

The age of aquariums

Bellevue company find niche tending other people's fish

By David A. Grant
Journal Business Reporter

BELLEVUE — People used to ask Steve Clayton when he was going to get a real job.

They didn't think that cleaning

aquariums and feeding fish was much of a career, but the skeptics might want to take another look.

Clayton owns Bellevue-based Clayton Aquarium Corp., which he bills as the nation's largest aquarium service. The company designs, installs and maintains custom-made aquariums, servicing more than 900 tanks.



He has 17 employees, a fleet of 16 service vehicles and expects to top \$1.5 million in sales this year.

Some of his most visible projects include multiple aquariums at Bellevue's Overlake Hospital and the unique circular tanks at Nordstrom's flagship store, which opened last August in downtown Seattle.

But those splashy aquariums are just

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two of many in the Puget Sound region, where thousands of visitors each day enjoy Clayton's colorful installations at banks, medical clinics, retirement homes and restaurants, though few would recognize his name.

The company's growth in recent years has been made possible by a combination of technological change and the increasing perception that viewing fish may be good for one's health.

"What hasn't changed is that people enjoy fish as much as in the '50s, but they need them even more," he said, referring to workplaces that are becoming ever more stressful. "I think people have a need to have living things around. It's only human."

Childhood hobby became career

That's an idea that Clayton has been enthusiastically promoting since 1954, when, as a small child, he and his brother, Richard, founded Clayton Aquarium in Seattle with help from his parents. His first slogan was "Fish are Fascinating," and his first customers were friends who came to his house to buy fish.

Since that time, aquarium

equipment became more efficient, communications went mobile, computers began tracking operations and his slogan became a little more sophisticated: "Bringing tranquility and calm to Northwest working environments."

Although he still has customers from the early 1960s and people have become more willing to embrace the benefits of aquariums in the workplace, running the business has not been easy, and banks generally have been unwilling to loan him money.

"I just pounded my head against the wall," he said. "If this was something that was viable, there would be hundreds of aquarium services around the country, and there aren't."

One project that helped raise the profile of aquarium fish as well as his business is Overlake Hospital Medical Center, which remains Clayton's signature work on the Eastside. It includes a row of L-shaped aquariums in the main lobby that form the walls of several admitting offices. The installation is colorful, lively and integral to the room's design.

"It's very calming during a stressful day," said Harriet Acord, an admissions registrar who has worked in one of the aqua-offices the past two years. "With very ill patients it's a very

calming environment."

Business has taken off since '96

What Clayton learned from Overlake was that the company was capable of bigger things. In 1986, the year he installed tanks at the medical center and moved his business to Bellevue, the company had about 300 clients.

Now he has more than 800 clients, is installing tanks at the rate of about two per week and has experienced growth of 8 to 10 percent annually for the past four years.

"It showed what we could do with a commercial project on a large scale," Clayton said. "That made us feel more confident about what we were doing."

But an even more important factor in ramping up his business, particularly for saltwater aquariums, which now make up 60 percent of his tanks, has been the rapid development of new equipment and technology, Clayton said.

Examples include the widespread use of Plexiglas for tanks instead of glass and automatic feeding systems that use dry food rather than frozen food. That has allowed the company to install saltwater tanks in offices where employees aren't around seven days a week to care for the fish.

"We take care of everything. It's a total turn-key operation,"

he said.

Clayton is the main designer for the installations, which feature swanky wood cabinets that blend seamlessly into offices and hide the sophisticated pump, filtration, feeding and heating systems needed to keep the fish on an even keel.

Technology allows innovation

On the service side of the business, technology has helped as well. Because keeping tabs on thousands of fish is a constant job, Clayton has embraced the innovations, investing heavily in a computer system that tracks orders, feeding schedules and service calls.

The next step, he said, is to add laptop computers to the trucks so technicians can input data directly into the system and

keep in closer touch with the 1,800-square-foot leased space that is the hub of the business.

While the company is happy to take on commercial customers, it has avoided servicing private residences, which make up just 5 percent of its business because "it becomes more like taking care of someone's pets," Clayton said, and because he believes in the importance of having his aquariums in public places.

"It's a constant battle to convince people of the value of our product, how to translate the product to a commercial customer," he said. "It's one thing to dream, and it's another to make things work as a business."

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