

# Setting out on a journey of growth

● St. Paul Web design and development firm Voyageur I.T. is charting its course for getting bigger, faster, in a crowd of competitors.

By TODD NELSON  
Special to the Star Tribune

Like the hard-paddling fur traders who inspired her company's name, Voyageur I.T. President and avid canoeist Suzanne McGann has spent plenty of time on the water.

Now McGann is steering Voyageur, a 10-year-old website design and development company based in St. Paul, toward faster growth in a crowded, competitive market.

Her goal is to take Voyageur from a staff of eight and 2005 revenue of \$360,000 to a multi-million-dollar company with more than 20 employees, positioning the firm as an online branding expert and a "creative Web solutions" provider.

To raise the capital the company needs to get there — about \$500,000 "would help a lot," McGann said — she has been studying options ranging from loans to angel investors to a merger or acquisition. That would enable Voyageur to do more of what it already specializes in: website design with an emphasis on online branding, plus site development and hosting. It also handles search-engine optimization, pay-per-click advertising, e-mail marketing and database and e-commerce development.

"We don't have that sexy business plan where there's the widget that's going to make us rich," said McGann, whose clients have included Buffalo Wild Wings, Holiday Inn Express and the Science Museum of Minnesota. "It's just hard-core service work."

Experienced in guiding canoe trips as well as in surfing, sailing and white-water rafting, McGann takes the voyageur theme to heart. She wants employees to work hard, use their skills to navigate difficult stretches and have fun on summer trips she organizes for them on the St. Croix River.

McGann also hosts yearly, invitation-only "Ladies Voyageur Day" canoe trips on the St. Croix for female business owners and executives.

At Voyageur I.T., McGann said, a recent push involves working with larger firms as a managed service provider. As such, instead of just launching sites as one-time efforts, Voyageur makes regular updates to optimize a site's search-engine ranking and to maintain pay-per-click ad programs.

Setting her company apart from most competitors is the ability of Voyageur designers to both design and to build the technical underpinnings of the sites they create, McGann said. That helps avoid glitches that can occur when separate



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Further, McGann said, a couple of Voyageur's designers have obtained certification from Google, giving them access to information that can help clients' sites achieve high rankings on the giant Internet search engine.

Over the years, Voyageur has gone from simply launching websites for companies to demonstrating that "we can build better companies that can bring better revenues in through their websites," McGann said. "Really, we're building your business and the website is the vehicle."

#### Overhauling Mackay's site

Harvey Mackay, a best-selling business author and nationally syndicated columnist based in the Twin Cities, hired Voyageur to do a complete overhaul of his website, HarveyMackay.com.

Mackay's new site incorporates online branding, e-commerce and e-mail marketing; more than 200 readers a week sign up at the site to receive his columns. The site recently added podcasts from Mackay and offers more of his writings, said Mackay's assistant, Greg Bailey.

"We're getting very good comments from it," said Bailey, both for its design and ease of use. "Harvey's a big believer in coaching and teaching. ... His website now has a lot free materials for readers."

Joe Ahern, owner of Evergreen Industries in Inver Grove Heights, which manufactures Christmas wreaths and other natural decorations

for fundraising organizations, said that upgrades last year to his company's site, Evergreenindustries.net, had increased its market share.

The upgrades included a retail store that processes wreath orders during the holidays, Ahern said. Voyageur has done a good job of keeping his site near the top on Internet search engines as well, he added.

"It just really produced outstanding results for us," Ahern said of the updated site. "We're anticipating a much busier Christmas season this year."

#### Working with founder

McGann, a North Carolina native who moved to Minnesota in 1994, began working at Voyageur as a project manager in 1999. Three years ago she acquired majority ownership from founder David Peterson, who continues to oversee network administration and other technical aspects of the company.

At 33, McGann stands out as the head of a company in what still is a largely male-dominated field.

She and her husband have a 4-year-old son, and McGann works a four-day week to have time with her family, though she sometimes puts in weekend or early-morning hours at work.

She hit on the idea of holding Ladies Voyageur Day four years ago. Besides canoeing and a gourmet spread, guests take part in some low-key networking. That makes it easier for some to take a day away from work or family, she said.

"The first year it was most-

#### VOYAGEUR I.T.

**Business:** Website design and development firm; also provides online branding, search-engine optimization and pay-per-click advertising services, e-mail marketing, website and e-mail hosting and database and e-commerce development  
**Founded:** 1996

**Headquarters:** St. Paul

**Executives:** Suzanne McGann, owner and president; David Peterson, co-owner and CEO

**Employees:** 8

**2005 revenue:** \$360,000

**Strategy:** Gain more business managing search-engine optimization and other services for client websites, weigh options to finance faster growth

ly about seeing some of my colleagues burning out and realizing we needed to get away for a day," McGann said.

Her background was in marketing, working with billboards, radio, classified ads and other components for administrative staffing provider Jeane Thorne Inc. in St. Paul. McGann also took an early interest in the Internet as well, coming up with a website for the company that included a shopping cart for jobs.

That combination explains how she came to be running what she calls "a creative I.T. company, merging creative and the Internet."

"We've made that line now where I think the whole company of Voyageur is easily the director of Internet strategies for the [client] company," McGann said. "We're still doing the tactical, but we're also giving them the leadership."

**The expert says:** Bhabani Misra, director of graduate programs in software in the College of Business at the University of St. Thomas, said Voyageur I.T. has strong growth po-

tential because demand for its core services most likely will rise. However, Misra said, competition for new business will be fierce because of the number of companies, particularly larger ones, offering some of the same services.

Positioning itself as a "creative Web solutions provider" that offers a broader range of services than more specialized competitors helps to differentiate Voyageur and boosts its potential to grow, Misra said. Having designers who also build clients' websites and staff members with Google certification to aid in optimizing clients' sites on search engines are pluses for Voyageur.

Voyageur's promising outlook for growth and its differences from competitors are likely to make it attractive for investors, but getting financing also is highly competitive in the industry, Misra said.

Todd Nelson is a freelance writer in Woodbury who also has written for the St. Paul Pioneer Press and the Raleigh News & Observer.