

BENEFITS OF STARTING A REGIONAL BUSINESS

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There's no doubt that after COVID-19, more and more Australians are exploring the benefits of starting a regional business.

Only one in three Australians live outside the major cities and towns. But people in rural and regional Australia play a huge role in our economy, lifestyle and history.

Since moving to the Barossa 8 years ago, I've met so many people who've made a similar lifestyle choice. Escaping the traffic and stress of city life for the slower pace and closer connections regional Australia offers.

One good thing to come out of COVID-19 was realising most businesses could operate from home. They could handle meetings, networking and client calls by Zoom, just like I did. Once others worked this out, it opened up an alternative source of business opportunities for many people.

My vine change

When we first moved to the Barossa, I wasn't thinking about building a regional business. One of the main reasons we moved here was the cost of living. Those reduced costs (and expenses) probably made it easier to take the risk and start a business. If we were living in a city, we'd have a much bigger mortgage and higher living expenses. I would have needed to have a part-time job while I established my business.

After living in an expat community in Hanoi, we wanted to be part of a community. We wanted to live somewhere where we could get involved and contribute. After living in a city, we wanted our kids to experience a different lifestyle and know where the stuff we buy comes from.

The longer we're here, the more we appreciate the fact we're living somewhere special. A place with a long history, fabulous traditions, beautiful landscapes, and amazing food and wine.



The Barossa landscape – gorgeous even in winter.

Growing numbers

Running a business is incredibly challenging. There's finance, sales, marketing and more to consider. Thankfully, there's plenty of business support available in rural and regional Australia. Your go to when looking for support is Regional Development Australia (RDA). They help (or find someone who can help) businesses and organisations nationwide find new growth opportunities and achieve better results.

RDA uses local knowledge and connections to help new investment projects, improve business performance or find the right workforce. They research regional data to communicate priorities to all 3 levels of government. This helps inform policymaking for better outcomes in the future.

Strong economies need robust and resilient business, people and communities. Each RDA region works differently to address this. One way [RDA Barossa, Gawler, Light, Adelaide Plains](#) is helping regional businesses succeed is the [B2B Program](#). This program matches established professional service providers to businesses in their region – all at a highly subsidized rate. This helps increase professional capability so that every business can reach its best potential.

Supportive cheerleaders and community

When I asked my friend Alice MacGillivray about the benefits of starting a regional business, she didn't hesitate before saying 'community support'.

Alice runs [Bright Threads](#), which makes bright, uniquely patterned table linen. Alice works with an incredible team in Bali, who has become like a family. The business, launched in 2019, has grown considerably, even during COVID-19 when Alice could travel. More importantly, she provided employment for many people in Bali who would have otherwise suffered without the tourists.



Alice MacGillivray – Bright Threads Barossa in her Tanunda shop

In April 2021, Alice launched a store on Tanunda’s main street, showcasing her linen and also selling stunning homewares. It’s something very special for locals who don’t have access to a vast range of stores. And in doing so, she’s created something special for visitors too.

For Alice, the support from her community has been a valuable source of growth (and sales).

“As soon as I post about anything new on social media, friends and locals come in to buy. And then they usually post on social media, which is such an important source of support.”

Alice MacGillivray – Bright Threads Barossa

But the support is more than just shopping with her. When a hailstorm and flooding affected the store in October 2021, the local community rallied. Friends and business owners were on hand to clean up the mess, bringing flowers, coffee (and gin). And local tradies stepped in to get things fixed.

Not without challenges

While there are benefits to starting a regional business, Alice also highlighted some challenges other regional and rural business owners face.

Internet connections aren't always reliable or available. When we first moved to the Barossa in June 2014 (pre-NBN), we couldn't even get an ADSL connection. The best I could do, for about 8 months, was a 25GB dongle. Fortunately, we now have NBN and a fixed wireless connection. But in many regional areas, expensive satellite internet (that can be sensitive to extreme weather) is the only option.

Freight is another challenge for businesses in the bush. Receiving and sending stock is often expensive, and remote locations limit the ability to negotiate a competitive plan.

Getting the right people can also be a challenge. Lots of locals, especially young people, are tempted to move away. While many people are keen to move to regional areas, the lack of accommodation can be a problem. I've spoken to many businesses, particularly restaurants, cafes and cellar doors, who can't get staff because there's no affordable accommodation.

Then there are the challenges of the Australian climate, from floods to fires, that can make working in rural areas difficult. But sometimes, it's these challenges that drive people in the regions to start new business.

Networking opportunities

While there might not be as many networking opportunities in regional areas, that sometimes makes it easier.

You're more likely to get a cross-section of people in the room, with people from different industries and at different stages of their business journey. Smaller events often make it easier to 'work the room' and meet more people.

Although the internet can be challenging in rural and regional areas, there are great online opportunities for rural businesses. The [Buy from the Bush](#) platform has provided regional ecommerce businesses with new opportunities to market their products around the country. Last Christmas, they even hosted a pop-up store in Sydney's Martin Place.

Creating new opportunities.

Even in this digital age, there's a growing regional and rural publishing environment, with magazines like [Graziher](#), [Galah](#) and [Found Regional](#). My fellow copywriter Sarah Walkenden and her husband Toby have also started [The Rural Publishing Company](#). They've created collaborative publishing opportunities for rural business, and launched a free digital magazine called The Rural Entrepreneur.

Sarah shares her thoughts on being a rural business owner below.

When we first started to run businesses from our rural property, the best thing was the freedom and flexibility of work fitting seamlessly into our rural lifestyle. Instead of travelling to the city and wasting hours in the car, and then being chained to a desk between standard business hours, we could make better use of our time and arrange our work schedule around caring for the horses and the property, and the kids.

In winter, that means we can take half an hour to feed the horses in the daylight instead of having to do everything outside in the dark. If our daughter wants to ride her pony after school, we can do that. We can then work a little more in the evenings if needed. It's therefore much easier to balance family and farm life with work.

Something that surprised me was the fact that we feel far more connected to our local community and the business world from our regional area than we ever felt while in the city.

I always found city life quite lonely. Even though there's lots of people around you, no one really talks to each other. It was lucky if you knew your neighbours. Even though we're clearly more spread-out location-wise, country folk seek connection and to be more inclusive and supportive.

It's not unusual to end up parked on the side of the road for half an hour or more, chatting to friends and neighbours and catching up on local news. If you don't have time to stop for a chat, you at least get an enthusiastic wave as you pass.

I think regional businesses do collaboration and community well. It's all about supporting and looking after each other, so everyone thrives.

Sarah Walkenden – The Rural Copywriter and Rural Publishing Company



Making work life balance a reality

This has been an enormous advantage of living and running a business in a regional area for me. Living in a small town, I don't have to worry about commuting. I've also been able to access affordable coworking.

One reason I started my business was being able to get involved in the community. The advantages of working from home mean I have time to do this, and the networks I've made have also supported my business.



Presenting to the RDA B2B Group

Start small and grow

One of the benefits of starting a regional business is that you can start small. You're not competing against hundreds of other people doing the same thing.

You can also tap into the support offered by organisations like RDA, local chambers of commerce and local council. Having a small, local community is a great way to workshop and test ideas.

Serving a niche

Some copywriters niche or specialise in an industry or type of copy, but my location is my niche.

Starting out, I was happy to work for anyone that would pay me. But I soon realised that I could do my best work for female founders and family-owned businesses.

More recently, I've focused on female founders and family-owned businesses in rural and regional areas.

That doesn't mean I won't work with someone based in a city. But now I can target my marketing and networking to reach people in regional and rural Australia.

And if you're wondering why? Well, I figure it's just one way I can support businesses outside cities. I also love the stories behind these businesses and meeting the people running them.

Over to you

I hope you've enjoyed this blog post. If you know someone doing business, or planning to start a business in regional or rural Australia, I'd love you to share this with them.