

Neil Hartling and Nahanni River Adventures win the big chair

“Anytime I get a big idea, it costs me a lot of money.”

The “Yahoo! Big Idea Chair,” is awarded annually for the best travel-related website in Canada. Sponsored by Yahoo! Canada and the Canadian Tourism Commission, the award – which comes with a Dr. Seussian purple comfy chair – is coveted by ad agencies around the world. Nahanni.com was built and is maintained by Outcrop Yukon. (Disclaimer, Outcrop is the sister company of Up Here Publishing, publisher of this magazine.) Hartling has long been recognized as a leader in Internet adaptation.

■ Back in the mid-1990s the Yukon recognized that the Internet was a good solution for the problems of distance and costly communication that we face in the North. It was a great levelling tool: There was government support for infrastructure that allowed small communities to get online whereas similar communities down south were taking longer. We saw the value of it too, and compared to many of our competitors were an early adopter.

■ My first experience with the Web was at a trade show. I thought I was buying myself a website but my understanding was so crude that really what I was buying was an ad on somebody else’s website. For a number of months I thought we were up to date and ahead of the trend. Then one day in the mid-1990s Yukon Tourism had arranged for one of their ad agency people to speak to the wilderness tourism association about marketing and he asked over a coffee break, “Neil, do you have a website?” and I said, “Oh yes, we have a website,” so he asked, “What’s the URL?” and I said, “What’s that?” and he said, “The name of it,” and I said, “Well, it’s a bunch of numbers and slashes and so forth

and I couldn’t tell you,” and he goes, “Who has nahanni.com?” and I said, “What’s that?” and he said, “You should have it, let me check.”

■ It began to unfold rapidly from there, and I became a convert quickly. At the time I was on a marketing committee with the Canadian Tourism Commission. Around the table were a lot of the heavyweights like car rental agencies and hotels and I was saying, “The CTC has to get a web

presence,” and these marketing professionals were talking about it as though it was quite an annoyance and a distraction and a fad and were basically hoping it would go away before they had to waste any time on it.

That was another reason it was so great to receive the Yahoo! Big Idea Chair: Truly, back then, our modest little Northern tourism company was ahead of Air Canada, Hertz and CP Hotels. They didn’t want to have anything to do with it.

■ The one thing we’ve been successful with is steadily revising and redoing the site, whether it be with new tools or new information pieces for our guests, to give it extra depth and make it more of a resource for people rather than just advertising. Our clientele are generally well-educated, curious people. Their holiday is as much a learning experience as it is a travel event and they like lots of information, so there’s a lot of background information and other research that people love to sink their teeth into. In the past, disseminating that info was financially and environmentally costly because of all the printed material we’d mail around. Now I can see our typical guest, sitting at work, looking around furtively, and then going into some part of the site and daydreaming about their trip to come.

■ I know the Web is so important to our guests and so it’s very important for us to keep it fresh and keep it avant-garde. Guests now show up for our trips quite a bit more informed and prepared than they would have been in the past. That enhances their experience with us because they’re starting out at a higher level.

■ The chair is now in my living room and my wife has suggested that it’s so impressive and imposing that it probably needs another home, like the garage. I’ve avoided sitting in it too much because it’s the “big idea” chair and anytime I get a big idea, it costs me a lot of money. 📌

■ Neil Hartling was an early adopter of computer technology, and continues to use it to level the playing field for his Whitehorse-based tourism company, Nahanni River Adventures.



CATHIE ARCHIBOLD