs Farley is able to maintain a one-on-one personal service with customers around the world – something many people feared could become lost in the digital world.

"For me, that's a key factor ... although I'm online, I'm still a human being and not a machine."

She said she was receiving daily inquiries from overseas customers about her latest online travel venture, holidays to South Island fishing lodges, including three in Nelson – Lake Rotoroa, Owen River and Stonefly Lodges – since launching the website about two months ago.

Nelson Markets managing director Nita Knight said retailers selling at the Saturday market had embraced the digital world. It provided a sustainable business model, allowing online

sales for out-of-town visitors while also keeping the unique, local and intimate customer base.

Former Christchurch resident Sandra Anderson moved to Nelson in March, shaken but having survived the Christchurch earthquakes. Within two days, her perfume business, Hedonista, was back up and running online.

"If I had been relying on Christchurch for business and sales, I would have died a long time ago."

She stocked artisan perfumes in four Christchurch stores, but lost about \$4000 worth of stock in the quake, leaving her with only one fragrance range, which she relocated to Nelson with. Online sales and exports to Japan had been key to the business surviving, Ms Anderson said.

She had since been dealing with a South Korean and Hong Kong distributor about exporting more product.

"The main thing is because I am online, it's meant that I can be in Nelson or anywhere in the world. The only reason I didn't lose the business was because the online portion kept it going."

Businessman Galen King, of Lucid Design, is outspoken in his support of social media, saying his two biggest contracts, worth \$100,000, were secured from anonymous conversations that started on Twitter.

They progressed to email discussion, then Skype meetings, and finally the contracts awarded to his Nelson graphic design business were signed, Mr King said.