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# CANADA

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A Celebration of our Heritage

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J.M.S. Careless

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# Cancom

Inspired by Whitehorse broadcasting visionary Rolf

Hougen, a group of private broadcasters set out in 1980 to create a satellite system that would deliver high-quality radio and television signals to even the smallest and most remote communities in Canada.

Within three months of winning a licence in 1981 from the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, with a mandate to focus on those out-of-the-way places, the fledgling Canadian Satellite Communications Inc. (Cancom) had constructed three satellite uplink stations - something the sceptics said could not be done in so short a time. Eldon Thompson, head of Telesat Canada, which owned and operated the satellites, was so impressed by the feat he had commemorative plaques made for Hougen and his team. Amidst smiling faces, the plaque carried the message: "They're beaming!"

Cancom has been confounding the sceptics ever since. In the early years the company had to pay its bills - including \$1.25 million annually for each of four satellite transponders - with very little money coming in. The satellite signals feed cable networks, but few of these systems existed to serve Canada's small and remote communities at the time. So Cancom helped build them, piloting local entrepreneurs through the regulatory paperwork jungle and in some cases even helping them to string up cable:

At least 1,000 subscribers were needed in the early days to make a cable system economically viable. However; by 1986 the combined skills of Cancom and the cable industry had made it feasible to serve villages and hamlets with as few as 50 households.



1. Rolf Hougen,  
Founder

By 1983, Cancom had become the first company in the world to scramble commercial broadcast signals to deter "pirates" using unauthorized receiving dishes. That same year shares in the company were issued on the Toronto and Montreal stock exchanges.

In 1984 Cancom started making "house calls," delivering signals directly to backyard dishes for those residents beyond the reach of cable. (Cancom's cable offerings doubled with the addition of the four main U.S. networks (ABC, CBS, NBC and PBS).

To take advantage of a clear line of sight to its satellites, relative freedom from microwave interference, and access to fibre optic links with Toronto, in 1991 Cancom's Master Control Centre was moved from Montreal to Mississauga, Ontario.

The stage was set for the most

dramatic change in Canadian broadcasting since the advent of colour television: the transition from analog to digital technology. Many more signals - with better picture and sound can now be accommodated on Telesat Canada satellites, making the signals cheaper to distribute. By late 1995, Cancom had been licensed to distribute 23 television signals embracing both official languages, and plans for more - plus many more radio signals - were in the works.

At the same time, Cancom's knowledge and experience was being put to work for ExpressVu, a new direct-to-home service featuring the largest selection of Canadian and U.S. programming ever offered in this country.

The benefits of Cancom's pioneering work are shared by Canada's aboriginals. The company donates

satellite services to five native radio stations and the Whitehorse uplink for Television Northern Canada, the world's first native satellite television network.

In 1995 Cancom instituted a training and development internship for aboriginals interested in broadcasting or telecommunications as a career. It allows three natives to spend 12 weeks a year at Cancom studying managerial or technical aspects of the industry. Named in memory of Ross Charles, a Cancom Vice President of Ojibway descent, the program is administered by Cancom in conjunction with the Canadian Native Arts Foundation and Television Northern Canada.

Cancom introduced satellite services for businesses in 1986, changing the way commerce thinks about communications. Those changes in attitude were accelerated when Cancom embraced digital technology.

No longer are truckers forced to rely on telephones to stay in touch with their bases. With Cancom Mobile, company dispatchers can exchange messages with drivers anywhere in North America, and track their progress on a computerized map. Engines can be monitored and warning signs passed on by satellite for preventative action by head office Dispatches, helping to keep expensive rigs off intensive care hoists.

Cancom uses Canadian satellites that also support Mobile-equipped U.S. trucks when they cross the border into Canada. Canadian trucks travelling south enjoy seamless U.S. service on a reciprocal basis.

Cancom data network services, including the new frame relay protocol, eliminating costly long-distance charges and making secure and rapid exchange of information feasible even for small businesses. No longer is a private satellite network beyond the financial grasp of small and me-



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dium size companies. Cancom has a shared-network service that even takes care of capital costs.

Company leaders turn to Cancom Business Television to be seen as well as heard when conferring with employees at different locations at one time. Hospitals use the satellite-based system to demonstrate surgical techniques to physicians in other locations. In 1995 Cancom BTV introduced interactive distance learning, enabling groups anywhere in North America to see and hear an instructor and to interact via voice and data.

The Cancom Master Control Centre in Mississauga provides around the clock monitoring and restoration service for all business networks and cable clients.

From its roots at WHTV in Whitehorse, where station founder Rolf Hougen took the first step toward giving remote communities satellite access to mainstream broadcast signals, Cancom has pushed back the frontiers of satellite-based communication in Canada serving the people in both official languages. The story of this determined and resourceful company is still unfolding.

1. *Five Founding Members and first President (1981): (from l. to r.) Charles Allard, Stuart MacKay, Rolf Hougen (first chairman), Bob Short (first President), Raymond Peters, and Phillippe de Gaspé Beaubien.*