

business in Michigan

The company has gained a cult following in ski communities around the globe.

BY MICHELLE MIRON • **ENTREPRENEURSHIP** • NOVEMBER 6, 2025



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Credit: Shaggy's Skis. Shaggy's grew from Jeff's (above) and Jonath
stom skis.

meanwhile, his young sons Ben and Jonathan – both accomplished skiers – had started a hobby – building custom downhill and back hill skis for friends and family.

That hobby turned into a family affair, with John Thompson leaving construction to help establish Shaggy's Skis, a custom ski manufacturer. The family moved north from southeast Michigan to Boyne City, outfitting a former Knights of Columbus building into a small factory and headquarters.

Since then, their products have gained traction as well as what John Thompson calls a cult following in ski communities around the globe. Sixty percent of the company's sales come from the Midwest, but their products have been shipped to clients as far away as Australia, Russia, Japan and Europe.

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Mountain Resort in Northern Michigan, where staffers work demo stations to encourage patrons to test-ski its many models on the slopes themselves.



Credit: John Russell. The company creates 17 different ski models (in six different lengths) at its Boyne City shop.

The greatest reward of all that? According to 36-year founder and lead ski builder, it's "being part of getting and experiencing the thrill of flying down a mountain. someone loves our skis, and how they can do so many of their high performance.

"This is not an easy business," he says, declining to me always the most financially rewarding. But it's our abs

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drawing a growing number of retailers and manufacturers to the state's outdoor recreation industry. Small companies across the state make a variety of winter products, including snowshoes, skis, outdoor apparel, gear and more.

Winter tourism is a major contributor to the state's overall tourism economy, which generated an estimated \$54.8 billion in 2024, according to the latest report from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC).

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And skiing is a key component of Michigan winter tourism, says Brad Garmon, who is senior strategic advisor & executive director for the Michigan Outdoor Recreation Industry Office (a division of the MEDC). The office was created several years ago to support and grow the outdoor recreation economy in Michigan

Michigan, he notes, ranks second only to New York state in the number of ski areas – the Great Lakes State has about 40 ski areas.

“We show businesses like Shaggy’s as examples of how entrepreneurs can grow and succeed here,” he explains. “If you have an idea in small business with a project you want to grow and ex

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(Snow)plowing ahead with a unique product

Jeff Thompson and his brother learned to ski as small (2005) were creating their own skis using their dad’s to

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Jeff Thompson

home in the lower peninsula and moved north to focus on what would become Shaggy's Skis. The name honors their ancestor Sulo "Shaggy" Lehto, who hand-carved wooden skis for family and neighbors in Kearsarge, Michigan, a century ago.

John Thompson became co-founder/lead ski builder/member, mom Shari office manager. Capital came partly from sales of John's construction equipment, though he took additional building jobs while running Shaggy's.

The owners worked closely on business and market strategy with Michigan's Small Business Development Center.

Refining the ski-making process took years, Jeff Thompson says, partly because there was little precedent from small companies and scarce information on best practices. The owners designed and built their own tooling for better quality control.

"At first we were in blissful ignorance — we didn't know what we didn't know," he recalls.

Still today, no labor is outsourced. Raw materials for the skis include hardwoods harvested from Northern Michigan, triaxial fiberglass, copper, carbon fiber and other elements

"It was absolutely slow to start, and 20 years in the m:
"People had no idea who we were, and they wanted to
it. We put in 14-hour days."

Sales saw an uptick in 2015 after several new and upgr
including a limited-edition ski featuring key U.P. logos
a pastie, a Stormy Kromer cap and a chainsaw. Boost
Greater sales allowed for expansion of the staff to eig

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Shaggy's typical customer? An experienced skier 45 to 65 years old who "is on the adventurous side and likes to go off the beaten path to keep things interesting." Men buy more than women, Jeff Thompson notes, and around 12 percent of sales are wholesale.



Credit: Shaggy's Skis. Jeff Thompson in action on the slopes.

"A couple other companies in the U.S. do what we do," really competition; even if you combine us we're still a compared to the total ski volume made by the major i

One effective marketing tool: Shaggy's staging of dem Michigan. At each event, staffers bring along up to 50

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employees, friends, family and customers gather at Mount Bohemia Ski Resort in the U.P. for group runs, photo opps, scavenger hunts, games and opportunities for free gear.

“People are finicky about buying skis, and only think about buying them every three years or so,” Jeff Thompson explains. “Some sales are by impulse, but usually we have to nurture. So it’s about the relationships we build, and once people become our customers, we work to keep them happy”.

The greatest challenge of running the business? Its reliance on a decent snowfall and discretionary spending in any given economy. Shaggy’s helps counter both by producing and selling a line of its own pickleball paddles and offering building materials to DIY enthusiasts interested in building skis and snowboards.

In recognition of the state’s help with its business growth, Shaggy’s supported its Pure Michigan marketing campaign by creating Pure Michigan branded skis released last year.

Future forecast? Variable conditions

The company’s five-year plan (“Shaggy’s 2.0”) is in flux because John Thompson plans to retire next year. He says that’s created uncertainty in both sales projections and who will lead production moving forward.

That said, upcoming upgrades may include better automation, more product customization and broader sourcing for renewable materials.

On the plus side, the U.S. ski market could grow due to products mass-produced in China and the Ukraine.

“Five years ago we purchased our building, so we’ll continue to own the time,” Jeff Thompson says. “But the world is going to look at the rate AI is changing everything. It’s more than w

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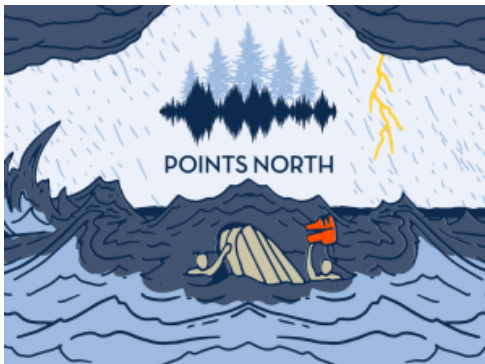
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