



## Case Study

# Songer Whitewater

Fayetteville, West Virginia  
Susan Hoffstetter, President/CEO

### Profile

Songer Whitewater is an adventure trip outfitter that offers rafting excursions on the New and Gauley Rivers in the Appalachian Mountains of southern West Virginia. They also provide all-inclusive and custom-designed vacation packages that might include add-on adventures, monthly specials, contests, and custom adventure vacation packages. Add-on adventures include rock climbing, horseback riding, ATV trailing, motorcycle cruising, and fishing trips.

Songer Whitewater is one of about 15 whitewater rafting outfitters plying their trade in the New River Gorge area of West Virginia. With so many outfitters concentrated in such a small geographic space, competition is keen, meaning that customers must be king. Songer Whitewater is currently the fourth largest outfitter in the immediate area and also fourth statewide, up from ninth regionally and 12<sup>th</sup> statewide just a few years back. They attribute much of this improvement in their ability to market themselves effectively over the Internet.

### History

Songer Whitewater started in 1978 and has been under the same ownership since 1982 when Len Hanger and Susan Hoffstetter decided to build their business around their mutual interest in water-based recreation. The business has steadily grown through the years reaching approximately \$1.5 million in gross sales in 2006.

Songer Whitewater was an early adopter of information technology, starting at the very beginning of the Internet in the early 1990s when they used a text-based bulletin board system to advertise their company. In about 1995 they developed their first Web presence, a simple 2-for-1 coupon, allowing them to know who learned about Songer directly or indirectly from the Internet. This first test of the effectiveness of the Internet convinced them to invest in the development of their Web site using in-state vendors. In the late 1980s their Web site evolved to include more graphics with Susan creating content but hiring external Web site programmers. They introduced “doorway” pages in 2000, allowing them to consolidate information in a way that provided Songer with

a competitive advantage. Also around 2000, they decided to hire an in-house programmer, but still contracted with external vendors to provide Web site market positioning.

### Business Location

Fayetteville, West Virginia is considered the “gateway to the New River Gorge.” This small town, (2000 population 2,754) was the legal center for surrounding coal fields. Now the town is capitalizing on its natural beauty and proximity to the New River Gorge National River and serving as a tourism and second home destination. Located in nonmetropolitan Fayette County (2000 population 47,579), Fayetteville is close to the metropolitan area of Charleston, West Virginia and Roanoke, Virginia.

### Role of e-Commerce

Susan readily attributes much of their success on being early adopters of Internet marketing and e-commerce strategies and continuously investing in improving their approach along the way. In fact, just prior to her interview for this case study, they publicly launched yet another set of major Web site improvements. As Susan saw an increase in Internet use for planning vacations, she jumped on the band wagon by hiring a Web designer who was very familiar with the rafting industry. He has been the driving force behind Songer’s increase in Internet sales.

Songer uses their Web site for providing basic information about scheduling and reserving trips and packages, including trip features and rates. They provide an online printable brochure and waivers allowing parents and guardians to provide necessary formal permission for their children

Year Online: **1995**

Area Population: **2,754**

Web site:  
**[www.songerwhitewater.com](http://www.songerwhitewater.com)**

to participate, saving time for everyone. Their ancillary, subcontracted trips (e.g., fishing and horseback riding) are advertised exclusively through their Web page. However, they still produce a 28-page hard-copy brochure for marketing their core business of whitewater rafting. In order to help drive traffic to their Web site, they place their URL virtually everywhere, including on printed brochures, on company vehicles, and on their rafts.

Songer has been using e-commerce for the past eight years, relying on a proprietary, BookItNow system called ROAM (Reservation Outdoor Adventure Manager), developed and maintained by a firm from Nova Scotia. Even though not necessary, Songer still typically follows up their online reservations with a telephone call, in order to clear up any misunderstandings and to help solidify their relationships with customers. ROAM operates on a legacy operating system (Theos) that allows for networking of one computer with multiple dummy terminals. This arrangement made a lot of economic sense when it was first conceived due to the high cost of fully-operational PCs at the time. Along with about 20 firms spread across North America, Songer initially paid approximately \$20,000 for site development and now pays \$250 per month to this firm and receives periodic system upgrades, training, and trouble-shooting. Even though this might seem expensive, Susan seems to be very satisfied with the reliability and consistency of this approach. The current version of this system allows for secure credit card transactions, e-mail invoicing, reservation confirmations, and directions to their location.

e-commerce has evolved to be a very important success factor for Songer Whitewater with a reported 25 to 30 percent of new business coming from leads developed through their Web site. Many of these business leads came from people who were not new to whitewater rafting but who were new to Songer, having found their Web site more appealing and easier to use than many competitors' sites.

Songer sees future business opportunities in several niche markets. For instance, they developed strategies to encourage motorcycle riders (Harley-Davidson primarily) to cruise through the beautiful surroundings, do some whitewater rafting and/or other outdoor activities, and generally enjoy themselves while using Songer as a base of operations for their adventure trip. Another interesting niche might be built around Songer's current provision of outdoor adventure experiences for incoming West Virginia University freshmen students. This program is being supported by the WVU Provost as a student retention strategy. Songer also has a similar long-standing relationship with a middle school group from a private school in Detroit that could be expanded

to other schools looking for similar experiences for their students.

### **Challenges and Lessons for Rural Entrepreneurs**

Songer's experience suggests some important lessons for other small and medium-sized rural businesses:

- The development of a Web presence is nearly essential in today's competitive marketplace. Further, their Web site needs to be informative, easy-to-navigate, and it should facilitate easy retrieval of the kind of information most customers are seeking.
- Susan suggests that business owners learn as much as they can, but find a reliable service provider whose philosophy "syncs" with their own. She felt quite strongly that the service provider needs to have a good understanding of the core business they are serving and a willingness to provide for the IT service needs of the business on their terms, not on the providers' terms.
- Many small rural businesses do not realize that creating good Web presence can put them on even footing with larger competitors and that they do not have to be technology wizards to achieve good Web presence given that there are more and better Web designers in the marketplace than in the past.
- Improvements in the regional availability of support would benefit small and medium-sized businesses. One, affordably-priced high-speed Internet service is an essential ingredient for businesses that plan to host their Web sites in the region or who plan to interact with their customers using the Internet or e-mail. Two, educational seminars to help small businesses develop Web presence and e-commerce strategies should be supported by local groups like chambers of commerce, convention and visitors bureaus, and other local tourism agencies. University outreach and Extension organizations and/or technical colleges are likely best candidates for providing this local training since they would be less likely to have the vested interests of local service providers.
- When asked what Songer might do differently if given the chance to start all over, Susan indicated that they would have gotten involved in e-commerce in a bigger way sooner had they realized its potential.

**From *e-Commerce as a Strategy for Improving Business Vitality: Lessons Learned from Small Businesses* by Deborah M. Markley, David L. Barkley, and R. David Lamie**

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