

# ON THE RIGHT TRACK

ITRACKS

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by Penny Eaton

Photo by Stuart Kasdorf Photographics

"I was a terrible employee, so I decided the only thing to do was start my own business," jokes Daniel Weber, CEO and co-founder of Itracks (Interactive Tracking Systems Inc.).

The company offers online market research tools that help companies and organizations find out what their customers, employees and constituents are thinking. Itracks was one of the first in the world to specialize in this type of research and counts among its clients many of the Fortune 500 companies such as AT&T, Microsoft and IBM.

Dan Weber and his wife Garnette founded Itracks in 1996. There are currently 45 employees with the company, 32 of which are in Saskatoon and the remainder work from other locations in North America. "It's a new world," Weber says. "In this business, we can hire anyone from anywhere." That said, Weber enjoys living and working in Bridge City. "We grew up here, and our families are all here. We've always wanted to stay in Saskatoon."

There are some challenges to having an office here – "it takes at least a day to fly anywhere," Weber remarks – but the advantages outweigh the drawbacks. "Saskatchewan has good people and a great work ethic," he says. "Plus, Saskatoon is still a relatively low-cost place to operate."

Weber says Itracks has the best of both worlds. "Our company has a real 'Saskatchewan feel,' but it also offers the opportunity to work beyond our borders and do business with some of the top companies in the world."

"Eighty-five per cent of our work comes from the United States. Over the past year, we saw several of our larger accounts take a major hit and some even disappeared. That was hard. But it also made us focus our efforts in new areas," he says.

Itracks used to operate two call centres, one in Saskatoon and another based in Kenaston. Over the past year, the company has moved completely out of telephone research and sold the call centres to other companies. "It was difficult to be a small fish in a big pond," Weber says of the telephone research sector. "We're trying to focus on what we're really good at: online research."

Survey work has dropped off over the past year as many companies have either taken this kind of research in-house, or have outsourced the work to other areas such as India. However, this has been more than offset by an upsurge in the use of online focus groups.



Garnette and Dan Weber, Itracks

"The costs of conducting focus groups in person have simply become too high for many companies," Weber explains. Online focus groups offer qualitative data at a fraction of the cost compared to traditional in-person methods. Also, Itracks continues to develop more and more sophisticated software for collecting qualitative information. "The economic downturn actually made people more aware of the high costs of in-person focus groups and brought more business our way," he says.

Still, some companies are hesitant to conduct market research. "I'd really encourage businesses to look into the value of research," Weber says. "People think research costs a lot of money, but a little goes a long way – good research provides 10 times the value of the initial investment. From a marketing standpoint, this is why the U.S. is so often ahead of Canada: they do far more market research before moving ahead."

Weber credits much of the company's early success to the establishment of an advisory board. "This is the single-most important factor in moving from 'small-time' to a real business," he says. "Ninety per cent of what you're already doing are probably the right things, but an advisory board gives you the confidence to take action and move forward. And they'll help you rethink the other 10 per cent."

Itracks is planning to launch a new product in January 2010, something that will be "the lynchpin for all our current services," Weber promises. "Our vision is to be the world's leading provider of online data collection tools. I've always thought we could achieve our vision, but never really knew just how. Now we know the way."

Weber feels this new direction will propel them into the upper half of Saskatchewan's Top 100 Companies™ next year. Not a problem for a company whose slogan is "assume first it can be done." ■