

ICT convergence changes market

Small business owners need to keep sight of the basics when they seek to navigate technology trends.

CONDUIT: Richard Keeves (left) and Gareth Lane set up iQ Seven to supply helpful information to small businesses. **Photo:** Attila Csaszar



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3-PAGE FEATURE

RICHARD Keeves and Gareth Lane have worked with numerous small and mid-sized businesses over the years, and they are worried by what they have seen.

Despite the plethora of information about technology trends, they believe many SMEs are struggling, even with the basics.

“What I’ve observed over the years is that most businesses have websites but most don’t work very well,” Mr Keeves told *Business News*.

Mr Keeves ran web development company IBC until it was sold in 2008 and since then has operated a digital consulting business.

He recalls running a series of seminars for retail businesses.

“Seeing them struggle in the world of ecommerce was not just an eye opener, in a way it was sad,” Mr Keeves said.

“They really wanted to do well but they didn’t have the resources or the technical skills to match it with the big guys.”

Mr Lane, who heads digital agency Concise Digital, said one of the problems was the lack of regulation.

“Anybody can be a web designer and there are lots of sharks making promises they can’t deliver,” he said.

“I’ve seen a lot of people sign contracts for two years on the promise they will be top of Google, without having any real knowledge of how it works or the fact you can’t actually do that.”

Mr Lane said a lot of small business operators missed the basics.

“A lot of people think it’s all about SEO,” he said.

“Or people love to hear about social media, but it isn’t relevant for a lot of people.”

Changing tech

The rapid emergence of new technologies, and the convergence between areas such as information technology, telecommunications and digital marketing, add to the challenges facing SMEs trying to work out what they really need.

Not only is the technology changing, so is the language, with the emergence of terms such as ‘conversational commerce’.

“That’s the new buzzword in town,” said Ben Derham, the technical lead at digital marketing agency Marketforce.

The term was coined by Uber executive Chris Messina in 2015 and refers to

the intersection of messaging apps and shopping.

Marketforce held a seminar recently to help its clients make sense of some of the new technology trends, including those presented at a recent Google conference in San Francisco.

General manager client solutions Nicole Cikarela said the rapid advances in voice technology was a big talking point.

“The thing that got people most excited was Google Assistant, which called a hair-dressing salon to make an appointment on your behalf,” she said.

“It was a robot calling a real person and having a conversation that sounded for all intents and purposes like two people having a conversation.”

Ms Cikarela said Marketforce was constantly adding new skills to adapt to technology trends.

“We still do advertising, but you can’t stop there,” she said.

“You have to look at how you get customers all the way through to purchase and then retention and loyalty.”

Mr Derham said it also worked the other way around.

“Companies that were specialised in just IT or web development now need to skill up in marketing,” he said.

Ms Cikarela said most clients were seeking advice across three main areas.

The first was around being found on the internet.

This tied into their search strategy and how their web site was set up to support

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that, in both its technical development and its content.

The second area was around smoothing the sales process to make it easy for customers to complete a purchase.

The third related to managing customers’ data; i.e. how securely was it stored and how easily accessed by different people.

Mr Derham said one of the goals of ‘conversational commerce’ was to take away the formality of online transactions.

It would enable customers to start and finish a purchase journey within a messaging platform, such as Facebook Messenger.

“They are now allowing you to embed Messenger on your own website, so a customer could come to your site, start a conversation about a product, leave your website but you are still connected via Messenger and they can finish the purchase later,” Mr Derham said.

Ms Cikarela said local businesses may not deploy voice technology in their

business, but may still need to adapt what they were doing.

“People need to start thinking about how their website will show up in voice searches,” she said.

Dynamic networks

The convergence trend is having a big impact on telecommunications.

The traditional telco network connected physical places that had servers that stored applications that customers used.

“Now we see a convergence of network and applications, so the network becomes far more intelligent and dynamic,” said Andrew Wildblood, executive director of Telstra’s enterprise segment.

“Where we play a role is the merging of IT and communications into a combined ICT world, where the network is at the centre of how you operate.”

Mr Wildblood said a key part of this trend was the growing use of cloud computing, which gave businesses access to scaleable IT applications and the ability to only pay for what they used.

“It’s still very topical when we’re talking to customers,” he said.

“You tend to find SMEs who can’t afford a big investment in IT architecture and infrastructure but want to scale up tend to be big adopters of cloud services.”

Mr Wildblood said these trends were reflected in the fact that Telstra’s managed IT business was one of its fastest growing business segments.

Telstra showcases its partnerships with ICT product vendors at its annual Connected event, which Mr Wildblood was all about marrying technology and business.

“What most customers want is technology that can take them to new markets,” he said.

“It can be confusing and confronting for SMEs.”

He believes Telstra’s product packages and the support of its partners helped SMEs navigate the technology challenge.

“I think more than ever the barriers to consume IT are disappearing.”

Results driven

Messrs Keeves and Lane are also looking to make life easier for SMEs by launching iQ Seven, which is a finalist in the WAITTA Incite awards to be announced later this month.

It’s an online business designed to supply information and advice to subscribers on managing their web presence.

“We’re trying to empower business owners so they know what needs to be done so they can get the results they want,” Mr Lane said.

The two founders will continue to run their consulting businesses but recognise most SMEs cannot afford to hire experienced consultants.

Instead, they have drawn on their collective knowledge to design the new service, which was launched in February this year.

“We wouldn’t have been able to do this without our real-world experience; we’ve seen what works and what doesn’t work,” Mr Lane said.

The name of their new business stems from the founders’ belief there are seven areas that need focus for a website to be effective.

You need to be easily found, you want to attract the right visitors, and then engage and build trust.

The website needs to generate leads and convert them to sales, and to encourage social sharing.

Mr Lane said there is a lot of information in the public domain, which can be found via the likes of Google, but it can be



GROWTH: Andrew Wildblood says Telstra’s managed IT business is one of its fastest growing segments. **Photo:** Gareth Jones

out of date, misleading or wrong.

Even when people found useful information, many SMEs struggled to determine what was most important, he said.

iQ Seven seeks to tackle this by scanning the internet every day, tracking changes in web services, search engines, social media and web technology.

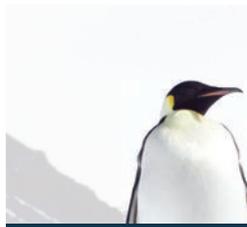
It then sends alerts to subscribers, prioritised to meet their needs.

The system also checks each subscriber’s website, and their use of social media and search engines.

It alerts subscribers about problems to fix along with ideas and opportunities to improve results.

Mr Keeves said a key aspect of iQ Seven was that it was fully independent.

“We don’t do web design or SEO or marketing services or anything like that, it’s an independent advisory system,” he said.



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