

SpaRetailer

INSIDE THE HOT TUB INDUSTRY

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Former Industry Outsider Shapes Future : Ex-Firearms executive reloads in hot tub industry and triggers a change.

Though your best laid plans don't work out, you can still end up in the right place at the right time. That's what happened to Chris Robinson, director of sales and marketing for Lucite International. As the Hot Tub Council's division director, he's a key player in shaping the direction of the portable spa industry.

A mechanical engineering undergraduate student who went on to receive a masters in business administration with a minor in marketing, Robinson started his career in an industry where the mission couldn't be any further from the hot tub industry's goal of helping people relax. He worked at the Remington Arms division of DuPont, building parts for firearms. Since DuPont encouraged its employees to try several positions before settling on a career within the company, he jumped to the tub and spa division at Lucite International.

It wasn't because he knew much about spas, though. He just wanted to get out while the getting was good.

"My feeling was that [Remington] was not a core business and that it was going to be sold," Robinson said. He was right. DuPont sold Remington in 1993. It sold Lucite the same year. "Well, that didn't work," he joked.

As he looks back on his gamble with humor, he sounds more amused and engaged than one might expect from a person who made such a miscalculation. Of course, it helps that he landed in the Lucite division that makes sheet for spas at a time when hot tubs were beginning to take off and pioneers were starting to put the right pieces together.

"I've seen the industry grow. I love working with entrepreneurs and watching their business grow," he says. "That's the part I like about it. You can touch it, feel it and watch it change. It's more fun than the bath business because it tends to be white [acrylic] sheet and nothing ever changes. Fashion in hot tubs changes every year."

After 20 years in the industry, he's found himself becoming more than just a supplier, however. While he didn't plan it, he's become one of the movers and shakers who may end up helping those in the industry come together to help themselves. Call it another case of being in the right place at the right time.

An outsider looking in, Robinson says he believes an on-going Hot Tub Council initiative could do more than just pull spa sales out of the doldrums, it could also take the industry to the next level.

As he sees it, the key will be getting everyone in the industry to find common ground. He understands it's a sea change for manufacturers, for example, because most run regional businesses and haven't seen the point for national advertising if it won't directly affect their sales. The business has been so competition-oriented that manufacturers spend more time bashing competitors than worrying about

the industry as a whole. They also worry that others might reap all the benefits without making any investment.

"They're not typically marketers. They're entrepreneurs with good ideas [and] they don't trust that everyone's going to participate," Robinson says.

Now that sales have been down for three straight years, many are willing to consider something other than business as usual.

"There has to be momentum. There has to be a defining event that catalyzes people to make a change. For them it was a couple of down years. It's got people concerned enough that they're willing to compromise."

And if the success of the recreational vehicles and boating industries are any indication, the effort could pay off. Both sectors had had a similar run of luck before the players got together and advertised the recreation category, rather than a single company. One year later, sales were up and their slogans were as familiar as "Got Milk?" and "Beef, it's what for dinner."

"We want to get out the message that hot tubbing is a fun family activity," Robinson says. As he sees it, it will succeed only if everyone cooperates. "The key thing is for people to participate. It won't change if you're not willing to help change."