

Investing in robust IT

Biosphere Expeditions used grant funding from the takeITon programme to improve its web presence and source the hard-wearing IT equipment it relies on for its wildlife conservation expeditions

Survival of the fittest

Biosphere Expeditions is an award-winning, not-for-profit organisation, which takes volunteers on wildlife conservation adventures around the globe. The business' UK base is in Norwich, but it also has offices in Germany, France, the US and Australia.

"We bridge the gap between scientists at the forefront of conservation work in need of funds and helpers, and enthusiastic laypeople, who in their holiday time want to support them," explains Kathy Wilden, UK director of Biosphere Expeditions.

The importance of the web

It was the company's Business Link adviser, David Marsh, who first made the company aware of the **takeITon** funding programme available to businesses in the East of England. Biosphere Expeditions leapt at the opportunity to invest in upgrading its website, search engine placement and IT equipment used out in the field.



Kathy explains: "Our website (www.biosphere-expeditions.org) is a crucial part of our overall marketing strategy and our most important marketing tool by far. It is our window to the world and, often, the most important opportunity to present us to our potential clients, who tend to be highly educated, time-poor, cash-rich professionals. For this clientele, our market research has shown that it is essential to have a website that is both informative and cutting edge, but also shows that we are reputable and professional about the wildlife research and conservation work we do."

For this reason, the company took the forward-thinking step of using part of its **takeITon** funding to upgrade its website with 'Web 2.0' functionality, such as multimedia clips, a chat room, discussion forum, blogs and live updates from its explorers working on expeditions. "It will go a long way towards achieving this goal and reaching out to potential clients," says Kathy.

Alongside this, Biosphere Expeditions recognises that search engines are one of the most important tools used by consumers in finding what they want online. Therefore, the company also extended its funding to making the site more search engine friendly through search engine optimisation (SEO).

“Getting good search engine placement is crucial in attracting people to our website and recruiting them for our expeditions,” says Kathy. “Our three biggest sales generators are the internet, word of mouth and PR (in that order). SEO is, therefore, an integral part of our sales strategy.”

When the going gets tough...

As well as improving its web presence, Biosphere Expeditions decided to use some of the **takeITon** funding to invest in new laptops for field access. This would enable it to update features on its website while not in the office, such as the real-time updates and blogs, to help keep the site exciting and interactive for its target audience.

The big challenge for any IT equipment that Biosphere Expeditions uses though, is sustaining the rigours of traveling around the globe to far-flung places. “Our wildlife research and conservation expeditions take place in remote and challenging parts of the planet, such as the Altai mountains of Central Asia (snow leopard research), the Dhofar mountains of Oman (Arabian leopard), the Bay Island archipelago of Honduras (coral reef conservation) or the Amazon rainforest of Peru (jaguar, macaw and biodiversity conservation),” explains Kathy. “Therefore, we need IT equipment that can withstand these working conditions.”

Durable and hard-wearing laptops are, understandably, expensive and also quite hard to source. Yet Kathy is convinced of the benefits: “Reliable IT equipment is crucial for the business, not only because we use it for marketing purposes but also because it performs critical functions, assisting our safety measures through satellite uplinks to the emergency services, for example.”

“The **takeITon** grant has made all this happen and we would not have been able to do any of it without the funding,” she adds. “I would definitely recommend the TakeITon programme to other small businesses.”