

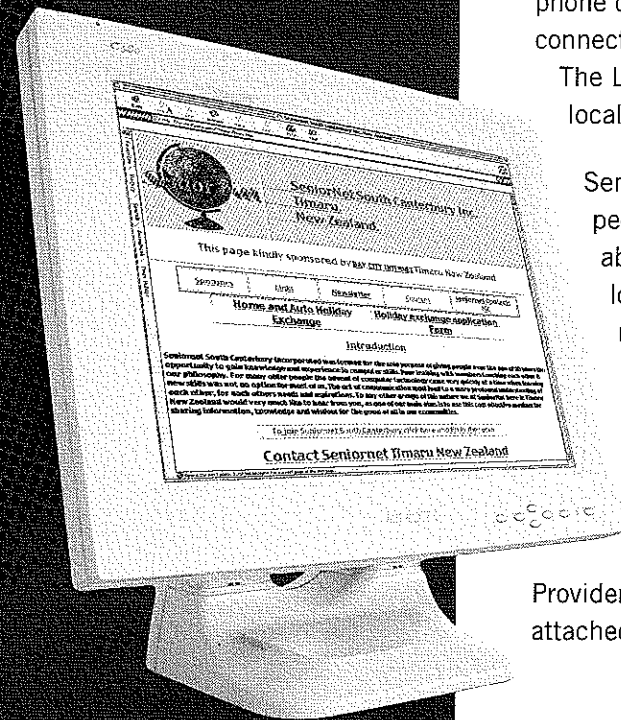
## SeniorNet Timaru

*A classic Kiwi approach to an international concept – take an idea, make it work, make it better, and fit it to the local conditions.*

SeniorNet is an international concept, originating in the USA. It gives older adults the opportunity to get on the Internet, and learn more about new communication and information technology. There are currently 77 SeniorNet groups in New Zealand, double the number at the start of 2000. Each is a separate incorporated non-profit society.

Each SeniorNet sets up and operates a Learning Centre. An independent local committee organises their own premises, classes and funding, and gets a start-up grant from Telecom, consisting of \$1500 cash, two free phone connections and two years' free line rental, free connection to Xtra and free usage of Xtra for two years. The Lottery Grants Board has also funded over 60 local SeniorNets to a total of more than \$650,000.

SeniorNet South Canterbury started life when people involved in the local Grey Power heard about the Telecom offer. They put an ad in the local paper and the first meeting drew the necessary 15 people to set up an incorporated society. This group set up a steering committee and went looking for premises and local support. The local branch of Westpac Trust Bank has been generous with providing space in the old bank chambers and some hardware, and the local Internet Service Provider (ISP) Bay City Internet sponsors their web page attached to the city council's site [www.timaru.com](http://www.timaru.com).



**Website** [www.timaru.com/~senior/index.htm](http://www.timaru.com/~senior/index.htm)

**Contact** Les Howard

**Phone** 03 683 3212

**Contact** Jim Kane (secretary)

**Phone** 03 688 2356

**Email** [J.kane@timaru.com](mailto:J.kane@timaru.com)

The original nucleus of 25 people came from diverse backgrounds – farming, teaching, freezing works – and had some computer experience between them, but “none of us were experts”. They acquired recycled 386 PCs from Telecom plus a couple loaned from the sponsoring bank, bought the necessary software and manuals and advertised their first course.

Four years on, SeniorNet Timaru has more than 400 current members and over 500 people have completed their courses. Thirty-six tutors, all graduates of the courses themselves, run the classes. Membership costs \$30 for the first year including the introductory course, and \$15 for subsequent years. Course costs (\$30 for 6 weeks, one session per week) cover all outgoings. As well as the introductory course, they offer tuition in word processing (two levels), desk top publishing, spreadsheets, databases and genealogy. They have re-equipped with new hardware and software, and also own a scanner and digital camera with the associated software. They now have no vacancies in courses for the next six months.

The first course assumes no prior contact with computers, and has one tutor to each two participants. Tutors – all volunteers – are those who have completed the courses themselves, and the computer terminals are set up to encourage interactive “peer tutoring” between pairs of students. Tutor-pupil ratio is ideally one to three, and anyone who is unhappy with their course can repeat it at no extra charge. Finding software manuals rather unfriendly, they have developed their own course notes and manuals or borrowed from other SeniorNets.

The main reason their members give for coming is to “keep in touch with the family and try to keep up with the grandchildren”. Many are also interested in genealogy. Their oldest participant is 83: she came with no technical experience at all and now has her own computer. They run separate courses with extra practice time for participants having no access to a computer at home. Local retailers are very happy with the efforts of SeniorNet – half their hardware sales are to people over 55.

#### **What would they do differently?**

Not a lot, they say. But they did not realise how fast the whole project would catch on and take off. Originally they did little planning of the year's courses, just ran them as demand required. Now they plan up to a year in advance.

#### **Useful tip**

Make people pay for the whole course when they register, and before the first session. It's not fair on tutors to have to collect fees as well.

#### **Key success factors:**

- Helping other communities to get SeniorNets under way has been helpful for getting their own structure working smoothly.
- Keeping away from the “school-teacher” attitude has been critical in helping those on the courses grapple with new technology.
- Encouraging question-asking straight away means people don't struggle or feel they're inadequate.

*“We've been going for four years and it took us three years to get organised.”*