



Photo by Jeffery M. Harris for the Seattle Times

Steve Clayton, owner of Clayton Aquariums, touts fish as a "beautiful-to-watch" living sculpture.

AQUARIUMS

Something fishy going on in offices

It's probably just about impossible to live or work on the Eastside and not run into at least one or two of Steve Clayton's aquariums. You'll see them in banks, doctor's offices, hospitals, dental offices and attorneys' waiting rooms. Gone are the rectangular tanks of yesteryear with tubes, pumps and filters hanging over the top. Thanks to new technology, today's tanks are sleek and sparkling showcases that can be made in almost any size and shape.

Clayton has been running Clayton Aquariums, which started as a family business in 1954, pretty much on his own for the past 20 years.

Service:

Designing, building, installing and maintaining aquariums for corporate and institutional use.

The challenge:

Clayton Aquariums has designed, built and installed more than 600 aquariums. But that's just the beginning. "The really challenging part is maintaining and servicing the tanks after they're installed and keeping both fish and client happy."

Maintaining:

"Most of our tanks have to be serviced every 14 to 16 days. This includes cleaning, adding new water, checking and cleaning the equipment, checking food supplies and feeding patterns. It's a critical part of what we do. We want these fish to thrive."

Selling the idea:

"Twenty years ago an aquarium in a corporate setting was a pretty new idea and people were skeptical. Now, it's easier to sell the idea, but we want to make sure people are motivated and interested in the fish because it does take a commitment from them. Even though we maintain the tanks, the client has to take care of daily feedings, so tanks really will only work for clients who are going to be in the office five or even five and a half days a week. You can't just shut the place down for a few days."

Protecting the fish:

"I've been diving with the people who collect our fish for us out in the Pacific Ocean in Hawaii or around the Marshall Islands. I know how serious they are and how carefully they treat these fish. I'm not about to take one of these and put it in a tank where people aren't going to care about it and can't

commit to keeping it healthy. It not only wouldn't be good business, I couldn't have it on my conscience."

Attraction:

"The fish are simply beautiful to watch. People are realizing they can spend money on artwork or plants but with fish what they get, in essence, is a living sculpture. Fish have a calming effect. It's a proven fact that they lower blood pressure, and anyone who's gotten caught up in watching them knows they can help you forget the tension of the moment."

The service component:

"The key to what we're doing is being able to service our accounts in a professional, reliable and regular way so we can maintain control over the tanks and thus the fish."

The solution:

"Every day I have vans working in several different regions of Puget Sound. I have nine aquarium technicians working for me, and it's their job to service their regular accounts and to deal with any emergencies that come up in that geographic territory."

Teamwork:

"My management philosophy is to find good people, make sure they're trained well and then pay them well enough so it's worth their while to stay. My employees are professionals who love fish and enjoy what they're doing."

Residential:

"I haven't done too many residential tanks mainly because of the problems getting in and out of people's homes to service them." But certain people, including David Sabey, Martin Selig and Curt Warner, have managed to overcome those obstacles. In Clayton's new home in Kirkland, (still under construction) he is planning a tank inside an exterior wall that will be visible from the outside of the house, as well as from the interior hallway.

Costs:

Prices vary, but a 130-gallon aquarium can be designed, built and installed for around \$3,000. Maintenance service contracts run around \$100 to \$125 a month.

—Carlene Canton

Clayton Aquariums

President: Steve Clayton.

Address: 13256 Northup Way, Bellevue (showroom hours by appointment only).

Phone: 644-7222.

Number of clients: 600.

Number of employees: 13.

Service vans: Nine.

Budget for fish food: About \$1,000 a month.

1990 revenues: \$690,000.

Projected 1991 revenues: \$800,000 (18 percent sales, 82 percent service).