

Blazing trails in info-tech

Since taking over as majority owner of Voyager I.T., Suzanne McGann has polished her company's image to draw more customers to its Web-site and data expertise.

"I want Voyager to become the online branding company for the Twin Cities," she says.

BY LESLIE BROOKS SUZUKAMO
Pioneer Press

Upon joining Voyager I.T. six years ago, Suzanne McGann remembers being bowled over by the Web design company's technical expertise. But its fashion sense, not so much.

For starters, the office's decor was plain pressed-wood furniture. The business cards used clip art of a canoe for a logo. And the workers, all men, broke new ground for defining "business casual" — one wore overalls and kicked off his work boots to pad around in stocking feet all day.

"I remember talking to a friend on the phone that night and I told her, 'I just walked into a frat house masquerading as a company,'" said McGann, now 33.

A true geek might snort at that. But visitors to Voyager I.T.'s office in St. Paul's Lower-town now are greeted by a wood stove and wall art of tree branches in the reception area. The stove and branches are a bit hokey but effectively evoke a Minnesota "Up North" feeling, along with old paintings and graphics of the tough French Canadian explorers from whom the company takes its name.

The canoe logo has been redesigned, and to further reinforce the brand name, reminders of canoes and Voyageurs appear in nearly every room — starting with an extra long, handmade wooden canoe that hangs upside down from the ceiling in the main room.

The makeover is part of McGann's strategy to grow the business by stamping it with a brand that can separate it from the plethora of other Web design and development boutiques in the marketplace.

As the firm's majority owner since 2004, she wants Voyager to present a more polished image to snag midsize clients in the \$40 million annual revenue



Suzanne McGann, majority owner of Voyager I.T., displays some of the company's "Up North" decor. To reinforce the brand name, reminders of canoes and Voyageurs appear in nearly every room — starting with an extra long, handmade wooden canoe that hangs upside down from the ceiling in the main room.

range. Some of Voyager's clients include Minnesota envelope magnate and motivational book author Harvey Mackay, the Giant Screen Theater Association and the Saint Paul Capital Fund.

She said Voyager also does more than design Web sites, including working with databases to let a company manage its relationships with its customers. She hopes that breadth of expertise can overcome client worries that the firm might be too small to compete against mega-marketing and advertising firms.

"I want Voyager to become the online branding company for the Twin Cities," McGann said.

McGann's marketing-heavy approach is a little unconventional for information technology, but so is she. The daughter of a Marine, she grew up in Fairfax, Va., and planned early on to become a pastor because she was attracted to the idea of running something. She completed nearly all the work for a master of divinity degree from Luther Seminary but finished with a master of arts. She got a job in 1996 at the University of Minnesota doing programming and administrative work for the Lutheran Campus Ministry.

"I grew up in traditional military towns. The women that I knew were teachers, nurses and stay-at-home military moms. I don't believe that I had even met a 'career-business-owner woman' until I was already an owner at Voyager. I think that I grabbed at the chance to be a pastor because I could identify the pieces as being a good fit for my skills," she said.

But then she discovered the Internet in 1996 and left the non-profit world to join Jeane



This hand-painted logo greets customers when they walk in to the offices of Voyager I.T. in downtown St. Paul.

Thorne Inc., the office support agency, where she worked with a marketing team that helped businesses design Web sites.

One of her vendors was Voyager I.T., and McGann jumped to Voyager in late 2000 as a project manager.

Founder Dave Peterson, 41, started Voyager in 1996 with business partner Shane Dennis, and they were looking to grow the company when they hired McGann.

But Dennis left the business in 2001 to move to Pipestone, Minn., leaving his share of the business to Peterson. McGann stepped up her contributions as a manager, and as a reward, Peterson gave her 30 percent of the company in 2002.

She got 51 percent in 2004 after Peterson moved with his wife and two small children to a town outside Denver for quality-of-life reasons.

"She had a backbone and she

had ideas and she wasn't scared," Peterson said from his home in Conifer, Colo. Peterson, who retains 49 percent of the business, continues to monitor progress and contribute over the Web.

Despite the changes, the company has grown. Revenue rose from about \$220,000 in 2003 to \$290,000 in 2004, and it climbed again to \$360,000 in 2005, McGann said.

The company is profitable and net income is on track to grow by 50 percent this year, showing McGann's ideas aren't merely cosmetic. She is the enforcer, making sure that projects are on track and that work is properly billed.

She has spent hours at the James J. Hill Reference Library in downtown St. Paul researching local companies that might become clients, hobnobbed with business leaders at Twin Cities Business editorial board meet-

TALK BACK

Know any successful entrepreneurs? Mail your suggestions to Casey Selix, Sunday Business Team Leader, 345 Cedar St., St. Paul, MN 55101, or e-mail sundaybusiness@pioneerpress.com.

ings, and organized an annual summer canoe trip down the St. Croix River for the past four years for area women entrepreneurs.

"These were all Type A type women and the first year, they just took off like crazy down the river," McGann said. She now gives "canoe networking" lessons before each trip to get them to relax a bit. This year's trip was held in June.

Peterson called McGann "the reluctant entrepreneur" and said that making her the boss was a smart move.

"She has a great head for business but I don't think she ever imagined herself as an owner," he said. "I'd rather have 49 percent of a company that Suzanne and I could turn into something than 70 percent of something that would languish."

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WHERE DID THEY GO?

The Business People and Mover columns can be found on Page 2D

FOLLOW-UP

Where are they now?

Name: American Petrographic Services
Business: An engineering firm that determines how structures made of concrete or other rock-based materials fail.

Location: St. Paul

Web site: www.ampetrographic.com

Owner: Scott Wolter, president

Founded: 1990

2005 annual revenue: \$1 million

Profiled: March 6, 2005

Challenge then: To grow the business, which spun off from American Engineering Testing in 1990.

Today: American Petrographic Services and its president, Scott Wolter, have received a lot of publicity since they were profiled last year, but the company hasn't grown much.



Scott Wolter started American Petrographic Services in 1990.

The company received top engineering awards and publicity for its work helping the Las Vegas Police Department identify the body of a young woman who was found dead in a makeshift concrete sarcophagus in the desert.

Separately, Wolter co-authored a book that claims the Kensington Runestone, a stone etched with runic symbols supposedly left near Kensington, Minn., by Vikings, was genuine but that it was left after the Viking era by the Norse relatives of the Knights Templar.

The murder case has not brought in more criminal forensic work, but the runestone book has attracted archeological jobs, Wolter said. He's thinking about starting a separate branch of the company for "archeopetrography," combining archeology and petrography, the study of rock pictures.

Revenue in 2005 hit a ceiling at just over \$1 million, Wolter said. He is changing the workflow to give his staff more autonomy and to avoid a bottleneck where only he or his chief assistant signs off on reports.

— Leslie Brooks Suzukamo

COMPANY SPECS

Name: Voyager I.T.

Business: Designing the look and function of business Web sites.

Location: St. Paul

Web site: www.voyageurit.net

Employees: Six

Revenue: \$360,000 in 2005

Competition: Large advertising and marketing agencies as well as a long list of local Web marketing firms like Ciceron and Web designers like B-Swing and Popular Front.

Challenge ahead: Majority owner Suzanne McGann wants Voyager I.T. to maintain a 20 percent annual revenue growth rate. Eventually, she wants to expand the work force to 20 employees so the company can tackle bigger projects.

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