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Interactive Design Shop Summit Projects Thrives in Small Town through Innovative Approach to Staffing, Appeal to Lifestyle Professionals

HOOD RIVER, Ore. (March 23, 2011) — After years in the urban fast lane of print advertising with Outside and Summit magazines, Craig Sabina found himself looking for quality of life about the same time windsurfing had captured his attention, and this thing called the Internet was poking its head above ground.

A vacation trip to Hood River, Ore., showed him his future home. A phone call from a former colleague who had gone to work with Nike showed him his future business. Sabina in 1995 leapt from print to digital, starting Summit Projects an hour down the freeway from Portland in the heart of the Columbia River Gorge. Today, his successful web marketing company is just one of several small technology companies that have found a fruitful fit a bit upstream from the mainstream.

Portland gets its raves, but Hood River is no slouch, annually ranking on one or more “best” lists.

“The music, dining and cultural opportunities out here are unbelievable for a place this size,” Sabina says. “Sure the wind sports are great here, but there's boating, kayaking, skiing, snowboarding -- and the fishing is unbelievable. And there is so much hiking, biking and on and on, many, many things to do that don't cost much money.”

So, everything's great, right? Pretty much, but Sabina admits that it's tough luring top digital marketing talent to paradise.

Sabina has resigned himself to what we might call “the 10 percent solution.”

“For every 10 people out there, one of those 10 will come here and go, 'Wow, this is just what I wanted',” Sabina says. “The other nine? You're not going to get them.”

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The 10 percent come to Summit Projects for the chance to balance a private life in the middle of what some call the world's greatest outdoor gym with the professional opportunity to deliver cutting edge digital marketing experiences for clients such as Nike Golf, Buck Knives, Yogi Tea, Lucas Entertainment, Victorinox Swiss Army, and H.K. Anderson gourmet snacks.

“At Summit we get to do challenging work, yet play is still emphasized, accessible, and a priority,” says Kris Reynier, the company's controller. “After work, it's not 'What bar should we go to?' It's 'Where are we going windsurfing, biking, kiting ...? Fill in the blank.’”

Dave Russell, a project manager for 13 years with Summit, is one of the 10 percent. Gladly. He was interested only in windsurfing when he arrived in the mid-1980s. He built a sail-making company, later joined Summit and now favors adventure racing in his spare time.

“It's like a long-distance off-road endurance race,” he says. “It involves kayaking, mountain biking, mountain climbing, ropes, trekking, trail running. The Gorge is the perfect place for that kind of thing.”

Sabina remembers what it was like when, 19 years ago, he chose Hood River over then more-visible outdoors meccas such as Boulder, Colo., and Bishop, Calif. As one of the early freestyle skiers, Sabina had a passion that extended from recreation to business. He wanted a place where he could do both, and Hood River rose to the top during an exhaustive screening of idyllic “lifestyle” destinations that would also be practical places to grow a business with clients almost anywhere.

Because Hood River sits in the middle of a cargo and data transit corridor – a river, and fiber optic backbone, run through it – Sabina says his home is even more fantastic now than it was then. Dozens of small technology companies have located along the Columbia River, or mushroomed in its soil.

Running a business in paradise? That's more complex. As a provider of digital marketing solutions, Sabina relies heavily on technology to link a dispersed team of talented – and equally lifestyle-driven – professionals. Some want to live near the company offices overlooking the quaint main street of Hood River. Some don't.

In the early going, Sabina plucked smart, talented people exclusively from the local labor pool. Like him, they had been drawn to the area for outdoor sports – windsurfing, rafting, kayaking, skiing, mountain biking, climbing. They “got” the lifestyle thing and the web was new to everyone, no matter where you lived.

These days, he must often recruit talent from outside the Gorge. Proximity to Portland's labor pool led Sabina's team to get creative about staffing. Around a solid local core he has plugged in a group of “seven or eight people who commute out every day from Portland in a company van.”

“Some days people work from home,” he says. “And we have contract resources we never see who work completely remotely – by phone, e-mail, IM and so forth.”

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Flexible solutions to flexible times, which allows Sabina to plan for permanence in paradise. He recently rented an additional 4,000 square feet of downtown space, anticipating growth.

Sabina is still skiing and windsurfing, exploring kite boarding “a bit,” and spending a lot of time riding bikes with his kids and playing tennis with his wife, Michelle.

For his business, it's a virtual world. But when it comes to reality, Hood River is still Sabina's one best place.

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