

Walk-in Design Makes Soak in the Tub Safe

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Ituna, Sask. – When people think about inventors, they don't often picture them as a calm-natured, tall, sturdy fellow from a small town in the middle of the Prairies, like Ladimer Kowalchuk.

Ladimer was born and raised in Ituna, Sask., which presently has a population of 700. His first profession was as a journeyman carpenter. Kowalchuk had an inventive nature, however, and became an Author in 1982 of "A Complete Guide to Contracting Your New Home", the initiator of the Automobile Broker in 1983, and the developer of the Bale Berge in 1993. Despite this, he never imagined that, one day, he'd invent a new concept of the bathtub – one that you walk-into rather than climb-into.

"If somebody would have told me 20 years ago that I'd be designing and building bathtubs, I would have told them they were out of their mind," Kowalchuk said, "but one thing leads to another and you end up there."

Kowalchuk stumbled upon the idea in 1990, when his 65-year-old father told him that he could get into the bathtub but that he couldn't get out. Nick Kowalchuk also told his son that he hated showering. "My father owned a grocery store and meat market. He was a professional sausage maker and carried heavy, heavy weights all his life," said Kowalchuk. "He was very heavy. He weighed about 148.5 to 153 kgs (330 to 340lbs).

For three years, the Kowalchuks searched for a bathtub that would meet Nick's needs. When they didn't find one, Ladimer decided to build one.

The original fiberglass bathtub was compact, measuring about 86.36cm (34in) wide, 91.44cm (36in) long and 76.2cm (30in) tall. Kowalchuk's father found it easy to step into because it had a special walk-in door that swung outward. It also came with a moulded seat and massaging whirlpool jets. By the time Kowalchuk made the first tub, he'd invested 20 to \$25,000.⁰⁰.

The inventor formed Safety Bath Inc. in 1994 and began manufacturing tubs out of a 360sq.m. (4000sq.ft.) shop that's now used for applying marine grade fiberglass to the tubs. In addition, Safety Bath occupies a 162sq.m. (1800sq.ft.) main office building and a 900sq.m. (10,000sq.ft.) shop that's used for assembling, testing and shipping.

Currently, the company manufactures four different models of bathtubs, the Standard Safety Bath, which Ladimer originally designed for in-home use, the Safety Bath Supreme, which he made for institutional use and two models that he unveiled in Apr.2006, the Safety Bath So-Lo and the So-Lo with a heated shower deck. "We're the only ones who offer a heated seat," Kowalchuk said. The So-Lo has almost the same measurements as a standard bathtub but has a unique inward swinging door. Kowalchuk designed both for aging Baby Boomers, all of which value their independence.

The So-Lo models are made out of a 1.2x2.43m. (4x8ft.) sheet of acrylic and are currently manufactured in Saskatoon, Sask. "If I can't build things, I'll out-source it," Kowalchuk said. "Whenever possible, we try to buy Canadian parts for our tubs, too."

As of Oct.13, 2006, the So-Lo models will be manufactured in Ituna. "We're installing a thermo-vacuum forming machine in the 4000sq.ft. shop. I believe it's the biggest machine in Western Canada," said Kowalchuk. "We'll be able to do 60 tubs a day." They presently make four per day. Also in Oct., the inventor is launching a Door Kit, which converts any home bathtub into a So-Lo model. "People want to be able to stay in their homes as they age and this simple door frame insert gives them the opportunity to do a conversion and not spend a fortune on it," Kowalchuk said. "A local tradesperson could install it in about four hours."

Safety Bath ships bathtubs to customers as far away as Dawson, N.W.T. and Florida, U.S.A. "We actually have a good central location for shipping," said Kowalchuk. "We use Yellow Freight and Kindersley Transport. With Yellow Freight, our tubs are guaranteed to be in California or Florida in three days. We handle all the brokerage fees and customs so the product just lands at their door."

Customers can purchase bathtubs directly from Safety Bath's main office or from one of 80 Canadian Dealers. "I hired Don Hardy, my Sales Manager, in 2004 and he decided to set up a dealer network," Kowalchuk said. "One year later we started setting up U.S. dealers. We're headed for 1000 dealers in the next three or four years." As of 2005, Safety Bath also has one dealer in Australia. Dealers in China have also expressed an interest in representing Safety Bath. "We're going to look at each opportunity one at a time," said Kowalchuk. "We had stars in our

eyes and pursued a market in Australia and Russia, but we've decided to concentrate on North America."

Between Mar.31, 2005 and Mar.31, 2006, Safety Bath's sales grew 250%. "We're looking at 200% plus growth this year again," Kowalchuk said. "It's accelerating so fast it's almost scary."

Safety Bath isn't the only specialty bathtub manufacturer in the marketplace. One British and six American companies make tubs, with in-swinging doors, which they sell in Canada and the U.S. Kowalchuk's original out-swinging door has earned the company a niche market. "A care home can't buy a bath with an in-swinging door because if a person collapses in it, you can't get them out," Kowalchuk said.

The inventor hasn't relied on design alone to forward his company but has worked hard to promote his product. In the beginning, he personally demonstrated his tubs to potential customers. "We started out being 'Marketing Hillbillies'," said Kowalchuk. "We didn't have a proper brochure. A black and white business card is all we had. I'd throw a tub in the back of the car and go. If I didn't sell anything, I'd come back and sell a few more cars."

Now, the inventor advertises in a few carefully selected magazines and attends six U.S. tradeshows per year. At present, consumers visit Safety Bath's website 200 times a day. Kowalchuk says it took years to develop their website and that staff use it to refer customers to the closest dealer and for marketing. "I've got one girl concentrating on marketing Safety Bath to contractors, one girl working on dealer development and one girl on institutional, care and nursing homes," Kowalchuk said.

The inventor currently employs 20 people, full-time, and also hires a few local farmers during the busy winter months. "50 to 60% of our business is in Jan., Feb., and March," said Kowalchuk. Even though Safety Bath is located in a small town, Kowalchuk has no trouble finding employees. Four of his staff commute and four more have moved to Ituna from Alta. and B.C. "Our employees are all top-notch, hardworking, reliable people," said Kowalchuk. The inventor hired two experienced fiberglass workers, but most of his employees came to the company with skills in another line of work. "There's no trade like ours. It's our own personalized production line, so we kind of want to train employees ourselves," Kowalchuk said.

Kowalchuk has found many advantages to being located in a small town. "Everything's good here. The overhead is probably 25 to 30% of what it would be in a big city," said Kowalchuk. "We've lived in Alberta and Manitoba and moved back when the need arose. For the quality of life that we have here, where could you move? I wouldn't move."

In the future, the inventor plans to open a second head office in the U.S., but will keep manufacturing his bathtubs in Ituna, Sask.