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Young man with a plan:

Web designer weaves tradition and technology



Northeast Kingdom Web designer Sam Young sits in the Statehouse in Montpelier, which, unlike many parts of Vermont, is wired for 21st-century telecommunications.

Jeb Wallace-Brodeur/Staff Photo

By Kevin O'Connor
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Editor's note: This story is part of a series on young Vermonters who personify the most pressing issues facing the Green Mountain State. For related articles, see the "Voices of Vermont" special content section on <http://www.rutlandherald.com/> or <http://www.timesargus.com/>

Born into a Northeast Kingdom farm family, Sam Young believed only one thing could recharge him better than milk.

“You’d go to the sugarhouse, get an 8-ounce cup full of maple syrup and just drink it,” he recalls, buzzing on the memory.

Then the 32-year-old tapped into a wellspring that makes him feel even more wired: the Internet.

The fifth-generation Vermonter may live in the tiny town of Albany, population 808, but as owner of Think or Sink, he creates global websites for clients ranging from his uncle’s maple shop in neighboring Glover to Kaua Photography half a world away in Hawaii.

Young merges his interest in politics with technology by maintaining sites for the Montpelier lobbying firm Kimbell Sherman Ellis and a slew of state candidates ranging from gubernatorial contender Peter Shumlin to an unlikely local wannabe legislator: himself.

Young would be happy to work solely on computers rather than campaigning, too, if only Vermont’s patchy Internet coverage didn’t leave him with a prehistoric dial-up connection and the need to pull a signal from a pricey satellite dish.

“I don’t think I would have stood up and run for office if I had easier access to my occupation,” the Web designer says. “Our education system gears everybody up to go to college, but you can’t afford to come back to the area that brought you up because of lack of economic opportunity.”

And so he’s tackling a new extracurricular concern: How can his state plug into 21st-century telecommunications while preserving its sweetest traditions?

Quick study

Born in Newport and raised in nearby Barton and Glover, Young was 12 when he invested his paper-route money in his first computer, a RadioShack Tandy 1000 HX. A quick study, he was selling database services to local businesses even before enrolling in the computer science program at the University of Vermont in Burlington.

“I thought, ‘I’m going to make a lot of money — that’s my goal.’”

But his green cravings soon changed. Young left the program after two years to study outdoor education at Prescott College in Arizona, then traveled to every state but South Dakota and Alaska.

He also toured the world, working with a children’s theater and cultural exchange group in Cuba and a seed-saving organization in Australia (near the international date line, he was part of the first wave on the globe to greet the year 2000) between stops in Belize, the Cook Islands, Mexico and his ancestral homeland of Scotland.

All the while he felt the same pull that, shortly after the Civil War, lured his great-great-grandfather across the Atlantic to the Northeast Kingdom.

“I love this place, I really do. There’s no other place where I really feel at peace.”

If only a paycheck came as easily. Stopping home in 2000, Young figured he’d stay a month. The fact he stuck around wasn’t all positive.

“Part of it is economics — it’s hard to save up enough money to get out again. Where are you going to work?”

Young tried his hand at carpentry, electrical apprenticing and timber-frame design. But people were more interested in his ability to build home pages than houses.

‘How many?’

Young, however, faced an obstacle: the region’s mountainous geography that restricts wireless antennas and requires countless miles of computer cable.

Gov. James Douglas sparked headlines in 2007 when he called for universal cellular and broadband coverage so Vermont could become “the nation’s first true e-state” by 2010.

Three years later, more than 100,000 of the state’s 621,760 residents still can’t access high-speed Internet. In Albany, just west of Glover’s landmark Bread & Puppet Theater, Young circumvents the lack of local service with a satellite dish and \$70-a-month computer signal.

“That’s a big expense. If you want to have anything to do with the Web and are sensible, you’re going to live in Burlington. But that’s not where I want to live.”

Young would rather stay and support his friends and neighbors. He points to the website he created for his uncle’s West Glover farm. Click on www.andersonvillemaple.com anywhere in the world and you not only can learn about its history (“Winner of Best of Show Orleans County Fair”) but also order pints, quarts or gallons of syrup.

“Every little mom-and-pop business can have access to 300 million consumers,” he says of the Internet.

Young’s job is to make it seem simple. A Web designer with populist leanings, he works with free, publicly available “open source” software rather than selling proprietary product that belongs to a particular company. He doesn’t require a big office or related overhead, just the laptop and Google phone in his backpack.

“You can do the work from anywhere. If we had the infrastructure, people would want to live here. How many programmers moving to Vermont and making \$100,000 a year would it take to get enough tax revenue to fill our budget gap?”

Break a leg

And so Young is running for Vermont House in the seven-town district of Albany, Barton, Craftsbury, Glover, Greensboro, Sheffield and Wheelock. He’s hoping to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather, who represented Stannard back when each of the state’s 246 communities had its own seat.

The descendant’s path is different from his ancestor’s, whom fellow farmers sent to Montpelier after he broke his leg and couldn’t do barn chores. Young first visited the Statehouse on a sixth-grade field trip, spurring him to serve as a page in eighth grade, join UVM’s Lawrence Debate Union and graduate to

become a Glover justice of the peace.

“He has married a number of couples,” his campaign biography reports.

But none of that explains his independent run for governor in 2008.

“In some ways it was an experiment,” he says today, “an opportunity to voice my concerns and get my ideas into the debate.”

And onto WCAX television’s Sunday newsmaker show “You Can Quote Me.” Young began with more sputters than sound bites. Then co-host Darren Perron asked him to explain his statewide push for high-speed Internet.

E-commerce, Young said, is expected to generate \$335 billion globally by 2012.

“The same thing that sent thousands of jobs to India is the same thing that can bring jobs to rural Vermont — and we speak English a lot better,” he continued. “We need to catch up to some of the Third World countries when it comes to connectivity.”

Co-host Marselis Parsons smiled skeptically before asking the political novice, “Why not run for the House?”

Two years later, with an incumbent retiring, Young is doing just that. He’s limiting his television interviews to local cable. But he’s still inviting viewers to quote him.

Squeaky wheel

“I am the only candidate in this race who has actually attended the public schools in this district,” Young said in an NEKTV interview, noting the state spends about 50 percent of its funds on public education. “I think that having an inside knowledge of those institutions is a valuable asset.”

Many seasoned Vermonters figure the state’s next generation isn’t interested in the past. But Young’s self-designed campaign website calls for “solutions that honor the spirit and ingenuity of Vermonters while preparing our families and communities for the 21st century.”

Valuing his farm roots, Young wants the state to cultivate more sources of local food and renewable energy.

“It’s remembering our heritage — we don’t want to lose the traditional knowledge of how we survived here before tractor-trailer trucks.”

Young also yearns to plant more fiber-optic and wireless technology, pointing to the state’s recent receipt of more than \$100 million in federal stimulus money for telecommunication improvements.

“What can a politician do about broadband? I’m going to at least keep on these companies that are supposed to be doing this.”

For ultimately, Young isn’t campaigning for a future in politics but instead a future in his profession.

Spurred by classmates who've moved away, he believes that more options could retain peers in a state where a record one-fourth of the population is projected to be 65 or older by 2030.

And with Vermont's 18- to 29-year-old voter turnout among the nation's lowest (only 13 percent cast ballots in the state in 2002), Young believes technology could help plug his generation (or at least the 2,100 Facebook friends and 350 fans on his campaign website) into the political conversation.

"Part of the democratic process is for people to stand up and let their voices be heard. I'm trying to get young people inspired. We have to keep pushing in order to make it happen for us. The squeaky wheel gets the grease, right?"

Just as a dirt road can lead to a different type of a hard drive.

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