

■ November Business Profile

VoyageurWeb a long way from its basement beginnings

Web consulting firm helps others improve their business processes

By Cathy Jones
Photos By John Cross

A 15-year business anniversary may not seem like a big event compared to many longtime area businesses that have operated for many decades.

But a 15-year anniversary for an Internet business is significant — it likely means it's doing things right.

VoyageurWeb began in July 1993 as Internet Connections in the basement of Dale and Yvonne Karsten's home with one computer, four phone lines and four modems. During the years it has evolved from a local Internet service provider to a business providing Web site design and hosting for nationwide and international clients. But it's not just about making a Web site pretty; it's about functionality and making a business more successful, using a Web site as a tool.

"Web sites are more like new offices, new locations, brochures or, when used for efficiency rather than sales, they are new ways to streamline communication or new machines that make your work go faster at higher quality," said owner Yvonne Cariveau (formerly Karsten).

Having a marketing background, being a part of the business world first, and learning the technology over the years as the business grew has enabled Cariveau to differentiate VoyageurWeb from the competition. Any number of computer-savvy people or businesses can design or host a Web site, but Cariveau said she interviews a client to learn about its business and what its needs are.

Laura Dhuyvetter, owner of St. Peter business Laura's Candy, has been working with VoyageurWeb for two years, revamping its Web site to improve its appearance and the payment/shopping cart system, replacing PayPal with Authorize.net. "I think it's now an easier process to place an order



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on our Web site," Dhuyvetter said.

Cariveau offers examples of how online forms can help businesses by saving time and money. Scholarship America used to process thousands of students' paper applications. Developing a Web-based "e-application" allowed it to cut labor costs significantly during a seven-year period.

Said Scholarship Management Services Director Jodi Bruns, "Voyageur Web continues to work with Scholarship Management Services to enhance our products, making them more user friendly and technically savvy. Their customer service and technical support has been top-notch, which has been invaluable to us as we work through needs of sponsors and students."

Manufacturer SPX/OTC Tools had been hiring an outside firm to enter into a database the information gleaned from product registration cards, but the database was not being used. Developing an online product-registration system allowed the business to eliminate thousands of dollars of annual data entry cost and make marketing to that customer list much easier.

"That system was set up with an administrative back end so that they could pull out that data easily and use it," Cariveau



Yvonne Cariveau talks over a project with manager Bridget Norland.

said. "Their product managers and marketing people now have easy access to search that data and pull out whatever kind of mailing list they'd like, to do e-mail campaigns or print mailings."

Voyageur also can help businesses keep documentation on multiple sites organized and existing sites maintained and managed.

"Businesses now are creating sites for specific products or geared to particular audiences," Cariveau said. "Most organizations we take care of have more than one Web site now. Some have many."

She said 2008 so far has been one of VoyageurWeb's best years for sales. "Gas prices help us, I think. People want to use the Internet to transact business because it doesn't require gas or time. We can create Web sites that help people collaborate more easily — sharing files and ideas."

Internally, the company has saved many of its employees (it has the equivalent of 10 full-time people) money and time as well, allowing them to work from home. Some work from home a few days per month, others most days. Contrary to popular business myth, it has even increased workers' productivity, she said.

"We began allowing telecommuting about five years ago. I had a staff person I didn't want to lose that was moving to the Twin Cities. He hardly ever met with clients, so we set up a secure connection for him to be able to get into our network and work from his apartment," she said.

"Telecommuting cuts chit-chat, since it's mostly typed on IM (instant messenger) and you don't have those over-

heard/over the shoulder conversations that one gets drawn into. People are in an environment where they are comfortable, at home, and it's quiet.

"Also, when telecommuting my staff gain some of their day back — no dressing for work, no driving, less snow shoveling, fewer trips to the gas station, cleaners, etc. So they are more rested, balanced and less harried just trying to keep up with everything. That translates into them being a little quicker mentally, a little more creative at problem solving, and all those little bits add up."

They communicate internally by instant messenger when they need to ask quick questions of one another, and they track their time in a project management system that lets everyone know what's been completed and what's in the works on anyone's desk at any particular time. They can have face-to-face meetings online through a Web and phone video conferencing system that also allows them to see each other's computer desktops when they collaborate.

She also enjoys the flexibility herself. "Instead of a driven, high-stress corporate job or working for someone else, I have the ability to set my own hours, work on projects I want to work on and pass on projects that I don't want to work on," she said. "I get to work with talented people from a variety of different disciplines, and I get to learn about tons of other businesses and help lots of people to reduce their stress and make their businesses work better. It's the best."

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