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'Handi-Man'

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August 2, 2007

By **JIM POWERS** | Managing Editor

There is an obvious human aspect to Thom Disch's business.

The handicapped community has counted on Libertyville-based Handi-Ramp for nearly 50 years to gain access to the world.

"We can design a ramp to their desires and their environment to help them maintain their independence and live a full life," Disch said.

But what sparked Disch's initial interest in buying the business 12 years ago is the variety of applications his product can serve.

And clients.

Like turtles.

And pets.

"When I first bought it, we were getting phone calls all the time from people saying, 'I need a ramp for a loading dock,' or a musician called saying he needed one to help move his equipment," Disch said. "I realized there was a whole different business out there."

But back to the turtles.

When South Bay Power Plant in the San Diego bay area had to address environmental concerns on its impact to sea turtles, the company called Disch seeking a solution.

"They wanted to bring the turtles up from the bay to the parking lot of the plant for inspection, so we developed a ramp and gurney to help transport the turtles with minimal process," Disch recalled.

As for pets, the company's hottest selling item is a lightweight ramp designed to make it easier for a dog to gain access to any vehicle, but especially for higher-elevated SUVs, vans and trucks.

The applications appear limitless. Disch said he had a customer who needed a ramp made so he could take his pair of segways, the upright, two-wheeled people movers, into his truck; another company asked for a loading ramp to deliver goods to a store at a strip mall that didn't have a loading dock, and the new Sprinter vans being used by United Parcel Service sport a Handi-Ramp.

Perhaps that's why the company recently cracked *Inc. Magazine's* 5000 after reporting an average of 35 percent growth per year, including 48 percent in 2006.

When Disch bought Handi-Ramp, the plant was located in Mundelein, and he moved the business to a 27,000-square foot facility in Libertyville in 2000. The Lake Bluff resident had always had an itch to be his own boss and use some of the same business savvy he used to give to others.

"I really wanted to be an entrepreneur and take my own advice and either benefit or suffer based on how good my advice was," he said.

One move he made was to keep the manufacturing end here rather than outsourcing it. So the process begins with a call to one of Disch's sales people and finishes with the product being made in the Libertyville facility.

"Our new products come from talking to our customers," Disch said. "Every day is a new opportunity for us. They give us a problem, and our job is to solve it. That's how we are effective."

For example, Handi-Ramp created non-skid aluminum tread strips to replace those black strips to gain better traction on tough surfaces. They can be placed as strips on steps to covering an entire ramp. Disch also made 4,000 hand rails for trailers used by victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Customer calls also led Disch to creating a second business in 2000, Internet Engine, which helps companies develop strategies to drive customers to their Web sites.

Disch said he began a Web site for Handi-Ramp back in 1996 when the only search engine running was Alta Vista. Alta Vista reported to him that his site was attracting more hits than all of the Web sites they were tracking at that time. That was enough to convince Disch of how customers would shop in the future.

Time has created more competition, but Disch said those early years are a good reminder.

"We were the only one out there in the beginning," Disch said. "Once we realized how lucky we were, we made the most of it."



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