

Backbone Media blurs line between work and play



The workspace at Backbone Media, a nationally ranked best place to work is open and informal. Courtesy photo.

By Justin Patrick
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Today's active lifestyle consumer market is "so happening, bro," as the saying goes.

Gone are the simple days when a few companies like North Face and Patagonia supplied the world's gear to what was then considered the nuttier segment of society, those who were ditching the

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standard 9 - t o - 5 jobs to pursue lives that allowed ample time for nontraditional outdoor sports. Crazy, right?

Transition to today, when Colorado alone can attribute \$62.5 billion to the outdoor recreation economy and activities like winter fat tire biking, para-skiing, and free solo rock climbing are on the menu.

There are many reasons for those developments, but one significant factor was the revolution in marketing invented by companies like Carbondale's Backbone Media.

Humble start, epic vision

For founder Penn Newhart, the sport of choice was climbing.

In 1989 he moved to the Roaring Fork Valley as a Wall Street refugee and went to work as an advertising sales director for Rock and Ice magazine. He became immersed in the outdoor industry and noticed that nobody was working with brands to create "editorial coverage," what lay people might recognize as the rad adventure stories involving gear that convince them to try it themselves.

Traditional advertising was "silver," according to Newhart, but "great editorial brand or product story was gold." He concluded that people in the know made gear and clothing choices based in large part on what their friends recommended; conversations over beer were more influential than staged iconic images in magazines, however glorious.

Newhart's vision, then, was to bring that concept to the industry. He saw an opening and thought, "Why don't we just try this?"

In 1997, along with business partner Lisa Rawley (who also worked at the magazine), Newhart set up shop in a 250-square-foot space in the basement beneath Peppino's Pizza on Main Street. Using two old doors as desks, a couple old phones and a fax machine, they started pitching potential clients.

Around this time, Nate Simmons was completing his MBA at the INSEAD business school in France (casually referred to as the Harvard of Europe). He desperately wanted a job in the outdoor industry and was willing to make just about any sacrifice to get one. He was not pleased to discover, however, that the anti-corporate culture of the industry was hurting his chances.

"The last thing they wanted was an MBA on staff," he recalled.

Luckily, his roommate was Penn Newhart's cousin, and he spent significant time with the family. Though he didn't know Newhart personally, Simmons accepted an invitation to Carbondale where he found himself interviewing for a position at Backbone Media while chopping wood at Newhart's cabin.

Though Simmons ultimately left to travel abroad, when he received word some months later that Backbone's role with Black Diamond was expanding and he would have a place at the company, he cancelled a trip to India and arrived back in Carbondale with a duffel bag.

Simmons said his pay initially was scant, "But it was awesome! From a lifestyle standpoint it was everything I thought it was going to be." They instantly got to work building the company.

Applying lessons from the trail

Years after the company's founding, Backbone Media still retains its independent, work hard/play hard vibe.

Their spacious office across from Town Hall is populated by quietly working, fit-looking young professionals. Exceptionally nice bikes and skis are daintily tucked away.

The company has been featured in Outside's Best Places to Work for four of the past five years, and ranked 20th nationwide in 2018.

Employees have access to a gear closet filled with the latest products from the company's clients, kombucha and craft beer on tap, Blue Bottle espresso, and plenty of whiskey and tequila on hand. Their robust client list includes Yeti, Eddie Bauer, Gerber, Big Agnes, and Klean Kanteen, among many others.

Newhart and Simmons wore sandals and plaid shirts and offered me espresso as they explained Backbone's keys to success.

A recurring theme was their core belief that the lessons learned on the trail, while adventuring, are highly applicable to their professional space. In business, you have to commit, Newhart explained. Too many new businesses, he maintained, are baking in exit plans without bracing for the ride ahead.

But "that's like talking about a pre-nup before marriage without falling in love." He avoids "bragging on the bus" about his success, but attributes it to

Continued on page 15.