

The Real McCoy: Michael Duck – a “Sure Shot” to make Black History

February 1, 2011 by Natalie Mcfarlane

When one hears the story about Michael Duck, founder and president of A.C. Dispensing Equipment Inc. and inventor of the SureShot® Dispenser, a few inspirational phrases come to mind like *Never give up*. . . . *Stay connected to yourself* and . . . *Maintain a sense of wonder!*

In the Beginning . . .

Duck was born in 1957 in Neptune, New Jersey, the middle child of a family of five children. As a student, he “hated” school. His family was not well off, and he remembers wanting to be a garbage collector, because the “garbage man” would be able to pick up all the cool stuff left on the curb and then sell it. In addition to this, he demonstrated business savvy, Duck possessed an innate talent for doing things mechanical. He loved to build and fix.

- Ownership: 100 per cent privately owned 100% by Michael Duck and his wife
- Business Activity: manufacturer & distributor
- Dispenser Product Lines: liquid dispensing, micro-dosing line of non-sugar flavouring, cream portioning, whipped topping line, granular dispensers, and more under development
- Number of Employees: 80
- Sales: \$17M – \$24M per year

In 1973, the Duck family relocated to Nova Scotia. He quit school in grade 10 and worked as a stevedore along the Halifax waterfront, earning a great income; but the onset of automation technology resulted in him losing his job. An attitude of constructively defiant self-determination outweighed any feeling of frustration during this period. In fact, it enabled him to be humble enough to ask for help.

Duck and his wife got married in 1976, at the age of 18, and turned to his father for help in finding employment. This act of humility created the opportunity for him to work at Baxter Dairies as a general helper. The opportunity also came with a decrease in pay to \$3.50 per hour, along with some racism from his manager who expressed an expectation of problems with “his kind.” Duck chose to maintain high work ethic standards in spite of the financial challenges and interpersonal resistance. He notes, with dignity, that he served at Baxter Dairies for 15 years, while his racist manager was there for only six months.

In addition to his work ethic, Duck owes his length of employment with Baxter Dairies to his habit of keeping busy. As he had learned from a former boss of his in New Jersey: “You got time to lean, time to clean . . . you work too fast, you won’t last . . . you work too slow, you gotta go!”

Duck took that advice and started fixing things during his down time at work, which resulted in him being moved into the maintenance department. He loved what he was doing in that department, and the pay was better too. His boss, a Plant Engineer, wanted to shift gears in his career; and Duck set his sights on his boss's job. He went back to school to upgrade and re-educate himself: night courses in math and English; some engineering studies; and all the proper licenses to perform his boss's job. By the time the position opened up, between 1 ½ and two years later, Duck was qualified, and he became a Plant Engineer, earning even more and loving his job.

Turning Point: The Personal Challenge...

When starting his morning shift, Duck would pick up coffees for his employees and co-workers, a seemingly inconsequential part of his work-day. This was back when coffee shop employees were pouring cream and sugar by hand and Duck would always remark that he was getting too much cream. His boss gave him a personal challenge, telling him to "stop complaining and do something about it." Duck was not brought up to run away from challenges and so he rose to the occasion.

In 1985, Duck made his first product, what would be the SureShot® Dispenser, in his basement. Still employed by Baxter Dairies, he was not yet a licensed engineer, but he relied on his innate mechanical abilities. He landed his first client, and his dispensing machine sales grew from there and A.C. Dispensing was born.

By 1990, Duck was working approximately 100 hours per week at Baxter while operating A.C. Dispensing as well as another business. He quit his job at Baxter to handle his two businesses, eventually focusing only on A.C. Dispensing.

What was groundbreaking and visionary about his product invention was its consistency. He saw that clients wanted consistency and quality. His product exceeded regulatory standards and he understood and addressed his client's needs concerning the speed of service of the product, which makes them more profitable.

In growing the company, Duck says that his biggest challenge was consistently finding people smarter than himself to join the company and who also have the right DNA that fit the core values of the company. The effective approach to address that challenge was to take the time to research and ensure that the people hired would carry on the family values.

Duck says there were also certain qualities and character traits that were necessary for him to possess including: (i) finding like-minded people who are willing to take a risk with him; (ii) putting in the effort to bring an idea into fruition; and (iii) being willing to ask for help.

"I am a regular person who has had a ton of help along the way and to this day, still asks for a ton of help because we can't do it on our own. If anyone says 'I' did it, they're lying to you."

Some of the Proof in the Pudding...

In 1996, sales for A.C. Dispensing reached as far as Ontario, and a customer offered Duck the opportunity to distribute his machines across Canada. By 1997, Duck had 30 tonnes of equipment and 11 employees working in the basement of his 2,200 square foot home, and over \$1 M in sales.

A.C. Dispensing built a new 65,000 Sq. Ft. facility, designed to accommodate all manufacturing and production under one roof, in 2000. All of its North American manufacturing operates from this facility.

On the day that Michael Duck was interviewed for this story, A.C. Dispensing Equipment Inc. was recognized and presented with a “Canadian Industry Leader” certificate from the National Research Council’s *Innovative Creators Award of Canada*.

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