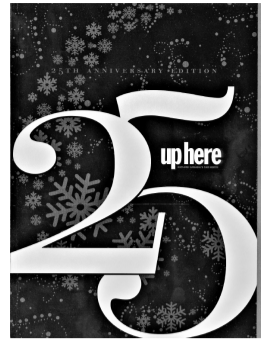


25 years of northern stories for southern readers



BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

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News Reporter

Forget gold, diamonds and wild game — the North's best export is its stories.

And Up Here magazine has been making a business of it for 25 years.

Marion Lavigne and Ronne Hemming began publishing Up Here in 1984 out of Yellowknife. The entrepreneurial pair were into book publishing at the time and decided to start a magazine about northerners, but aimed at southerners.

"A lot of people were starting to hear about the North and (Up Here) was to try and tell them about it," said Lavigne, the magazine's cofounder and owner.

The easiest part has always been finding stories.

"There's a never ending-supply of material across all of the territories," she said.

The everyday and mundane aspects of life in the North can appear exotic to a reader in downtown Toronto.

"We all joke about the fact that the one question we're asked whenever someone calls us is, what's the temperature up there?" she said.

"We've done a number of stories about living in the cold, about what people don't know about until they live here. (They're stories) about plugging your cars in and about dressing for the cold," she said.

With the fall of Arctic in Colour magazine in the early 1980s, originally published by the government of the Northwest Territories, the duo senses a lucrative vein in the storytelling market.

"Arctic in Colour disappeared and so we decided the North really needed a magazine to go to southern Canada and beyond, so we said, why not start one?" said Lavigne.

The market has also been about exploiting the gap between another of Canada's two solitudes, the North and South.

"The primary audience that was being targeted is not a northern audience," said Lavigne. Up Here has its subscription base in southern Canada and the United States, she said. It's the first magazine to cover all three northern territories and it finds itself as the de facto cultural newsletter for Canadians who can't help but see the North as white, cold and flat.

"It's a magazine about northern history, natural history, travel, lifestyle, people," she said. "It's designed to tell and give an impression of the North today in a very credible fashion."

Up Here began with 3,000 paid subscribers but has now grown to about 20,000, she said.

The challenges of running a magazine in the North sound like the standard list of any business trying to make a buck in the territories. There was trouble finding staff and setting up initial capital, she said.

But the bread and butter of the publishing business — the stories — were never hard to find.

"(One of the things) people really like in the South is what kind of houses do we live in the North," she said. "Sometimes we do it on really funky houses, sometimes on grand houses."

"And whoever hears about heat tape



Pat Kane/Up Here

NORTHERN FLAIR... Marion Lavigne and Ronne Hemming began publishing Up Here magazine out of Yellowknife in 1984.

down south?" she said, stressing the point that the North's usual is someone else's unusual. "We do those kinds of stories because its informative and entertaining and it gives people an idea of what it's like to live up here."

While writing for southerners does mean providing a little more background and context than northerners might appreciate, the audiences aren't too different, she said.

"There are some stories that obviously northerners know about that we may put in for the South. What we've found is that generally, what people in the South are interested in, people in the North are happy to read too."

"On the other hand, our most severe critics are northerners," she said. "If we don't say something quite right or if we make a suggestion it's usually northerners that will say, 'That isn't how it works.'"

"We have to be very careful about what we say. We can't make grandiose statements that we can't back up."

The magazine is published by Up Here Publishing, which also publishes books and Up Here Business magazine. Lavigne and Hemming jointly run their marketing and communications company, Outcrop Communications.

"Ronne and I are the ones who connect all the companies," said Lavigne.

When you're far from North America's big publishing markets, getting your message out is the biggest part of the game.

"We started out (by trying to get paid subscriptions down South) and we've learned a lot in the last 25 years," she said.

"This can range from the individual subscribers in Toronto or Vancouver, to even a subscriber like doctors' and dentists' offices."

On top of being in the North, maga-

zines generally need to be aggressive in the subscription game.

"Magazines have to invest ongoing dollars to continue to get more subscribers," she said. "We're always doing additional marketing to try and get more and more paid subscribers. We have a renewal rate of 65 per cent, which is pretty high for a magazine."

Their mantra is 'be profitable so that you can keep on going,' she said. And that means continuously upgrading the magazine.

"When I look back at those first issues, we certainly have improved the quality of the magazine. It's much slicker with better paper."

The magazine has won its fair share of awards. It won the Best Magazine Award in the Western Magazine Awards in the early 1990s and has won it again a few times since, she said.

Lavigne was also the recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award for her work with Up Here.

But nothing gets attention like scandalous publicity. Recently, the magazine made headlines in the Globe and Mail and the Toronto Star with what Lavigne calls the "famous bare bum story."

One of the magazines staff writers, Tim Querengesser, wrote a story on nude hiking in the Yukon, she said.

"We had a picture taken from behind of a man with tape on the bum. It caused quite a ripple, especially with the in-flight edition (which is featured on Canadian North flights.)"

The magazine was forced to retract and reprint for the in-flight edition

"We got great publicity," she said. "A negative became a positive for us, although it did cost us a fair amount to reprint."

When Up Here began, it published six times a year and now comes out eight times annually. The hope is to publish once a month in the future and to hit the magical 50,000 print copies in order to get more southern advertisers. It now prints 30,000 copies.

"It something you have to gradually do unless you win the lottery," said Lavigne.

"The advertising field is small," she said. "If you put all the territories together it doesn't even come near to the size of Vancouver."

Along with getting more advertisers, publishers of Up Here are aiming to win national magazine awards and hoping to, one day, have their publication crowned best magazine in the country.

It might be a long shot, but it's the kind of long-term dreaming that any entrepreneur has to have to do business in the North.

Global warming, pipelines, diamond drilling and the North's job potential are all creating a great interest in the region, a lot more than what it was 25 years ago, said Lavigne. As Canada and the world turn their eyes upward, the market of northern stories for southern readers keeps growing.

"There's a certain hunger for things up North and we want to be at the vanguard of that," she said.

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