

COMPANY USES HISTORY AS PATH TO SUCCESS

Research experience, tech assets make firm market leader

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By Mike McLeod

Fred Hosking has always been a history guy. His parents, both teachers, fostered a young Hosking's interest with frequent trips to Canadian and U.S. historical monuments and battle sites. Still, when he majored in history and later completed a master's degree, Hosking never envisioned himself as an entrepreneur.

"Work as a teacher, get a PhD, go to law school or work for government; those are the four big career paths for history majors," he says. "I never took it with the idea of starting a company."

That was then. Today, Fred Hosking, president of Public History Inc., heads what he calls North America's largest historical research firm. With more than 75 employees, the 10-year-old Ottawa-based company typically handles upward of 40 research projects simultaneously, some of which can last for more than four years and encompass tens of thousands of historical documents. To date, Public History has completed approximately 800 research projects.

"We are the ones who go out and do the digging, find the information, pull it together and deliver it to the client in some semblance of order," Hosking says.

Typically that client is involved in litigation, the outcome of which depends on historical documents. At other times, Public History is called upon to help clarify land-claim issues between First Nations and one or more levels of government.

"The federal government comprises slightly more than 50 per cent of our business," Hosking says. "Provinces account for about 15 per cent, while First Nations, corporations and law firms are just slightly less than that."

Size has its advantages, but Gwen Reimer, senior consultant with Praxis Research Associates, says it is Public History's accumulated technical assets and research experience that set the company apart.

"Public History has an excellent capacity for archival data collection," says Reimer, whose Ottawa-based company conducts social science research, including historical studies.

"They have both the human and techno - logical resources to create truly huge databases - 20,000 entries or more - of archival material. That scope of data collection and management is beyond the scope of smaller firms."

In addition to its sizable IT assets, Public History's three floors of offices also house the company's registered special collections library, which contains 7,500 rare and one-of-a-kind volumes of historical Canadiana.

"As a company with a registered collection library, we can do interlibrary loans with libraries across the country - another advantage we have over individuals or consultants," Hosking says.

The story of Public History's past almost rivals its present. After graduating from the University of Waterloo in 1994, Hosking contracted with the Department of Indian Affairs doing land-claim research. There he met the company's future co-founders: Eric Angel, Gerard Hartley and Shelley Garr (Garr is no longer with the firm).

"We chatted away and realized that, given the situation with Aboriginal litigation, we could probably do land claims for the rest of our lives as individual contract workers," he says. "But we figured it would be a lot more interesting, challenging and fun if we formed a company. We took a year getting all our ducks in a row and opened for business in 1995."

A number of factors converged in the mid-1990s that made starting a historical research firm appealing, even though it was virtually unheard

of in Canada at the time, Hosking says. In the early 1990s, the number of class-action litigation cases rose significantly. Around the same time, the federal and provincial governments slashed their budgets, and historical work that had been handled in-house was outsourced.

"In addition, the big Aboriginal litigation cases really started arriving in mid- '90s," Hosking says. "They all needed historical research."

Slowly, the company gathered speed, accumulating clients and larger projects. In 1998, the company opened an office in Winnipeg, not only to have a western presence separate from Ottawa, but also to take better advantage of the city's extensive Hudson's Bay Co. collection. Along with an expanded presence came recognition by the business community.

In 2000, Public History was nominated for the Ernst and Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award.

"Once we got going and established a reputation for the quality of our work, it started to flow," Hosking says. "That afforded us the opportunity to do research in other fields like health-product liability and cross-border trade disputes."

While many of the clients are involved in some form of litigation, Hosking is quick to point out that his firm isn't in the business of crafting history for the client's benefit; it simply presents what exists. In fact, Public History may find historical information that hurts a client's case.

"That happens all the time, but our clients know that going in," Hosking says, adding that the company has strict confidentiality and conflict-of-interest policies that preclude it from representing more than one side of a case.

"We just present the information. It is the client's job to figure out what it means for their side."

Looking to the future, Hosking says Public History will continue on its current course of steady, manageable growth.

"At our last annual meeting, we did an estimate that the value of our industry on a yearly basis is about \$125 million," he says. "Not the billions of other industries, but when you are looking at a \$125-million pool and we are doing \$5 million, there is a lot of room for growth."

As far as new offices, Hosking says Vancouver may be a possibility at some point, but expansion into the United States is out of the question, because that country isn't capitalist enough. At least, not when it comes to his industry.

"From what I've heard from people ... the American market is like a socialist paradise for our type of work," he says, adding that the U.S. government imposes strict profit and employment-related constraints on private contractors.

"It's just not worth it for an outsider to learn a system that is so restricted in terms of how you do business."

These days, Hosking says he spends 100 per cent of his time on corporate development, but the challenge of grappling with the present and future more than makes up for no longer paging through history one document at a time.

"Running a business is always stressful, but it gets more so as you become more successful," he says.

"As the business gets bigger, and you have 70 employees and they are buying homes and cars and raising families, the greater the responsibility you feel toward them."