

Handi-Ramp Inc. delivers custom ramps, treads, lifts

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The U.S. military uses the company's goods in Iraq, NBC employed them at the 2004 Summer Olympics in Greece, and Hurricane Katrina victims utilize them in Louisiana.

All these specialized jobs for a varied customer base are accomplished in a no-frills, 27,000-square-foot facility in Libertyville, where Handi-Ramp Inc. employees weld and assemble pieces of metal turning them into customized ramps, treads and lifts costing anywhere from \$4 to \$80,000.



27,000 square-foot facility in Libertyville

The 32-employee company's sales and shipments were approximately \$2.6 million in 2005. But it recorded production and shipments of \$280,000 in March alone, and for the whole year, Handi-Ramp expects to record sales of \$4 million. The ramp manufacturer claims an average annual growth rate of 30 percent for the last 10 years.

Many of the firm's ramps are used by government agencies, schools, churches, hotels and other public and commercial facilities to meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Handi-Ramp products are available across North America, including Alaska, Hawaii and Canada.

The company, which started operations in 1958, bills itself as the world's oldest manufacturer of ramping products for the disabled. But the 1990s brought new challenges for Handi-Ramp, which is now located at 510 North Ave., in Libertyville.

The Americans with Disabilities Act was enacted in 1991, making it mandatory for public facilities and commercial buildings to improve access for the disabled. While the new requirements brought in a host of new customers for Handi-Ramp, it also created many new competitors. So intense was the competition, in fact, that the firm was unable to compete successfully and was pushed to the verge of bankruptcy.

After the legislation took effect, Thomas R. Disch, a graduate of Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, bought the company for approximately \$1 million and diversified into manufacturing other goods for commercial and home users.

Today the company manufactures a variety of products, from nonskid treads for stairs and window well covers to boat rails and wheelchair lifts. In fact, 50 percent of Handi-Ramp's sales now are non-disability products.

Disch, 50, developed another business strategy: sell directly to the end user instead of through a dealer network. The Internet proved a valuable tool to reach this goal.

According to Disch, people with disabilities, who were early adopters of the Internet, used the company Web site to check out the products on-line and then call Handi-Ramp to order customized ramps and lifts for their specialized needs.

Roughly 80 percent of the manufacturer's sales now materialize this way.

Part of the success has been enabled by the search engine optimization for Handi-Ramp's Web site. The Web site has been able to consistently maintain front-page listings on the major search engines like Yahoo, Google, MSN, and Altavista.

To further draw in customers, Handi-Ramp customizes products to meet individual needs, something the company encourages its customers to ask for. A majority of its products still are custom made. And the company's fortunes fast changed.

The customization of products has helped Handi-Ramp build a niche. "So many of our products are custom manufactured that we do not really have any competition," Disch said.

Handi-Ramp, he said, is not so much in the product selling business as the problem solving business.

And, according to Disch, the company has done just that for a host of customers, including a Duke Energy Corp. plant in San Diego.



Duke Energy Corp. Plant

The plant was using water as a coolant in its facility and it released the heated water back into the ocean. The company wanted to test the impact of this on sea turtles to ensure there was no adverse impact. In order to move the animals from the beach into the laboratory, Handi-Ramp

built a specialized ramp for the turtles.

Handi-Ramp also custom made a stage lift for the late Christopher Reeves. One of Reeves' helpers looked at the Handi-Ramp Web site and ordered the customized product so Reeves could climb onto a stage. The product takes about 10 minutes to assemble.



Non-skid tread material

But the most popular item the company sells is the nonskid tread, a dimpled piece of aluminum plate, which can be screwed to such surfaces as stairs to avoid slipping in icy weather. The product costs between \$5 and \$12 depending on the size of the project. The company sold 50,000 units last year. The nonskid tread can be bought on-line or by calling the company.

In order to service customers well, Handi-Ramp has chosen to buck the corporate trend and has no voice mail. "We always have a person to answer our sales or customer calls," Disch said.

In addition, the manufacturer sends a customer satisfaction survey to every user and the response to the products has been 99.9 percent positive, according to Disch.

"If there is any negative comment, I go through it myself," he said.

All these efforts have brought rewards, including increased margins for Handi-Ramp, lower costs for end-users, and control of the relationship with the end user. The direct communication with the end user has enabled Handi-Ramp to market its higher-margin custom work more effectively.

But despite a steady growth, Handi-Ramp is not without its problems. "Finding and retaining good people is a challenge," Disch said. The company always finds good, solid employees with the skills to effectively interact with the public. But such skills are in high demand and finding new employees can be difficult."

As for the future, the company plans to buy its mass-produced items from low-cost manufacturers in other countries, including in Latin America, in order to concentrate on customization at its Libertyville facility.