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MINDING YOUR BUSINESS

# Web transforms old-line company

## Internet presence lets rampmaker roll into new markets

By Ann Meyer
Special to the Tribune

By leveraging its Internet expertise, a local manufacturing company is finding growth in unusual places.

Handi-Ramp, a Libertyville-based manufacturer of ramps, lifts and material-handling products, discovered the power of the Internet long before many manufacturers. When Chief Executive Thom Disch launched a Web site back in 1995 he was stunned by the response. "We stumbled onto an innovative way to reach customers," he said.

The old-line manufacturing company, which was struggling when Disch bought it a decade ago, hasn't been the same since.

"It has changed the way in which we do business," Disch said. "We used to have 75 percent of our sales go to dealers. Now 75 percent go direct to the end user," including individual homeowners, school districts, municipalities and businesses that find the company online.

The Internet has been generating about four out of five new leads for Handi-Ramp, uncovering markets Disch never would have sought out, he said. While ramps for the disabled were the company's original target, now that segment accounts for just half of Handi-Ramp's sales. Other customers range from Segway scooter owners who need a ramp to load the bikes into their sport-utility vehicles to a traveling circus that needed to transport a three-legged rhinoceros, Disch said.

"People with all sorts of ramp problems find us. People will do a Google on truck ramps and find us," Disch said, noting that trucking giant J.B. Hunt now uses Handi-Ramp's portable ramp system to make deliveries to retailers in strip malls.

Handi-Ramp's experience isn't uncommon, experts say. Over the past decade Internet marketing has brought new customers to businesses in ways never imagined, said Greg Jarboe, spokesman for the Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization, a non-profit based in Wakefield, Mass.

Through Internet marketing, companies can boost their Web site's presence on Google and Yahoo. Search engine marketing involves both natural search optimization, where a company takes steps to ensure its pages are picked up by the search engine browsers, and paid keyword or "pay per click" advertising, where a company buys keywords on a search engine and pays a fee when a user clicks on the ad.

"What search engine marketing does is allow you to segment in a whole new way," Jarboe said, expanding a company's reach beyond traditional geographic or demographic segmentation.

By designing its Web site to be search-engine friendly, Handi-Ramp has become among the top-listed companies on Google under the keywords "ramp," "ambulance ramps," and "truck ramps." "It really creates a dominance of position," Disch said. "It makes us look like a much larger company than we are."

By emphasizing the Internet, Handi-Ramp's sales have climbed 30 percent annually on average for the past decade, Disch said. The company now employs about 25 workers and is targeting 2006 revenue of about $4 million.

Tribune photo by Jim Robinson

Thom Disch of Handi-Ramp Inc. in Libertyville says the firm's Web site has uncovered markets he never would have sought out.

*"We used to have 75 percent of our sales go to dealers. Now [with Internet marketing] 75 percent go direct to the end user.'*
—Thom Disch, chief executive, Handi-Ramp Inc.

Handi-Ramp's success with search marketing spurred Disch to found a second company in 2001, Internet-Engine.net, which focuses on Web site design and search engine optimization. The company handles Handi-Ramp's Web presence, and also serves other companies.

Over the past decade search engine marketing has become a lot more competitive, Disch said, with many more listings found for a given term. Keyword ads that used to cost an advertiser 25 cents per click now cost $2.50 per click, he said.

In fact, search engine marketing represented a $5.75 billion industry in 2005, up 44 percent from the prior year, according to the Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization. Paid placement represents about 83 percent of the spending, according to the organization's November survey of 553 companies, though four out of five advertisers also reported using search engine optimization. "The market keeps growing, and every year there are new things you couldn't do the year before," Jarboe said.

While the goal of 60 percent of search engine advertisers is to sell product, slightly more report that increasing brand awareness is their top objective, according to the survey. Often the two go hand in hand.

While Handi-Ramp sells some product direct from its Web site (www.handiramp.com), it primarily directs online customers to call its toll-free number where its sales representatives can help them order exactly the right ramp.

"Talking to a live person eliminates 98 percent of misorders," Disch said.

Before Disch acquired Handi-Ramp, the 47-year-old company had just four employees and was selling its ramps through dealers. But the Web site was an instant hit among disabled individuals for whom brick-and-mortar shopping was a challenge. They were the early adopters of the Internet, Disch said. "Serendipitously, we walked into this," he said.

Many sales leads start with an individual looking for a solution to a specific problem, so Handi-Ramp takes each request for assistance seriously.

"Once you find a customer with a problem that's not being met, chances are there's another customer with that same need," Disch said. "Being able to promote it on the Internet is where the real opportunity is going to come from."

The company manufactures about half the ramps it sells in its 27,000-square-foot Libertyville facility, with other companies supplying the rest. Many are custom products, such as the ramps with gurneys attached that Duke Energy has used to safely aid sea turtles near its plant on San Diego Bay, or the non-skid walkway requested by an Alaskan kayak shop. More conventionally, the City of Chicago has purchased portable ramps to make polling places wheelchair accessible, Disch said.

The custom approach that Handi-Ramp has adopted requires a can-do attitude, flexibility and the ingenuity to meet various customer demands, Disch said.

Handi-Ramp's sales representatives are trained to never say no. "When they can't figure it out themselves, they go to our sales manager or me," Disch said. "And we put on our thinking caps."

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