



Using Broadband to Advertise: Panama Tours from Oklahoma!

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Interview with Winston Rice

Owner of Panama Jones (Clarita, OK)

www.panamacanal.com

Introduction

Broadband Internet access presents a world of opportunities for rural residents. Because of its ability to transfer large amounts of data almost instantaneously, rural individuals can now work, learn, and find entertainment right at home in their small towns rather than have to commute to larger cities. More and more rural citizens are taking advantage of broadband access to do a multitude of tasks online – including earning advanced degrees, reaching new markets for their business, gathering pertinent information about their job (such as weather predictions for farmers), staying in touch with relatives or friends, or even creating their own information-based job or business. This fact sheet describes one of these rural broadband success stories in detail – an Oklahoman living in a very rural area who uses the web as the sole source of advertising for his tourism business – and utilizes broadband to stay on top of demand and help him run his company.

Background Information

Winston “Panama Jones” Rice grew up in the tiny town of Clarita, Oklahoma (population 60 – about 35 miles southeast of Ada) and enlisted in the army at age 17. He served three tours of duty in Panama as a paratrooper, where he promptly fell in love with the country. He spent five years as a jump school instructor in Georgia and a parachute rigger instructor in Virginia. He then spent a few years as editor of a newspaper, and even became a cabinet maker in Alaska – but always seemed to have Panama on his mind. In 1987, Winston returned to his hometown of Clarita and continued his cabinet-making, while pondering a way to develop some sort of tourism business in Panama. By the early 1990s, Winston and his wife came up with a plan, and (after the fall of Manuel Noriega) put it into action. Unfortunately, they only attracted three tourists during their first year. Thankfully, Winston became more educated about tourism in general, and in particular, how to make use of computers and Internet technology.

After starting out using the Internet wherever he could get online – from the library, or using spotty dial-up service from home – Winston moved on to satellite broadband when that technology became available and finally upgraded to

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<http://osufacts.okstate.edu>



wireless access due to reliability issues. He estimates that 98 percent of his customers found out about him due to his web presence, which has been made significantly easier by using broadband technology. By successfully combining his interest in Panama with computers and broadband access (which makes distance irrelevant), “Panama Jones” is able to run every aspect of his touring company from his home in rural Oklahoma.

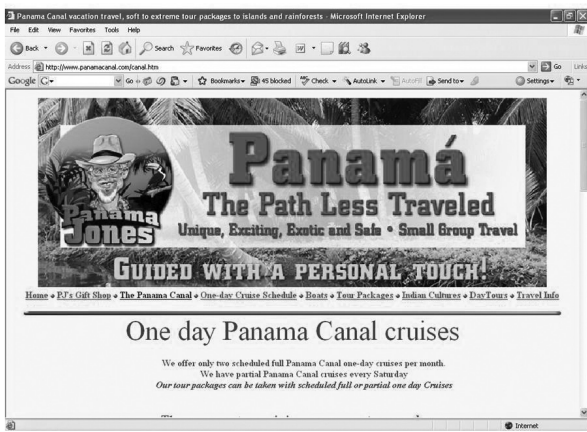
The following information is based on an interview with Winston Rice:

Tell us a little about your business and how you got started.

Well, I spent several years in Panama during my days as a paratrooper for the Army and had many more exciting visits there after I came back to the states. I was always interested in establishing some type of tourism business to Panama once I “retired” in Clarita, so as soon as Noriega was gone, my wife and I began exploring the possibility.

Did you always advertise via a website? When did you start using the web to advertise – were you on dial-up? When did you make the switch to broadband?

Yes, I have done *all* my advertising over the Internet since day one. We started using the Internet to advertise our business back in its early days – around 1993. Initially, we got online from anywhere we could – the local library was a good source, since our dial-up access from home was spotty and unreliable – and it was a long distance call to Oklahoma



City. My long distance bill was as high as \$400 to \$600 per month! I knew that to stay on top of my website, I needed a more reliable connection from home (where I run my site), so I started looking for ways to get a broadband connection. Here in Clarita, we didn't have broadband accessibility as early as an urban area might. However, I had heard about satellite connections that offered much faster Internet service than dial-up, and how they were available to almost any rural area. I made the switch to satellite in 1998 when I started using a company called Starband – I had to pay around \$750 to get all the equipment and was paying \$70 per month for their service. However, I got some bad customer service with them (they were down for an entire month once, and I couldn't get through to their service desk!) so when a wireless tower was built in nearby Coalgate that provided wireless broadband access in 2003, I switched over to them. I'm currently paying around \$40 per month for their service, and I've been very happy with them.

Why did you start using a website?

I started advertising via a website because I simply didn't have the money to advertise the traditional way. Even now, we do all of our advertising that way. We do have brochures we can send to people – but most only request those after finding our website and contacting us for more information. We knew the Internet would be a great way to market our business since literally anyone, anywhere can check out what you have to offer. I thought that being a household name was extremely important for marketing purposes – for example, “Coke” in soft drinks or “Kleenex” in tissues. Most people in this country already know about the Panama Canal – so I tried to focus on that. While I could have started a website called panamatraveltours.com – it would have been difficult to get people to find it. Most people will just type words into a search engine or even their Internet browser itself. I got lucky since the name www.panamacanal.com wasn't taken at that time.

Did you hire someone to design your website for you or did you do it yourself? Did you know a lot about computers and web design before you started?

I pretty much designed the website myself, and I still do all the maintenance. I use an old program called HTML writer (I actually still have it on a floppy disk). That program is becoming outdated, so I am considering upgrading to a newer one like Dreamweaver or something similar. I didn't

know very much about web design, but I did enough research to find out what was effective – and my kids helped educate me too!

How much did it cost to get your website up and running? Did you purchase the domain name/pay for site hosting your self?

I pay a company in California around \$600 – 700 per year to host the site. I pay Network Solutions about \$20 per year for each of the domain names I own. Since I did most of the design work myself, the site did not really cost all that much to get up and going. It did take a while for it all to come together, but having broadband access makes it very easy for me to update (including lots of fairly big pictures that I have up there) and move things around.

How much time do you spend updating your website? Is it a daily, weekly, or monthly task? How often are you in Panama giving tours?

I typically go to Panama about four times per year, and the trips we offer range from a single week to multi-week tours. So, while I generally update the website about every month, I spend a little more time with it once I get back from the trips and I have some updated pictures, stories, and testimonials to put up. It doesn't take a whole lot of time, since the website has evolved to where most of the information is already up there. However, it is important to update it continually so things don't look out-of-date.

Do you do any advertising on Google or other search engines?

No, I have had several people try to convince me to purchase specific “words” in various search engines, but at this point in my life I'm doing this primarily because I enjoy it – I don't want to become overwhelmed doing it. Besides, if you currently google “panama canal tours” guess which site comes up #1? Even a search on “panama canal” brings up my site in the top 10. And all that was without paying for any advertisement – as I mentioned before, getting the domain name was *crucial* to our advertising success.

Do you actually book tours and take credit cards online or is the website primarily for advertising?

We currently don't do any online booking. The website is there for marketing only, and then customers contact me through e-mail or phone and we work out all the details. This is partly because I still have to do all the contacting in Panama myself – it is very difficult to get hotel reservations, etc. set up unless you have some experience with them and know



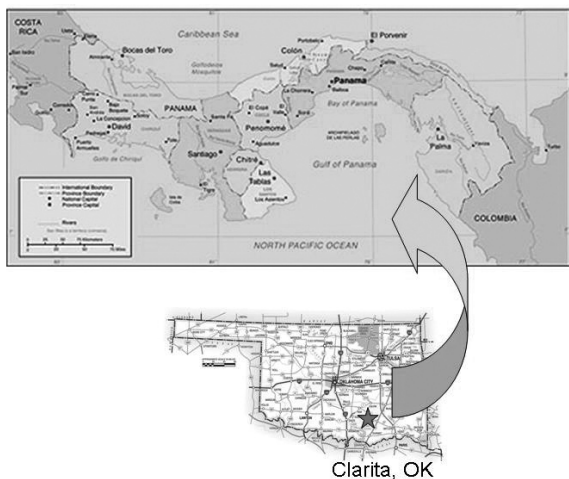
exactly what the customer wants. However, I am interested in incorporating more online features in the future – for instance, allowing people to book online would probably save me some time and would make it easier to deal with other phases of the tours since I would already have a lot of the information in front of me.

What contributions has having broadband made to your business?

I would estimate that around 98 percent of my customers came to me because of my website, with the other 2 percent coming from word of mouth. Broadband access has simply made it much, much easier for me to be on top of things – I can check e-mail from potential clients much more quickly, I can upload photos and update things on the site with ease, and I can even find weather reports for my planned trips to Panama. Broadband access is a great thing, and I’m actually planning on trying to help people here in Clarita understand that – we are going to convert an old building in town into a “technology center” with several computers to let the residents here know about how great computers can be, and what broadband access can do for them. It will be like an internet café and local hang out. The building will resemble a one room school house complete with bell. I would encourage all rural residents to take advantage of broadband access, whether it’s by establishing a business similar to mine, using it to further their education, or simply keeping in touch with their distant relatives.

This concludes the interview with Winston Rice.

Panama



Other Broadband Opportunities for Rural Citizens

While this fact sheet tells the story of how one citizen used broadband access to promote and market his business, there are a number of other ways in which broadband access can enhance the lives of rural individuals. These include:

- Job creation:
 - Help desk/customer service
 - Virtual personal assistant
 - Website development
 - Writing/editing
 - Software development
 - Medical transcription
- Reaching new markets
 - Market rural products to previously unserved areas
 - Attract urban customers to rural locations
- Continuing education
 - GED/Bachelors/Graduate degrees available online
- Communicating with friends/family
 - Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP)
 - Email

For more information about broadband access and why it is so vital to rural citizens (including more examples of rural individuals and businesses making productive use of broadband), check out the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension website located at <http://agecon.okstate.edu/broadband/>.

What if My Community Doesn’t Have Broadband Access?

There are a number of resources available to assist those rural areas without broadband in bringing some type of access into their community. The USDA rural development telecommunications program offers several grants and loans to communities and private firms interested in constructing broadband infrastructure in rural America. These programs include Community Connect grants, Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grants, Broadband loans, and Rural Utility Service loans. Additionally, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service has a program that involves strategic planning to uncover various options for obtaining broadband infrastructure. These strategic planning options include interacting with the local cable and phone company providers, forming a public-private partnership for sharing infrastructure costs, and even operating a municipally-owned broadband system. Other organizations, such as the Oklahoma Technology Council (OTC) and the Oklahoma Municipal Services Corporation (OMSC), are also interested in helping rural areas obtain broadband access. Contact your county Extension director, or any of the rural development specialists or other parties listed in the table on page 4, for additional information.

Table 1. List of Resources for Broadband Access.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Contact</i>	<i>Phone</i>	<i>Website</i>
OSU / OCES	County Extension Directors		
OSU / Rural Development	Brian Whitacre Stan Ralstin Jack Frye	405-744-9825 405-237-7677 580-332-4100	http://agecon.okstate.edu/broadband/
OTC	Jim Mason	405-239-3669	www.oktechcouncil.com
OMSC	Alan Holt	405-528-7515	www.oiml.org

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert E. Whitson, Director of Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President, Dean, and Director of the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of 20 cents per copy. 0907