



Polo-Lights are preformed then trimmed on a special cutter and assembled by hand. Fitted with fluorescent tubes they have become a popular product.



Aqua-Royale gravels are selling to a growing market. They are cleaned and colored in Michigan and packaged on special machines in Saginaw.

O'Dell

Hurrying Toward Big

Some people think O'Dell is just another name for Kenneth Hall and in a way it is. But Ken Hall has big ideas for his firm.

By
Lee Edwards

SAGINAW, MI -- For ten years O'Dell has been a fixture in Saginaw, yet two months ago the fixture announced it was moving -- corporate headquarters, staff, records and all -- to Canton, Georgia.

The announcement came as a surprise to many in the industry and surprise or not underscores O'Dell's growth. By any standards O'Dell is fast-growing, has been for more than a decade and probably will be for another decade or more.

The beginning

Organized in 1962 the firm began with little more than a different idea but that was enough. It enabled O'Dell to create an all glass aquarium, change the buying habits of hobbyists and move from a small company in a small town to become an international leader.

Last year growth surged ahead of all previous records and in the twelve months between last October and this, the firm acquired three manufacturers, M & L and Bramco in Georgia; Scattergood in Missouri, rejected several others, created a new subsidiary, Triton, and introduced two new products. In addition the firm has at least three items planned for market in the year ahead. If you had to define O'Dell in this year of economic unrest the word "solid" would do the job best.

An interview

Not long ago I had an opportunity to interview Hall and found him a pragmatist, that is a realist by old school definitions. Trained as an engineer, he is proud, aggressive, in a hurry and even abrasive at times yet if he's pushing it is toward one goal -- a major industry position for his firm. Hall stands ready to acquire firms or create products in whatever combination it takes to make O'Dell one of the largest -- if not the largest --

firm in the aquarium industry.

And, says Hall, the growth is moving according to plan. The first step was to make the company a major tank manufacturer. That began with the concept of an all-glass tank and was finalized with a combination of quality and factory service. The next step was to add a secondary product line, Polo Light hoods, Aqua Royale gravel, knockdown stands and more. The third step came last year with acquisitions and new products. The fourth phase, probably the trickiest of all has just begun.



Ken Hall has headed O'Dell for several years and recently purchased a new Georgia headquarters for his firm.

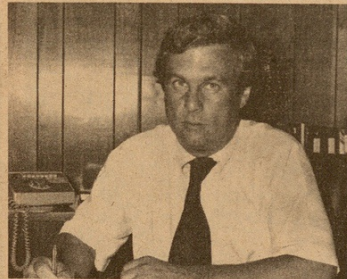
Serving two markets

To Ken Hall the fourth phase means expanding toward separate markets -- reaching the mass merchandiser while remaining loyal to independent retailers. Hall's solution is Triton, an entity designed to build a line of aquarium products separate from O'Dell.

"Triton," Hall told me, "Combines with O'Dell only at the top. In the

marketplace it is competitive -- and the difference is that Triton is geared toward another market."

Essentially Triton was created through the acquisition of M & L. Its job: to develop a product line with an image removed from O'Dell in the consumer's mind. Hall thinks he has accomplished this goal even though Triton tanks may resemble O'Dell's in several ways, even to similar quality. The packaging is different and the two will seldom if ever be seen in competing stores.



"O'Dell packages are designed for the independent retailer," Hall says.

"Triton products are made to sell without the personal touch," Hall says, "That means they are self-sellers designed for display racks and mass merchandiser's gondolas."

"You normally won't see O'Dell products there," he added, "The individual pet retailer is the only place for them. O'Dell's packages are designed for independent shops and advertising is geared for it."

Essentially Hall sees Triton in the hands of mass merchandisers who have full warehousing facilities. In contrast O'Dell is sold through distributors and jobbers and retailers who want the line buy them there. The move keeps the prices right and the competition honest.

Better retailing

While Hall's approach is to serve both independent pet shop and mass merchandiser markets, he personally believes that tomorrow's independent retailer will be able to compete better with mass merchandisers because new techniques will be available.

Some industry analysts see parallels between the drug and pet industry but Hall feels the independent retailer may soon more closely resemble the independent hardware retailer.



Tanks are hand-fitted by a special process. Preformed rims provide the careful alignment required.

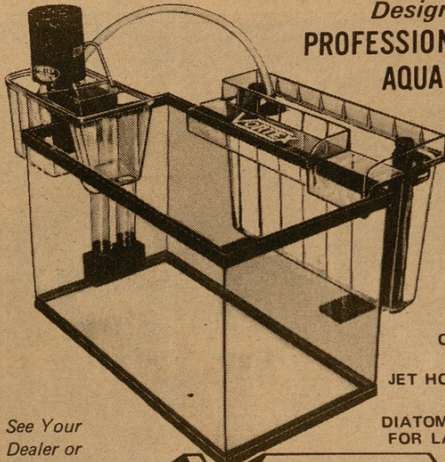
There, the appeal of mass marketers is weakening. Firms such as Answer Man, Pay'n'Save and others are facing problems while the independent retailer, by contrast, is gathering power. One reason is that many independents have joined together in buying and selling co-ops. Ace Hardware and True Value are two

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O'Dell

Continued from page 8

examples where centralized buying, among other services, creates the purchasing power which allows the retailer to offer competitive prices. Hall thinks independent aquarium retailers could move toward similar arrangements in the years ahead.

Problems make perfect

While Hall is a man in a hurry he's human and being human has faced his share of problems and miscalculations. The most noticeable headache last year was a new heater. It was introduced then pulled back for changes and improvements last year. The concept was proven and sound but the product fell short of expectations. Delays and reengineering cost the firm a considerable sum and Ken Hall an almost immeasurable amount of tension and frustration.

Essentially Hall and his staff were trying to shorten the time between development and marketing and Hall now admits time cannot be compressed.

"I was in a hurry," he admits, "and I learned you cannot accelerate development time. You need hours, days and months to fully test a product and you can't eliminate any of the steps."

The heater is fine now, reliable and proven with a fully tested production set up. Marketing is moving well and by the end of the year nearly every retailer should be well stocked with models in all four sizes. The major point here is that Hall learned from the experience. New products in the future will be given all the development time they need.

By the time the firm moves into its new 133,000 square foot offices and plant at the site of the Bramco plant in Canton, Georgia, who can predict what will have happened? Ken Hall may have purchased new companies, introduced

new products or tried both but if you're a gambler you can bet that whatever moves Hall makes between now and summer will be made for one reason - to push O'Dell one step closer to the top of the mountain. AI

Cooper Leaves O'Dell

BAY CITY, MI -- Phillip Cooper, sales manager and a long-time member of O'Dell's management team has resigned unexpectedly with every intention of manufacturing pet products himself.

Cooper has founded PCI Industries in Bay City and plans to begin his product line with a series of unique wooden aquarium stands. Wooden stands are currently popular as decorator items in the west and Cooper believes the popularity will spread nationwide.

New products

In addition Cooper told reporters he has plans for several other wooden aquarium items and will increase production facilities shortly to include a broad line of plastic pet products.

Initially Cooper plans to limit distribution of his wooden products to the midwest but will expand quickly to offer plastic products nationally. Production is scheduled to begin before the end of the month and the first distributor, Woolverton, has been announced. Other wholesalers will be signed up shortly.

Cooper also told *Aquarium Industry* that he plans to seek new inventions from designers currently unknown to the pet trade. He will guarantee production for suitable ideas and will offer a generous royalty.

Currently PCI, Phillip Cooper Industries, is headquartered at 4023 Devonshire, Bay City, MI 48706. The phone number is 517-686-5208. AI

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