

## Thanks for the splash, dad

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When Ladimer Kowalchuk says he built the family bathtub business around his dad, he couldn't mean it in a more literal way.

"It was actually my father's idea," Kowalchuk said.

Kowalchuk describes his late father as a big man, who operated a meat shop for years.

"He carried meat all his life and his knees were pounded out."

That meant the once simple task of getting in and out of a bathtub presented a major hurdle.

So over Christmas 1992, Kowalchuk, who in the past had worked as a carpenter, rented a local cabinet shop that had closed over the holidays and set about creating an easily accessible walk-in tub that would allow his dad privacy and independence.

The first model was finished in early 1993. His dad, Nick, was key in getting the design right.

"We'd get him there and say 'Sit in here and see if this feels good.'

"So basically I guess you could say I built it around him."

Eventually, bathtub-by-bathtub, Kowalchuk turned the single tub into a business based in small-town Saskatchewan that ships products across North America, and recently to markets overseas.

Safety Bath Inc. turns out 600 to 700 tubs each year. Thanks to the help of word-of-mouth buzz about their product, appearances at trade shows, a Web site and sales pitches, the company has about 90 dealers across Canada.

A decision to move into the U.S. about six months ago has already resulted in about 20 dealers in that country carrying the product, Kowalchuk said.

This summer, the company forged inroads in Australia and Russia.

The home base is Ituna, population 700. The company employs about 20 people in the community northeast of Regina.

The challenge with the first model was figuring out how to effectively seal the tub, Kowalchuk said.

"We designed our door to swing outward and to seal a door is a lot harder than you think it is, to find the right material.

"We got samples from everywhere," he said. "It wasn't like looking on the Internet now, you had to get on the phone and spend time. It was more like detective work."

Once the first tub was perfected, Kowalchuk sat down and realized he had invested about \$60,000. Encouraged by what others said about his invention and eager to recoup some of his original investment, Kowalchuk slowly began to build the business.

In 1998, the company launched its first Web site, and began to generate more interest and inquiries. By 2002, the momentum was building, with Kowalchuk and his wife working off their kitchen table.

In 2004, he hired a sales manager and began setting up a network of dealers, heading to home medical equipment retailers and kitchen and bath stores.

In addition to the basic tub the company first began marketing, there is also a "Safety Bath Supreme" model designed for institutional use, as well as the "Safety Bath So-Lo." The latter is an accessible regular-sized bathtub, accommodating those who want to shower or bathe without stepping over a bathtub wall.

Safety Bath has outgrown its facilities more than once. The company operated for a while out of a building across from Kowalchuk's house, then moved to 4,000 square foot building in downtown Ituna.

"We weren't even in there a year and it was obvious it was getting too small," Kowalchuk said.

A 10,000-square-foot building that used to be an equipment dealership became available north of town and the company moved there in March 2005.

The company now plans to operate out of the former building downtown as well as its current, bigger location.

Kowalchuk has the fibreglass shells done for Safety Bath in Saskatoon, and the tubs are assembled in Ituna.

But being in a small town hasn't been a restriction to growing the business, Kowalchuk said. In fact, the business has benefited from low overhead -- with taxes and insurance rates that would cost much more in the city, he said. Labour hasn't been a challenge either, with a few of the employees being former Alberta residents who were drawn to Saskatchewan for the lower cost of living, he said.

The Canada Export Centre in Vancouver, along with relationships with Saskatchewan Trade and Export Partnership and Export Development Canada, also spurred interest in the company, he said.

An Australian businessman saw the Safety Bath display at the Export Centre and contacted the company after returning home. The first container load carrying 20 tubs was sent to Australia this summer, and another load has already been ordered.

Kowalchuk said a standard safety bath also went in the summer to Russia, where a company plans to certify the bath so the product can be sold there.

The success of the business can be in part attributed to an aging population, creating more demand for accessible bathtubs, Kowalchuk said. And the one-time self-described "marketing hillbillies" have built up a lot of expertise.

"We've learned a lot and I think we're going about it the right way."

His dad, who died in August 2000, also played a role in the company's success, Kowalchuk said.

"My dad always encouraged me. He said, 'You know, you can sell these things.' "

