

Entrepreneur of the Month

Rah Trost, Owner and Manager, Great Northern Adventures

Home: Marquette, Michigan
Age: 45
Education: M.S., Public Administration and Recreation Resource Administration, North Carolina State University, 1989
B.A., Sociology, Michigan State University, 1983

Business: Great Northern Adventures
Primary service: GNA specializes in outdoor adventure trips in Michigan's Upper Peninsula
Employees: 1 full-time, 7-10 contract employees

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Business Grows from Passion for Place

By Lisa Bauer

At 10 years old, Rah Trost moved with her family from Detroit to Marquette, in the sparsely populated Upper Peninsula (UP) of Michigan.

“Coming from a city, I was shocked there was only one radio station. And I wondered why we would move here,” she said.

But it didn't take long for her to fall in love with the UP's pristine environment. After spending the rest of her childhood in the area, it became the foundation of her active lifestyle immersed in natural resources.

“I really fell in love with the beauty of this place,” Trost said. She left for 20 years, but, she adds, “For ‘UPers,’ there's always a calling to come back.”

Trost eventually came back to start Great Northern Adventures (GNA), a business that has grown 15 to 20 percent per year since 1997.

GNA Adventures

From her home in Marquette on Lake Superior, Trost talks about her business enthusiastically and nonstop – until her dog Max interrupts by barking at some wildlife.

After leaving Marquette more than 20 years ago, Trost attended Michigan State University and received her sociology degree in 1983. The high unemployment rate in her hometown discouraged her return, so she went on to pursue master's degrees in both public administration and recreation resource administration.

Trost worked in various recreation positions for 15 years. Her professional career includes her position as Director of the Michigan chapter of the Rails-To-Trails Program, work with the Youth Conservation Corp. and with a Michigan touring company.

Returning to the UP for a job as parks and recreation director for the area, Trost decided that -- with all of her experience in the industry -- she could start her own recreation business.

In 1996 she founded Great Northern Adventures (GNA), a company that specializes in outdoor adventure trips in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Located on the shores of Lake Superior in Marquette, GNA is a full service adventure company, offering one- to 10-day guided tours year-round in the UP. Customers can choose a variety of accommodations – from rustic backwoods cabins and backcountry camping sites to deluxe luxury hotels and lodges. With adventures in kayaking, skiing, mountain biking, snowshoeing and even dog sledding, GNA tours include meals, lodging and expert guide service.

“We’re not an ‘extreme’ adventure company,” Trost said, adding that the pace of most tours is leisurely and that her clients are of all ages.

Epitomizing a ‘sense of place,’ Trost has traveled hundreds of hours through the UP to personally design each tour for clients.

“This is my favorite part. It’s a good excuse to just pack up my stuff and goof off,” she said.

The big selling point of her business is its unique brand of ecotravel. Trost defines ecotravel as providing customers with a broad travel experience rather than a site-specific tour, raising consciousness about the environment, supporting local economies and educating customers.

“Everything we do is very conscious of our local area,” Trost said. “We operate ‘silent sports’ (non-motorized touring that doesn’t adversely affect the environment), and we also try as much as possible to return revenues to local businesses, for instance by staying at locally owned inns.”

Trost is a true believer in educational tours as a way to perpetuate a healthy environment. For example, she teams with the University of Michigan to allow MBA candidates in leadership development programs to develop adventure-based learning experiences for groups of classmates. And her tours with the Nature Conservancy include expertise of a naturalist.

Trost’s customers not only experience the great outdoors, but Trost’s favorite tours include participant bonding, such as a group of women celebrating their 50th birthdays with a GNA tour.

“The camaraderie in these specialized tours is great,” Trost said. “People can come out into this beautiful landscape and just have fun and celebrate themselves.”

Adventures in Business

The sole proprietor of GNA, Trost began her business modestly, without borrowing much money and by contracting for all equipment, such as kayaks. But, as predicted by her thorough market research, the business took off and grew 15 to 20 percent each year.

Before starting GNA, Trost did her homework. She knew that the abundance of public land and land owned by logging and mining businesses but still accessible to the

public, would provide her with a solid business base. But was there a market for travel to the UP?

Working with a Michigan State University recreation think tank, Trost found there was a large and growing market for ecotourism. She also interviewed a wide variety of people – from government officials to chamber of commerce leaders – and studied state and national recreation trends. All signs pointed to a positive end result for her adventure business.

She tapped a local nonprofit group supporting entrepreneurs – Northern Initiatives – for additional business support. Trost took business courses from Northern Initiatives and benefited from one-on-one counseling for her business and marketing plans.

“Working with Northern Initiatives saved me a tremendous amount of time,” Trost added. “They provided lots of good contacts and most importantly they were a clearinghouse for helpful information.”

Her background research and planning paid off.

In her first year of operation, Trost estimated taking 100 clients on tour. Last year, she and her guides helped 400 to 600 clients explore the UP.

“I love this work. That’s what really keeps me going,” Trost said. “And the markets have been really good.”

Trost, as the sole administrator at GNA, does marketing, public relations, accounting, scheduling and trip design. And, she added that her organizational skills, time management, and attention to detail all help the business grow.

“I talk to customers, I take credit card numbers, I put tour packets together,” she said. “And occasionally I actually get to go on tour!”

Modern-Day Marketing and Community Connections

To advertise GNA, Trost’s best tools include the Internet and travel writers.

“To be honest, the Internet is the greatest marketing tool that I have. This business might not work without it,” she said, adding that the website provides a “storefront” that she doesn’t have in Marquette.

The GNA website includes background information on the company and staff, details about activities and tours, GNA policies and a place to print out a tour register form.

Trost contracts with a web designer but provides all writing and editing for the site, which she insists on keeping current.

Travel stories also boost advertising for Trost, who benefited from her relationship with a travel writer from the *The Detroit Free Press*. The in-flight magazine for Northwest Airlines has also featured GNA.

“We’ve always operated on a shoestring budget,” Trost said, “so these travel stories and relationships with writers are important.”

A naturally social person, Trost has also benefited from developing relationships with numerous organizations and agencies. For example, she works with the Audubon Society, Nature Conservancy, Sierra Club and the National Wildlife Federation to help sponsor tours.

It’s a win-win partnership that provides organization members with high-quality, educational outdoor adventures and brings Trost national advertising and recognition.

Trost is also a member of local and regional recreation/tourism organizations, such as serving on a committee developing greenway trails on the Lake Superior Partnership – a regional economic development group.

“Contributing to the trails initiative is something I really believe in,” Trost said. “It’s good for my business, but more important it promotes a healthy lifestyle and it can boost our local economy.”

Down the Road

In the UP, the economy has shifted from extractive industries, such as mining and logging, to tourism. More people are bringing more dollars to make up for lost revenue in older industries.

Trost sees nothing but positive impacts and results from GNA’s brand of environmentally sensitive tourism in the future.

“As the business grows, so do my ideas,” she said, adding that there is room for expansion and, “I’d like to see the business double in five years.”

In the future Trost plans to add more educational tours, more learning experiences and generally continue to share her love of place with a broad audience.

“Lake Superior is a wild body of water. We truly respect it. And this ecosystem – full of bobcats, cougars, black bear, moose and so much other wildlife – is still very pristine,” she said. “I care about my community and want to see this environment protected. I just feel very fortunate to be in this business.”