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Young brings new life to NuCanoe  
Owner creates niche for hybrid watercraft



Not quite a kayak and not quite a canoe, retailers and customers have been discovering the versatility of NuCanoe, manufactured in Bellingham.

By Christopher Huber

*In a small, non-descript office in a north Bellingham industrial park, a pungent smell wafts through the room. Blake Young sits at the only desk in the room, with a few company posters surrounding him on the walls. The aroma is not of hops or roasted coffee beans, but of polyethylene plastic.*

*In the back corner of the warehouse, something is brewing. Cooking, actually. Inside the giant, tilting black oven a boat is taking shape. It's a canoe. Maybe more like a kayak. Well, it's neither.*

*You could say it's a hybrid. It's a NuCanoe.*

*Based in Bellingham, the budding boat maker is up and coming in the recreational boat business. Producing up to 10 boats per day, NuCanoe is quickly making a name for itself nationwide, shipping approximately 100 boats last month,*

*"A year ago, if someone came to me with a 100-boat order, I would have had a problem on my hands," Young says.*

*But, things have changed.*

*Young, owner and director of business development, and contract roto-moulder Larry Schoenmakers have finally hit their stride, having developed the right combination of product diversity and marketing practices to broaden their reach in the water-sports world.*

*NuCanoe currently has dealer contracts in 16 U.S. states, including Yeager's in Bellingham, and sales are rising consistently, just in time for the summer canoe- and kayak-buying season.*

*After about a year and a half of sporadic sales performance NuCanoe has done more sales in the past two months than in the previous eight months combined.*

*Based on the way production has been going since January, Young said they should exceed 2007 total sales by early this month.*

*Not a canoe, not a kayak*

*Because a NuCanoe is a hybrid, by design, it offers more stability and versatility. The unique 10- and 12-foot boats are all built the same way: cooked rotisserie-style in a giant oven, which was custom-made, weld-for-weld, by Schoenmakers, who is the owner of Cypress Designs and NuCanoe's mould maker.*

*The key characteristic of NuCanoe is that the boats are completely customizable. The company offers the two basic "rec" models plus eight other options, giving consumers the choice of which accessories to add to their boat based on personal interests.*

*NuCanoe caters to people who are interested in fishing, hunting or rowing. Weighing only 65 pounds (10-foot) and 85 pounds (12-foot) the boats can be easily transported in a truck.*

*Each canoe takes about 40 minutes to cook in the oven, which tilts back and forth to assure the powdery polyethylene adheres evenly to the walls of the mould.*

*Another 40 minutes to cool and a boat is ready for accessory assembly.*

*"It's remarkably simple, but in practice it's really difficult to get everything just right," Young says.*

The boats allow users to stand up safely while fishing or just taking in a view. At 42 inches wide and with a mostly hollow hull, the boat can float on its side, providing easy recovery from a fall overboard, Young says. And because a NuCanoe does not sink, someone can get out of the water quicker and get dry. "With something like this, you can get right back in and get yourself warmed up," he says.

In all, NuCanoe offers 10 different boat models, but it's really about how someone wants to accessorize, Young says. The idea of complete versatility is what has driven NuCanoe's development during the past year or so.

For example: one can mount fishing rod holders in about a half-dozen different places, the stern of the boat can hold an attached trolling motor and battery, hunters may affix a duck blind for camouflage cover and boaters can choose to row freely like a canoe or install rowing outriggers row-boat style.

People can attach an anchor, a sport box to store their catch, a reclining seat or simply buy a basic two-seater for puttering around the lake.

Many clients buy a bunch of "rec" models and accessories for customers to decide the combo they want in-store, Young says. Recently a dealer in Indiana bought 16 "rec" models, along with a lot of accessories for customer choice. Ten-foot "rec" models begin at \$699 and prices go up to \$1,350 for fully accessorized 12-foot models.

### *Success in the making*

The NuCanoe as we know it now came to fruition out of a company known as Wild Design.

Wild Design, run by owner Tim Niemier, began producing NuCanoe in January of 2006 as a new product line. The company underwent reorganization that May and at the time, was only producing the basic "rec" models, Young says. That same month, Wild Design spun off its boat roto-moulding business as a separate company, so Niemier could focus on developing other water-sports products.

This is when Young came to Wild Design. He owned a consulting business, Financial Sense, and had done consulting work for Wavewalker, a water-sports manufacturer. People at Wavewalker referred Young to Wild Design to help them get on track with the new boat line – NuCanoe.

He hopped onboard, and by summer he had refined the product a bit and leveled out sales, Young says. Still technically part of Wild Design, NuCanoe sold boats sporadically enough to show promise, so in October 2006, Young took over as owner and director of business development of NuCanoe.

He began with a focus on creating a consistently produced product. At first, the NuCanoe brand was limited.

"The focus was, 'OK, what can we add to this and make it more attractive?'" Young says.

The basic models are good for rentals and occasional paddlers, he says, but the question was, "How can they cater to hunters, rowers, fishermen and anyone else?"

As the company's marketing, sales and operations department-in-one, Young began by sending catalogs to dealers around the nation to get some attention. But it didn't produce any results, he says.

He faced a dilemma: "It's not a canoe, but it's not a kayak. It just didn't really fit," he says.

Young said he thought he could produce and the boats and people would come to him. He soon found that was not the right attitude to have as a tiny but nationally focused company tucked away in the far Northwest corner of the United States.

He began with a broad marketing focus and says it may have been wiser to start a little narrower, on the West Coast, rather than the entire United States.

January 2007 rolled around and NuCanoe had not made the progress he had envisioned.

"If we sold two boats in a week, I said 'Oh sweet, we sold some boats,'" he says. The company kept plugging away and eventually landed sales representatives in the Southeast United States.

Over the next 18 months, marketing efforts and production volume grew, he says, but they weren't really seeing tangible results. With a more realistic vision of targeting primarily independent outdoors retailers, Young began an advertising campaign in mainstream industry magazines, such as *Canoe and Kayak*, and also

sponsored fishing tournaments and attended industry trade shows. The combination of expanding the product line with time for marketing efforts to take hold have been two factors that have made sales take off, Young says. "You just gotta learn. If it works well, you keep doing it, if it doesn't work well, you do something different."

Case in point, when Young realized that promoting the customization possible with the boat was a selling point, he incorporated it into his advertising and demos at trade shows. Listening to the people was key to NuCanoe's recent growth spurt, he says.

"You can do things in these boats that you can't do with a lot of other boats," he says. "The feedback this boat gets is just really positive."

Despite operating with an eight-person staff, NuCanoe does not project itself as a small company. He says it's important to portray your company as confident and capable of producing results as good or better than larger competitors.

Young gives due credit to the work of Schoenmakers and the three welders and moulders at Cypress Designs. He says had he not met Schoenmakers in the early days of NuCanoe, things would have been much more difficult. For one, skilled roto-moulders are hard to come by in Bellingham.

Schoenmakers, who spent 12 years at Ocean Kayak in Ferndale, is contracted to make the parts for moulds, and has alleviated the pressure on Young to run both sides of the business.

With production taken care of, Young can direct his efforts toward marketing to dealers across the country, working with advertising designers and, above all, maintaining strong relationships with out-of-state sales reps and dealers.

#### *A bright future*

Attempting to maintain strong relationships with dealers, Young began the NuCanoe "Premier Dealer" program in January. The purpose is to build mutually beneficial partnerships between NuCanoe and committed dealers to increase awareness of the brand, maximize profitability and exploit economies of scale, according to the program pamphlet.

The idea is to sell 16 boats, rather than 6, Young says. He wants to deal with fewer dealers, but dealers who are committed to the product. He likes to know who he is dealing with and to have fun working with clients.

"We're not trying to stick them all (the boats) at Wal-Mart to boost sales," he says. About half of his clients sell only NuCanoe and he says he does not sell to a dealer's area competitors.

When asked if he hopes to sell with popular outdoor retailer Recreational Equipment, Inc. (REI), Young said he doesn't have plans to contract with stores that would make up a majority percentage of his sales. He said with the volume of boats he turns out per day, it's too risky to allot so much for one company.

He would rather sell 500 boats at a 20 percent margin than sell 1,000 boats at a 10 percent margin – quality over quantity.

Currently, he depends on quick sell-through and certain dealers selling a lot. He says they still have to rely on more short-term contracts, while dealers test out their ability to sell.

Accessories are key to the company's success, he says. The more people know about their options, the more boats he will sell. And with summer just around the corner, sales are heating up.

Young says his goal is to see constant growth by increasing his dealer network and eliminating spikes in periodic sales reports.

"We could easily sell a couple hundred boats during duck season and eliminate spikes," he says. "It would only take two big dealers to sign on and it could double production."

Long-term, he says, his goals are to build a solid foundation and develop relationships with dealers, and to make it enjoyable.

"I think that we're on a good course, a good trajectory," he says.