

small business

Adjusting to specific salon clients

• This firm's sink shifts to fit people who have limited mobility, for better hair days.

By TODD NELSON
Special to the Star Tribune

A good salon experience can go down the drain if getting shampooed leaves you hurting or your clothes and dignity drenched.

That's a problem for some senior citizens, wheelchair users and others whose physical limitations or stature keep them from fitting comfortably at the fixed-height shampoo bowls used by most salons.

Without a good fit, customers can suffer neck or back pain, get their clothes soaked or endure getting lifted from a wheelchair to a salon seat just to get their hair washed. Stylists also can experience aches and pains from bending and stretching while working at fixed-mount bowls.

Hoping to persuade salon clients, hairdressers and shop owners that it has the answer to such problems is a small Minneapolis company that makes what it calls the Adjust-a-Sink.

The product does just what its name says, raising or lowering the shampoo bowl by 12 inches to accommodate clients of different abilities and sizes, said Dave Shusterich, president of Accessible Systems.

Clients get a more comfortable shampoo, hairdressers get to stand up straight and salon owners can gain a competitive advantage, he said.

A patented telescopic drain and lift system lets the user adjust the sink's height. A stylist uses a hydraulic foot pump, similar to those used to raise and lower salon and barber shop chairs, to change the sink level.

Accessible Systems is trying to engineer a change of its own for the Adjust-a-Sink, aiming to build demand from commercial salons to go with its existing customers — salons at senior care and residential centers.

The company hopes commercial sales will help double revenue, from roughly \$500,000 in 2007 to more than \$1 million this year, Shusterich said.

The market has plenty of upside, with 1,500 Adjust-a-Sinks in use and more than 40,000 salons and senior-oriented centers and 300,000 commercial salons to target.

Two Fantastic Sam's locations and the Aveda Institute are testing the sink, Shusterich said. The challenge is in getting larger salon companies to adopt the sink on a wide scale. One obstacle may be the Ad-



Ted Halone used the Accessible Systems sink when washing Karen Houghton's hair. Halone said his clients love the adjustable basin, which Houghton said is far more comfortable than conventional models.

just-a-Sink's cost. At \$3,500, the price might be 10 times that of a standard sink. The company has redesigned components and taken other measures to reduce costs, said Shusterich, who added that the price also will come down as more units are sold.

The company has tried to make buying easier, and recently began accept credit card payments, Shusterich said. It also just made its first lease-to-own sale; the salon owner's cost to own the sink will work out to \$4 a day over three years.

"We think you can charge more as a salon owner to have your hair shampooed using the Adjust-a-Sink," said Mark Engel, co-owner of Accessible Systems. "It's a better experience." It's certainly better than what Engel recalls growing up with a father who had multiple sclerosis. His mother struggled to use the sprayer from the kitchen sink to wash his father's hair, usually soaking him and the kitchen floor in the process.

"Nobody would be happy

with the whole thing, including the kids on the sidelines listening to it all and watching it," Engel said. "From a personal standpoint, I can really relate to this product. ... Just that little piece of dignity, getting your hair washed so that you can look and feel good when the rest of your body perhaps isn't cooperating."

That personal history in part prompted Engel and co-owner John Peterson to buy Accessible Systems in 2007. The seller was Barb Klawitter, a licensed beautician who invented the Adjust-a-Sink in the early 1990s.

Engel and Peterson formed Meribel Enterprises six years ago to acquire product-based companies. Their first pur-

chase was Atlas Manufacturing, a Minneapolis contract manufacturing company founded in 1962.

Atlas, which has 65 employees, makes retail displays, industrial enclosures and chassis and racks for technology products, Engel said.

Clients from AccessAbility Inc., a Minneapolis nonprofit that provides training and work for people who have disabilities and economic disadvantages, assemble the adjustable sinks.

The Adjust-a-Sink is "the best thing I've seen out there," said Jean Rueckert, hair stylist at Mount Olivet Careview Home in Minneapolis.

"It helps the residents who can't bend their heads back and

ACCESSIBLE SYSTEMS

Business: The Adjust-a-Sink, an adjustable-height shampoo bowl
Founded: 1992; current owners bought the company in 2007
Based: Minneapolis
Website: Adjustasink.com
Employees: three
Executives: Dave Shusterich, president
2007 revenue: \$500,000
Strategy: Pursue sales at commercial salons while continuing to serve the senior-citizen market

it helps the stylists with their backs so they're not bending over," Rueckert said. "I wouldn't operate without one because it's so handy."

Industry veteran Ted Halone, owner of the Hair Shoppe in Bloomington, said the Adjust-a-Sink is a simple solution to a long-vexing problem.

"My clients are just delighted with it," Halone said. "The best part of the service is the shampoo. If I'm standing and working and I'm more comfortable, I'm going to give a better shampoo than if I'm bending over and my upper back and lower back are hurting. It's been a great plus all the way."

The expert says: Avinash Malshe, marketing professor at the University of St. Thomas Opus College of Business, said that the Adjust-a-Sink looks interesting but faces a challenge getting into established salons at its \$3,500 price tag.

"Unless I as a buyer really see the benefit in the long term, it will be difficult for me to make that decision to say I'm going to go ahead and buy," Malshe said. "Otherwise, what would motivate me to switch from my regular supplier at that price?"

The company, Malshe said, might get a favorable response with a combination of marketing that emphasizes the benefits to salons (less stress on stylists, more comfortable customers) and "sampling" the product at salons that have older clients or are close to senior housing communities.

Todd Nelson is a freelance writer in Woodbury. His e-mail address is todd_nelson@mac.com.

outside consultant

Q More and more companies are "going green," making changes to minimize paper use, increase recycling and promote public transportation. What additional strategies can companies use to further endorse going green?

SALLY MAINQUIST
PRESIDENT AND CEO,
CERTES FINANCIAL PROS

A Developing and using green policies in offices is more important than ever. Energy prices are on everyone's minds and show up in all aspects of business.

One of the most important steps in this process is to get your employees involved at the beginning, throughout your organization. To begin, you might develop an "environmental policy statement" in which you clearly establish environmentally intelligent practices as priorities. After determining goals, you can work with your employees to determine which strategies can best help reach the goals.

Involving your employees is essential to the success of your plans because, ultimately, they carry out the practices.

Some strategies you might consider include:

- Increasing the use of natural light.
- Using less-toxic materials.

- Improving ventilation and acoustics.

- Modifying purchasing policies to include environmental considerations.

- Conducting energy- and water-use audits to identify ways to improve efficiency.

- Encouraging alternative transportation such as carpools, bicycles and car-sharing networks.

- Developing waste-management policies for disposing of hazardous materials.

For more suggestions, try the "Greening Advisor" of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

DALE B. THOMPSON
PROFESSOR OF ETHICS
AND BUSINESS LAW,
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS
OPUS COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

Answers are provided by the John M. Morrison Center for Entrepreneurship at the University of St. Thomas. E-mail questions to: consultant@startribune.com.

small business calendar

MONDAY, JUNE 16

Business training orientation. 6 to 7 p.m., Rondo Community Library, 461 Dale St., St. Paul. Free. Call Bonita, 651-379-8429. Sponsor: Neighborhood Development Center. Topic: Learn what it takes to start and finance a business before you invest your time and money.

TUESDAY, JUNE 17

SCORE business consultations. 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., Southdale Library, 7007 York Av. S., Edina. Free. Call 952-847-5900. Sponsors: Hennepin County Library and Service Corps of Retired Executives. Confidential business consultations with an experienced business leader.

Small business solutions lunch and learn. 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., 10400 Viking Drive, Eden Prairie. Free. Call Kevin Terpstra, 952-818-3322. Sponsor: Phenomenal Networks. A discussion on new productivity solutions for small businesses.

Website marketing — hands-on workshop. 6 to 8 p.m., Rondo Community Library, 461 Dale St., St. Paul. Free. Call Romaine, 651-379-8430. Sponsor: Neighborhood Development Center. Topic: Discover low-cost options for attracting target audiences to your website.

Inventor's Network monthly meeting. 6:30 to 9 p.m., Vandusen Center, 1900 LaSalle Av., Minneapolis. Free for members, \$15 nonmembers. Call 651-602-3175. Topic: How to approach print editors and broadcast producers to get your share of free publicity. Rita McCormick, McCormick Marketing Communications, will speak.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 18

Entrepreneur advisory council meeting. 7:30 to noon today and June 19, Minneapolis Marriott Southwest, 5801 Opus

Pkwy., Minnetonka. Free for members, \$99 nonmembers. Call John Kurth, 952-942-8560. Sponsor: The Meridian Group. Meet with other business owners and executives so you can take control of your business, improve your profitability and create your vision of success.

Marketing your business seminar. 8 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., Anchor Bank, 1570 Concordia Av., St. Paul. \$39. Call 651-632-8937. Sponsor: St. Paul SCORE. Topics: Market planning, understanding your business, defining customer and target markets, and more.

THURSDAY, JUNE 19

SCORE business consultations. 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., Brookdale Library, 6125 Shingle Creek Pkwy., Brooklyn Center. Free. Call 952-847-5900. Sponsors: Hennepin County Library, and Service Corps of Retired Executives. Confidential business consultations with an experienced business leader.

SATURDAY, JUNE 21

Small business start-up guidelines. 10:30 a.m. to noon, Minneapolis Central Library, RKM Meeting Room 5-275, 300 Nicollet Mall. Free. Call 612-630-6000. Sponsors: Hennepin County Library and SCORE. Learn about resources available to start a small business, and how to create a business plan.

Items to be considered for this listing must be received by e-mail on Tuesdays, 13 days before publication. Include the time, date, location, sponsor, for information, phone number to call for information. Send to: SmallBiz@startribune.com

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30 yr jumbo	7.050	1.000	\$1341	20%	7.181	3/1 ARM	5.125	1.000	\$3047	20%	5.828
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