



The wide, smooth current created by Endless Pools allows pool water to flow from the front of the pool, around the swimmer and then back to the front.

GOING MAINSTREAM

Endless Pools – a hit among competitive swimmers and health-conscious consumers – has also surfaced at aquariums and zoos. Backyard pools might be next. —KIRSTEN SRINIVASAN

JAMES MURDOCK FOUNDED ENDLESS POOLS Inc. in 1988, but he doesn't take all the credit for a machine that allows people to swim in place. "Swimming machines are really an old idea, a turn-of-the-last century invention," he notes.

James's father, John Murdock, used to talk about the concept, recalling his own childhood in Arizona swimming in irrigation channels. Trained as a physicist, John Murdock went on to develop the per-lite industry, and at 86 years old, is now working on offshore, submerged nuclear power plants. As James Murdock finished his MBA in marketing at Columbia University, he decided to follow in his father's entrepreneurial footsteps.

In 1988, with his savings and a grant from Columbia, James built his first swimming machine for the swim team on the university's pool deck. He worked with men's swim coach Jim Bolster "to build a machine with a great current where the coach could work directly with the swimmer," he says.

Unlike jetted spas, the current in an 8-by-15-foot Endless Pool

is generated by a 16-inch propeller powered by a hydraulic motor. The wide, smooth current of water flows from this stainless-steel housing at the front of the pool, around the swimmer, and loops back to the front through stainless-steel "water return channels" that also serve as benches, he explains.

Initially, Murdock thought the market for the product would only be swimmers, but he soon realized its potential as a therapy pool thanks to his first customer, Bob Goldberger, provost of Columbia, who was also battling multiple sclerosis. "He called me into his office and said, 'I need one of these in my basement,'" Murdock states. "The only problem was he hadn't been in his basement in five years. He had no way to get downstairs, so he challenged me: 'If you build me an elevator, I'll buy one of your pools.' And we did, using a chain hoist and a steel frame I built.

"He was really quite an inspira-

tional guy," Murdock recounts. "He was the one who really explained to me that a small pool would be wonderful for people needing therapy. He became an investor in the company and pointed the way toward making a therapy product, which in a sense is what an Endless Pool is. Most of our customers are buying the pool for some health reason. For many people, it's the desire for a quality swim. Others want warm water 24/7 in the comfort and privacy of home."

Endless Pools Inc. is also exploring other uses for its product. The Field Center in New Jersey is testing a small swimming machine as a possible treatment for infants with cerebral palsy. Its effectiveness is not yet proven, Murdock emphasizes, but he is hopeful about its potential. "The concept there is if you can promote movement using a weight-free environment, in water that's warm and comfortable, and conveniently located in the home where the therapist can be a parent, the children will benefit further than if they had traditional therapy only once or twice a week," he says.

With sales across the country and around the world, the company is now setting its sights on the greater residential pool market. "We've averaged 23 percent annual growth in the last 10 years, but Endless Pools still only represent about 1 percent of all pools," Murdock states. "The big development now is to take our technology and put it into the backyard pool. There are millions and millions of backyard pools and all of them are too short to swim in. With our new Fastlane, you can get an amazing, high-quality swim in any existing or new backyard pool."

The company introduced the Fastlane in summer 2005. The

hydraulically powered machine bolts to the pool deck with stainless-steel rails that look like a pool ladder and carry hydraulic lines back to a 5-horsepower power unit. "The idea is to create a current without using a jet," he says. "It feels like swimming in open water and you never once need to turn."

Endless Pools has also added a Fastlane mirror that rests on the pool floor, allowing swimmers to watch and improve their stroke. "The Fastlane is a huge opportunity," Murdock explains. "We want to partner with thousands of pool builders out there to offer homeowners a real and exciting way to swim at home."

In contrast to the standard pool-dealer model, the company has only sold the Endless Pools direct with DVDs, press materials and an "extremely knowledgeable direct-sales staff." Serious customers can test an Endless Pool in more than 600 locations nationwide, at the homes of Endless Pool customers.

It's a model that hinges on satisfied customers, Murdock notes. He's proud of the company's customer service, which is "best shown in the number of customers who volunteer to open their home to strangers."

The company has approximately 9,000 customers and is growing steadily. Murdock hopes to expand internationally and opened a UK office last year. With all this growth, he readily admits that management structures and professional development remain his biggest challenges, and he has established a formal in-house training program to develop employees in a more consistent and comprehensive way.

Although challenging at first, the long-term payoff of such employee education is immense, he states. ■

PROFILE

Endless Pools
www.endlesspools.com
 Sales: \$31 million
 Headquarters: Aston, Pa.
 Employees: 140
 Products: Swimming machines
James Murdock, president:
 "[Most backyard pools] are too short to swim in."

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