

Michael Duck: ‘Everybody has their own freaky quality’

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Michael Duck, 59, is the founder and CEO of A.C. Dispensing Equipment Inc. (SureShot Solutions), based in Lower Sackville, N.S., the industry leader in dispensing in North America's restaurant sector.



I was born in Asbury Park, New Jersey. I wanted to be a garbage man. He was a cool cat because he would have the cool stuff you wanted hanging off the side of the truck – that bicycle frame or lawnmower with the engine you wanted so you could make a mini-bike. I worked at Howard Johnson's for 50 cents an hour as a dishwasher. If I had no dishes, I'd peel potatoes, sweep the floor. My boss said, 'You got time to lean, you got time to clean; you work too fast, you won't last; you work too slow, you gotta go.' I've always carried that advice with me.

We moved when I was 15 years old. My dad wanted to start a business and felt there were opportunities in Nova Scotia, where he started an oil-burner-repair business. I said 'Not me! I want to work from 9 to 5!' I knew more than him – I quit school in Grade 10 and worked as a stevedore on Halifax's waterfront making good money. It was a lot of work unloading ships by hand. One day, there was a forklift and pallets and I was out of a job. My dad had started a new janitorial company that had Baxter Dairies as a client. It opened a new plant in 1976 and he introduced me. I went from making \$12 an hour to \$3.50, starting as a general helper but I was getting married so needed that steady gig. I moved dairy cases, whatever needed doing. Whenever I had spare time, I'd fix stuff because I'm mechanically inclined, that's my freaky quality.

Everybody has their own freaky quality. Entrepreneurs have to have every club in a golf bag. We're trying all these clubs; shipping, receiving, marketing, salesperson, banker – we gotta do it all. But anybody who golfs has a go-to club. As your business grows, you've got to get back to your go-to club – your freaky quality you're good at – and delegate to other people.

When my job moving cases was done I'd fix something – that's what I liked doing. My boss saw that, so put me in maintenance – that was cool as I got more money. I saw my new boss wasn't going to be around long, so I started learning what I had to do to get his job. I did night school, correspondence courses and eventually became plant engineer.

I'd get to work around 7 a.m., stopping to get coffee for staff. [The coffee-shop employees] would add cream by hand, too much sometimes – I'd say 'easy on the cream.' My boss told me to stop complaining and do something. That was a personal challenge. If we don't take on challenges, we'll never find out how good we are. A lot of people mosey along, saying 'I should have done that.' Go challenge yourself and see what happens!

I invented dispensing machines in my basement in 1984, selling the first in 1985 to a Tim Hortons. Not being a sales guy, I gave it to them for six months, no charge, saying 'if you like it, pay for it.' After three months, they paid and ordered another. I loved my job at the dairy, working until 1990 while part-time doing \$400,000 in sales of dairy- and sweetener-dispensing machines.

By 1997, up to 11 people were doing a million dollars in sales out of my basement on 30 tons of machinery, including a 1946 punch press my wife suffered hearing. We still use it. I bought a machine that cost \$250,000, worth more than the house. We outgrew our first plant in four years. By 2002, we bought an injection-moulding company, then an electrical company. We now have a 65,000-square-foot plant and offices with 115 employees. We do \$20-million to \$25-million annually in sales.

I walk around every day talking to people. The music genre changes every two hours, there's a quiet room, exercise room, balcony, cafeteria with popcorn, ... a movie theatre with race cars employees can book for their kids' birthday parties. I have my own workshop to develop machines.

For fun, I play golf, shoot sporting clays and teach performance driving on Porsches and BMWs.

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