

MAKING HISTORY A BUSINESS

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By James Elliott

Historians usually earn a living writing books or teaching. But a Grimsby native found a new way. He and his partners formed a rapidly growing private company that does historical research and packages the results for clients ranging from government departments to Indian bands and lawyers.

Try this test. Do a search of the Internet with a good search engine like Google for the phrase history business. It will dutifully fetch up a 10-storey pile of pages, 2.25 million to be precise. Switch the wording around to business history and you'll reel in the same 2.25 million suspects. They all refer to the history of business; there's nary a mention of history as business.

Clearly to the search engine, the two terms are interchangeable, there's no such thing as the history business.

Hmmmmmm...

Hardly scientific proof but still an illustration of a widely held view - history and business are unlikely dance partners.

Historians parse the innards of subjects according to some arcane code to which only the elect are privy. They comb libraries, old newspapers and dusty old documents in archives for information and after suitably Solomonic deliberations, present the results to the great unwashed.

Historians are the last of the hermetically sealed professions. Business moves at the speed of light, history, something closer to the Hubbard Glacier.

Most historians' idea of high-tech is a ballpoint pen. If ever there was a field ripe for cyber-organization, it's historical research. Think of the archives as a vast beach and the conventional researcher armed with a tiny shovel sifting sand into a softer and scribbling notes on the back of an

envelope. Contrast that to the possibilities of a front-end loader and a G4 laptop.

Business is business, conducted according to the fluid precepts of commerce – practical, quantitative, mercantile. History is plodding, methodical and highly idiosyncratic.

Never the twain shall meet.

Or at least so we thought. Fred Hosking, however, is determined to change all that.

Eight years ago, the Grimsby native was facing a familiar dilemma for prospective university graduates – what to do for a living? Offers were limited, prospects were few.

Today he heads up the largest historical research firm of its kind in the land with 45 employees in two offices – Ottawa and Winnipeg – an impressive track record of over 350 projects and a reputation as the guys who can wrangle herds of outwardly disparate documents – milk them, coax them, winkle out their content – and distil the results into something portable and potable.

He has taken a hidebound profession and dragged it astonished into the 21st Century.

Rewind back to 1993. Hosking was four years into a five year honours history degree at the University of Waterloo and openings for historians were not exactly begging. Positions with the federal government had dried up and there were no teaching jobs.

Hosking had no clear idea what he wanted to do but the university's innovative co-op program, in which students spend half their time on job placements in the real world, offered at least a hint – it wasn't inside academia.

That and a scholarship convinced Hosking to take his masters in public history – one of the few such courses available in Canada.

The course, Hosking says, "is for individuals who have a historical background but don't want to do the traditional academic/teaching/federal government route. It's basically history that's applicable to the public at large as opposed to academic where the focus is much more narrow."

The program evolves from the novel notion that historians can be entrepreneurs.

For Hosking, the true epiphany came in the job placements. Most had little or nothing to do with history though they were useful exposures to business and management styles and the innovative use of computers. Then there was a particular placement with the federal Department of Indian Affairs.

"It was my first experience in doing that sort of historical research, working in archives, doing analysis with a purpose in mind. Not just writing a paper about something for an intellectual purpose, it was writing it because a First Nation believed it had a land claim and you're there to determine whether or not the historical facts support their allegations."

It was, he remembers, "a great experience."

For his masters cognate, or mini-thesis, Hosking arranged with a First Nation band near Sudbury to do land claim research and writing. Not only did it fulfill his MA cognate obligations but it was also submitted as a land claim to the Department of Indian Affairs on behalf of the land.

Suddenly the way to the future became crystal clear.

A year's contract work after graduation with the Department of Indian Affairs completed the necessary education.

"It allowed me to see that, wow, the way research was done in the early '90s could easily be changed and transformed."

How archaic was the process?

"They were still using typewriters, labels were handwritten, maps hand drawn."

The cyber revolution, by and large, had passed historians by. It was time to catch up.

Hosking kicked the idea around with some of his fellow consultants and it quickly became apparent an extraordinary opportunity was staring them in the face. Archival research was a kind of cottage industry, the work performed largely by individuals on their way to somewhere else. The typical researcher was either a former or future civil servant who did the work as a sideline or a hobby.

What Hosking and his partners recognized was a unique opportunity to marry systematic efficiencies of modern business practice to the insights and discipline of a trained historian and produce a model that was faster, stronger and more productive.

"We decided we wanted to be a business and take a professional approach. We're not doing it because we want to be civil servants and are just biding our time till there's opportunities to teach. No, this is a career."

With two other like-minded history grads and a sociology major also from Grimsby, Shelly Garr, Hosking founded the aptly named Public History. The partners kicked in \$4,000 each, a bank loan added another \$12,000.

They did all the things one normally associates with starting a conventional business but are rarely associated with history. They looked at the structure of law firms, accounting firms and architectural firms and stole what was useful. They spent several months developing a business plan and running projections.

"We wanted to be as solid as any other business would be."

Public History opened the Ottawa office in January 1996. The first contract came a month later. By the end of the year staff had doubled, by the end of the second year the ink was black, by the end of the fourth year a second office opened in Winnipeg.

Hosking's hunch about opportunities has paid off. Public History's one-stop shopping approach struck a chord in both the public and private sectors.

Where the conventional image of historical research is usually closer to the stool clerks in Scrooge's office with dip pens and fingerless gloves, Hosking's persona as confident master of technology found a ready market.

Increasingly, he is approached by firms looking for management of the whole package - research, analysis and report writing - in land claims and litigation support.

A typical case might involve a residential school lawsuit filed against the Department of Indian Affairs on behalf of aboriginals who attended the church-run schools.

"Before they can decide whether to settle out of court or deny it and fight it, they need to bring someone like us on board to do the archival research and document organization."

The work of slogging through the archives is the same for Public History employees as for any other researcher, except that the PH employees do it with a specific purpose in mind and in teams. It's what they do with the information afterwards that brings current technology and business methods into play.

An example was a lawyer Hosking cites who said: "My client's got 10,000 documents in boxes and I go to court in six weeks. I need you to put a team together who know what they're doing. I need it all organized, labelled, photocopied and indexed into a data base so when I go to court I can just walk in with a CD-ROM."

Another litigation project PH has taken on for the federal department of justice involves a team of eight researchers and could run as long as five years.

"They didn't want a bunch of individuals working together on it, they wanted a team. (They said) "You do everything - making sure quality control is there from beginning to end."

The company's success so far, Hosking says, depends on low-profile footslogging.

"We'd rather not be the expert witness in court. We're the ones behind the scenes. The work is very attention-to-detail oriented and it's not flashy. Everything you write has to be very strongly supported by historical document."

Of the staff of 45, three quarters have history backgrounds - BAs, MAs, or PhDs - the rest have degrees in political science, anthropology or sociology. All are strong on the computer side.

The work attracts a certain personality type, Hosking says. "You really have to enjoy it. If you're someone who enjoys flash and profile - it isn't going to turn you on."

Hosking recognizes the continuing success of his firm depends on maintaining its integrity and dedication to the discipline of history. That means you don't cherry pick your results to please the client.

"We're not an advocacy firm; we're going to give you everything we find whether you're going to like it or not. You have to have a reputation for objectivity in your research."

Certainly clients like what they hear. Their numbers include Correctional Service Canada, Department of Justice, First Nations, the Ontario Attorney General, the Law Reform Commission of Canada as well as prominent law firms.

In the early days, Hosking says a good contract was "any contract" but now they start around \$5,000 and have gone as high up as \$750,000, an impressive figure considering the ground PH occupies is terra incognita to many historians in Canada who regard their approach with suspicion.

"It varies," Hosking says, "some are supportive, others just ignore us entirely and others just don't get it."

"They ask, are you making any money?"

"Well, duh, if we weren't making money we wouldn't be doing it, you know what I mean? We're a business."

Hosking is aware his adherence to foreign issues such as deadlines and profitability affords him black sheep status in the academic history community but he makes no apologies.

Take a tenured history professor, he says, who has been around for 20 or 25 years, "you look at their publication list, it's like one or two things. They're only teaching a couple of classes a semester and you wonder what is it exactly that they're doing. Whereas with us, it's five years and we've already done over 350 projects."

And just to drive the point home that there's life – flourishing and prospering – outside of academia for historians, Hosking expects PH to keep adding staff as business grows. In fact, he predicts that within a couple years PH will be hiring more historians than all of the universities in Ontario combined.