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Is Winston Net Sustainable?

Winston Net's mission is to "bridge the digital divide." The concept of "bridging the digital divide" is massive and complex, encompassing such pervasive issues as race, socio-economic disparities, culture—issues that have plagued our country since its creation. "Bridging the digital divide" is only the most recent manifestation of these issues now that we live in a technological age.

Issue #1: *Can Winston Net dig deep enough to truly understand how to bridge the digital divide, or are its offerings merely band-aids to the problem?*

In all of my research on third-world economic development from undergraduate school, the year I lived as a teacher in a third-world country, and a recent conference I organized for an organization in Wilmington, NC called Partners for Economic Inclusion entitled "Bridging the Digital Divide," one of the most important points I learned is that as outsiders in a community or culture, we will never know what is best for that underprivileged community. Only by working side-by-side with those who are in need of our services and by letting them lead the way will these issues will ever be solved, and only then when you have full buy-in from the community.

Providing computers and internet access in community centers is only one small element to the digital divide issue. The educational tools are useful for those who have already accepted the need for computer literacy, but what about those who have not? Before computers will even be used, Winston Net must find a way to reach into the African-American community and dismantle the fear of education and the technological age. In the black community, there are misconceptions about an educational divide as well as a digital divide. Many of the most economically disadvantaged in the black community are afraid of educational institutions and have the belief that any kind of literacy, computers or otherwise, is not for them. One way to prove to the African-American community that Winston Net is interested in solutions and not band-aids is to partner with local black grass roots organizations and leaders and create an advisory committee to address this issue. If Winston Net fails to reach this community and address their needs as opposed to what Winston Net thinks is their needs, Winston Net will not fulfill its mission statement and will not be sustainable.

Issue #2: *Is Winston Net necessary to provide Forsyth County free wireless, or is there another entity that is better suited?*

Currently Winston Net seems to be a facilitator, bringing various community stakeholders and organizations together. Winston Net mostly has the right relationships and is set up to create more relationships with other organizations to maintain its status as facilitator.

Issue #3: *Once the computers have been provided, what will Winston Net do next?*

Given that Winston Net's business model is focused currently on using recycled computers and placing them in mostly low income community centers, what happens when the demand is met for old computers in low income neighborhoods? This issue is the main reason why Winston Net's current business model is not sustainable. However, this is not to say that Winston Net as an organization is not sustainable—I believe it has the potential to be sustainable, just not down the path it is currently progressing. As mentioned earlier, computers in community centers do not bridge the digital divide. However as facilitators, Winston Net has the ability to function as a bridge in of itself, allowing the other various organizations to work together on some of the deeper issues underlying the digital divide. And as facilitators, or aggregators, as we mentioned in our own business model for the arts, Winston Net is uniquely positioned to bring the disparate organizations of Winston Salem, both social and arts, together to find solutions to these major problems that plague our community. If Winston Net truly wants to be a leader in the country in bridging the digital divide, it must address the bigger issues as well.

The ideas that were presented in our last class have many of the elements that Winston Net needs to be sustainable. Winston Net must position itself to provide a service to the community that is needed, useful, and flexible. The ideas from our business model recognized a need in the arts community for an aggregator who was positioned to gather all the information from the various organizations. One of the social teams took the facilitator role from a different perspective, suggesting Winston Net should provide the technological training necessary for organizations already servicing the low income communities, which would include some of the black communities as well.

Winston Net has the challenge of finding a new business model that is flexible enough to be a technological community leader while at the same time addressing and finding solutions for the larger underlying issues of the digital divide. If Winston Net can succeed in these tasks, it will have the ability to be sustainable.