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Portrait of a corporate ef(fish)iciency expert



Clayton: his client list reads like a local "Who's Who"

Tom Cammarata photo

By LARRY LIEBMAN

To children visiting the dentist, an aquarium is a great waiting-room pacifier. Watching fish is as relaxing as hypnosis, according to a study by the University of Pennsylvania Schools of Dentistry and Veterinary Medicine.

Steve Clayton makes a business of these mobile pacifiers. His Bellevue firm, Clayton Aquariums, has installed and maintains some 500 aquariums from Marysville to Olympia.

Clayton's business is one of the biggest of its type in the West. Some 90 percent of his customers are corporations or institutions, including many doctors and dentists. The remaining 10 percent, his private clients, are like a local "Who's Who."

Clayton's firm tends to Seattle Seahawk star Curt Warner's aquarium at his Kirkland condo, and to developer Dave Sabey's in his Hunts Point mansion. Developer Martin Selig has an outdoor koi pond at his Madrona Park estate served by Clayton's company.

The aquarium business has evolved greatly since the mid-1950s, when Clayton was peddling tropical fish to school chums in his Ballard neighborhood.

Plexiglass tanks, sophisticated filtration systems, automatic lighting and commercial-grade motors are the norm now for most large aquarium installations. Tanks come in every shape and often serve as room dividers.

Clayton uses a computer to schedule his technicians' service trips.

The work is complex and Clayton enjoys it, but his rewards have been more psychic than monetary. The firm, which has a staff of nine, grosses between \$550,000 and \$600,000 a year; Clayton is the president and sole owner. Big profits have been elusive, he said.

On the positive side, Clayton's customers pay their bills on time and he has kept

his indebtedness low, owing but \$10,000 on a bank note and \$5,000 on a loan for a company car. He said he's not looking for outside investment capital, but is "always looking for new ideas."

"You've got to have lots of aquariums to really make it," Clayton said. His goal is to add about 50 to 75 corporate aquariums a year.

Clayton custom designs most of his aquariums, like the units in the admissions department at Bellevue's Overlake Hospital, which has one of the West's biggest institutional fish collections. Still to come at Overlake is a 16-foot tank in the surgery waiting room.

"From day one we've had positive feedback on our aquariums," said hospital president Sandy Jeghers. "People enter a hospital expecting a sterile, cold atmosphere. With the aquariums, the environment is instantly relaxing and cordial."

Clayton's aquarium career began as a family hobby/quasi-business created by his older brother Dick, now the vice president of Thinking Machines Inc., a Cambridge, Mass. company that designs super computers.

Steve Clayton, 43, went fulltime in the aquarium business in 1972 and incorporated in 1981.

"The first three or four years were a bear," he said. "We had to create a corporate and institutional interest that wasn't there."

Clayton has accumulated an impressive portfolio of installations, including executive offices at The Boeing Co. and McDonald's Corp.'s Northwest regional office in Kirkland, waiting rooms at Providence, Swedish, Evergreen, University and Overlake hospitals, numerous dental and medical clinics, more than 50 nursing and retirement homes and many restaurants, including the new McDonald's below the Colman ferry terminal on Seattle's harbor front.

But Clayton isn't taking things for

granted. Last December he hired longtime friend and fellow Ballard High grad Craig Christophersen as his marketing manager. Christophersen brings experience as a building contractor and sales manager, and long experience working with interior designers and architects.

Bellevue interior designer Michael Tye, a long-time client of Clayton's, thinks Christophersen's presence will help Clayton Aquarium's bottom line.

"This takes the marketing and salesmanship pressure off Steve and allows him to be more of an administrator," said Tye, noting that aquariums are "great visual elements . . . They are very soothing and calming and serve as pacifiers for kids, and they aren't a high cost item relative to other things."

The elderly, too, are captivated by aquarium fish. Bellevue's Careage, which operates nursing homes in California, Arizona and Washington, has through-wall aquariums in seven locations, visible from both lobbies and dining rooms.

"They're a conversation piece and people are overwhelmed by the beauty," said Vera Taylor, Careage's director of marketing.

Custom-designed aquariums for corporate or institutional use cost \$700 to \$6,500, Clayton said. Add to that monthly service contracts costing \$80 to \$150.

At the high-end of the cost are aquariums for salt water fish, a corporate favorite because fish imported from the Philippines, Hawaii and the Caribbean are more colorful than their fresh water cousins and are frequently used in lieu of paintings and wall hangings. Salt water fish, however, require about twice as much care as fresh water fish.

The tropical fish most frequently requested are bright yellow tang, the clown fish with yellow and orange vertical stripes, and the foot-long lion fish with flowing fins. Some restaurants make a ritual of inviting customers to watch as the

lion fish are fed their regular meals of live goldfish, evoking reactions of awe and revulsion.

Aquarium companies that pursue the corporate and institutional market are still a rarity. One of Clayton's few direct competitors is David Reinhardt, whose Everett-based Aquarium Service Northwest, services 150 tanks throughout the Puget Sound area. A major problem is getting healthy fish, Reinhardt said.

"The demand for saltwater fish is growing enormously and as it occurs quality control sometimes breaks down between fisher and the distributor," he said. "We could reach the point where demand far outstrips supply."

Clayton's business can't be compared with a retail aquarium or a pet store. Off-the-street customers normally don't wander into his office in Bellevue to browse. The showroom has some empty tanks, lots of literature and one through-the-wall tank full of iridescent salt water fish.

Some retail pet shops, especially in Los Angeles and San Francisco, have attempted to diversify by selling as well as servicing aquariums for institutions and corporations, noted Clayton.

"But the pet shops soon find out that servicing aquariums is too much of an expense and many quickly go back to retailing tanks and fish," he said.

Clayton, who scuba dives as a hobby, was a lieutenant in the Navy during the Vietnam war. In that assignment, his only involvement with aquariums was to maintain the captain's fish tank. "I never kept the tank more than half-full," he recalled. "The boat rocked a lot."

Clayton doesn't usually keep an aquarium at his Green Lake home, but installs one every time he throws a party. "What would people think if they couldn't find an aquarium in my home?" he asked. ■