



## CASE STUDY: Pacific Rim Divers

### Where a business under water is a success story

If Confucius had someone in mind when he said “Choose a job you love and you will never have to work a day in your life,” it would be Patrice Heller. Her commute is a boat ride and her office is the blue water of Hawai‘i. Operating out of Kailua-Kona, on the “Big Island,” Pacific Rim Divers, Inc. takes scuba divers for guided tours



Figure 1: Patrice Heller in her office at Pacific Rim Divers, Inc.

“They took a lot of feedback from me on what I wanted to see in my website and while I was leading dives – created what was infinitely better than what I had before!”

where they see everything from graceful bottlenose dolphins and gentle giant whales to the homely Yellow Frogfish. Highly skilled, a certified scuba instructor and licensed boat captain, Patrice knows well how to take tourists below the surface then send them home with stories to tell. But when she and her husband Frank

### At a Glance

**Business:** Pacific Rim Divers

**Industry:** Scuba Tours and Training

**Founded:** 1997

**TripAdvisor Rating:** 5-Star, Excellent

**Recognition:** “Tops in Kona,” Hawaii, The Big Island Revealed

**Go Daddy Helped Us:** Turn our passion into a thriving full-time business by overcoming competition from bigger, more established businesses.

**Results:** A fresh new look for their website designed by Go Daddy’s Dream Design Team to help attract new customers. The goal of the site was to educate visitors about their company and services, with the ability to request reservations.



Figure 2: The homely Yellow Frogfish

started the company long ago, neither were skilled at building a website let alone competing with two dozen other local dive companies, some with large advertising budgets. A friendly customer offered to help and Pacific Rim Divers has been in the black (and the deep blue) ever since.

## Launching a company, a boat & baking brownies

In 1997, Patrice and Frank joined 3 million other couples in the United States by starting their own business.<sup>1</sup> However, unlike most others they did so by leaving the mainland and starting anew in Kona, a town of 11,000 residents with temperatures that hover wonderfully near 75°F.<sup>2</sup> And, they launched it on April Fools' Day which, fortunately, was not prophetic. As they christened their new 26 foot boat Hapa Nai'a which in Hawaiian means part dolphin, a name that is probably more apt as a pseudonym for Patrice.

Equipped to take six divers they catered to those who, as Patrice says, "... wanted a really personalized dive experience." Personalized is right; in addition to ensuring each small group is equally thrilled and safe she ensures there are plenty of her homemade brownies for a post-dive treat (something she still does these many years later).

## A little company & a lot of competition

Operating in the gentle lee of the Kona Coast, Frank and Patrice wrestled with heavy competition. "Some were large and had dive shops too. They advertised locally with colorful rack cards, flyers and some in magazines ... syndicated national magazines. Many even had international standing and drew [customers] from all over the world. Just Google 'diving Kona Hawaii' and the biggest businesses would come up. I'm little. I make brownies."

## A stuffy nose, an ever-changing economy & an ever-adjusting company



Figure 4: Manta Ray night feeding on plankton off Kona, Hawaii (image courtesy The Telegraph)

In addition to heavy competition, other factors from micro to macro challenged the couple. For instance, Frank was the captain and manned the boat while Patrice, as Dive Master and instructor, led the customers below. The arrangement worked well until something as simple as a cold prevented Patrice from diving. And, though Frank was also dive master and instructor so he could lead the dives, she did not have a captain's license (the State requires a licensed captain be on the boat at all times during dive operations). Eventually she earned her license enabling the two to swap roles as needed. Then, a few years into operations, 9/11 had a devastating effect on the economy in general and tourism in particular. To keep things afloat Frank went back to work as carpenter while Patrice ran Pacific Rim

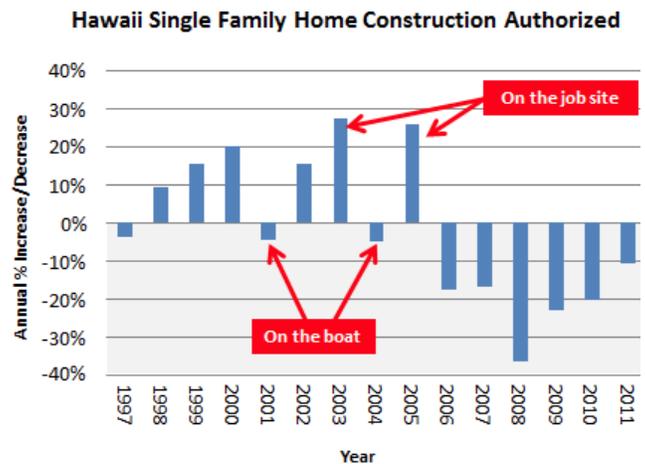


Figure 3: Frank worked where needed as conditions changed. (Data from Hawaii Dept. of Bus., Economic Dev. & Tourism)

Divers, hiring captains to fill out the small crew. A series of housing booms and busts<sup>3</sup> saw him moving to where he was needed most, the job site or the boat with Patrice always with the boat.

At times, especially in the early years and during those market drops, Hapa Nai'a went out light. While they tried to book a minimum of four divers there were "... times when I'd go with two and ... there were times we would go with only one." When things were particularly tight they would add Manta Ray Night Dives, named one of the Top Ten best dives by The Telegraph.<sup>4</sup> But being small meant that, unlike other dive companies with more crew, Patrice would work both shifts rising at 5:30 AM, returning at 3:30 PM only to turn around and go back out until 11:00 PM ... and get up again at 5:30 AM the next morning. Clearly Pacific Rim Divers needed some help drawing a more steady flow of customers and that was why in 2001 Patrice made her first foray from the surreal world of the sea to the virtual world of the Internet.

## When the customer really is right

2001 was a time when U.S.-based Internet use had reached 50%<sup>5</sup> and already more than 30 million people were booking travel online.<sup>6</sup> This trend did not escape Patrice who contracted a local company to help her obtain the domain name PacificRimDivers.com and set up a website. "It was a little website that wasn't very effective," and added that, "I wasn't able to interact with it. Any change needed was a big process that I just did not have the time nor the technical skills for; I had a business to run!"

It was also a time when a regular customer offered to help. He had been a regular since the beginning and had become great friends of the couple. She didn't know much about where he worked other than it began a couple years earlier with a few people in a small house in Arizona and that as he returned for more charters he would mention that it was growing. After explaining the problem, he replied: "We can help you build a website so you don't have to put a lot of time and energy into it, but stressed that it will be highest quality and it will be a much bigger presence than what you have now. So let us have at it and come up with something for you."

Thinking back to when he first showed up at Pacific Rim Divers as a customer he was already PADI<sup>7</sup> certified. Patrice then handled his advanced certification after which he delved into ever more advanced, technical aspects of scuba. She said that "When this guy got into something he really gets into it." So she reasoned that if he said they could help with their website, that they would know their business. She said yes, he was right, and a small company called Go Daddy came through.



Figure 5: The Go Daddy Dream Team created Pacific Rim Diver's latest web site. Telegraph)

## While Patrice was leading dives Go Daddy was building her website

They began by transferring PacificRimDivers.com to be hosted by Go Daddy then designed a new website. "There was back and forth. Someone would ask me, 'do you like this?' and, 'do you like that?' and I'd say, 'here is what I want to do'. They took a lot of feedback from me on what I wanted to see in my website and – while I was leading dives – created what was infinitely better than what I had before!" The new website became the primary way for new customers to learn about the company and to then email her for a reservation.

## The good, my bad & the OOPS!

“Go Daddy also made it easy for me to update content in my website which was both good and bad because, more than once, I managed to wreck it. It was like when I would break something on the boat and call my husband to fix it. I would call Go Daddy and say, ‘I just deleted my website, can you fix it?’” With her schedule this typically meant the call occurred late at night. Patrice is sure that millions of people around the world enjoy the company’s well-established all night technical support service at Go Daddy because, early on, she would call for help at 2 AM.

## Relationships: the ones that support are the ones that last

Patrice was careful to explain that although she knew she had a friend in the company she would simply call support for help and the staff would not be aware of the long relationship; they would simply help. Then, a few years ago, she commented, “I want a whole fresh new look to our website and her long-time customer said, ‘okay, contact our Dream Design Team’.”

Patrice then explained, a little sheepishly: “For a long time I thought I got this great support because of my customer. Recently I was looking at the website and noticed it wasn’t just me – the Dream Design Team is available for everybody! And I thought it was because I was special! That’s when it really hit me, that neither he nor the other staff at Go Daddy has changed; they give the same level of customer support with thousands of staff that they did when they were a few dozen.”

## Hard work & always-ready support brings success and more brownies

Now at fifteen years, the point at which 74% of small businesses fail,<sup>8</sup> Pacific Rim Divers is busy. It is the result a consistent, personalized approach that gives divers from all over the world the experience they seek and the never-closed, always supportive team at Go Daddy that helps bring the customers in. Just go to [TripAdvisor](#) where Pacific Rim Divers earned all Excellent ratings or buy a copy of the book [Hawaii The Big Island Revealed](#) by Andrew Doughty and Harriett Friedman who list the company as one of the “Tops in Kona” and said, “If we had to pick one, it would probably be Pacific Rim Divers.” A steady stream of customers drives home the point – and the profit – and keeps the company in the water seven days per week with Patrice leading the dives five days and her staff taking care of the remaining two which is important because ... it gives her more time to bake more brownies.

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1 “Unlimited Partnership: Couples in business”, Fortune, CNN Money, citing study by Glenn Muske, Professor at Oklahoma State University [http://money.cnn.com/2008/01/08/smbusiness/entrepreneurial\\_couples.fsb/](http://money.cnn.com/2008/01/08/smbusiness/entrepreneurial_couples.fsb/)

2 City-Data.com: <http://www.city-data.com/city/Kailua-Hawaii.html>

3 Construction Data Tables, State of Hawaii Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism: [http://hawaii.gov/dbedt/info/economic/data\\_reports/gser/construction](http://hawaii.gov/dbedt/info/economic/data_reports/gser/construction)

4 “The world’s top ten dive sites”, The Telegraph: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/picturegalleries/7300359/The-worlds-top-ten-dive-sites.html?image=2>

5 Internet Usage and Population Growth, InternetWorldStats.com: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/am/us.htm>

6 Online Travel Booking Numbers On the Rise”, RoadAndTravel.com: <http://www.roadandtravel.com/traveladvice/onlinetravelplanning.htm>

7 PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors): <http://www.padi.com/scuba/about-padi/default.aspx>

8 “What is the survival rate for new firms?”, FAQs, Advocacy Small Business Statistics and Research, U.S. Small Business Administration: <http://web.sba.gov/faqs/faqindex.cfm?arealD=24>