



COVER STORY

Climbing to the next level

Poulsbo company builds success in ladder safety equipment niche

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Phil Lanzafame is like many typical entrepreneurs: He believes that in order to win in business, a person has to take risks. And like many others who start small companies in their home basement or garage, he took the risks he felt would help him build a successful business.

But unlike many small-business owners who are compelled to give up after too many trials and tribulations spread them too thin, Lanzafame kept going.

"For quite some time, I felt like the water was up to my neck," he says. "If my business would have failed, we would have had to sell our house."

His Poulsbo-based business, Levelok Corp. (www.levelok.com), is now 17 years old and not only is the water no longer up to his neck, he feels like the business is out of the woods. Four years ago, the company became debt-free, a major milestone — and Lanzafame says they can now look forward to calculated growth.

Levelok's patented ladder-leveling device stabilizes a ladder on an uneven surface. The company was born out of an idea for a ladder safety product. Lanzafame, who had a background in construction and a degree in architecture, had a difficult time finding a ladder leveler that he liked. "I thought the equipment was lacking on the market. There was a lot of room for improvement," he says.

So he patented his own, and soon became very motivated to see it in the hands of contractors and utility crew workers. At the suggestion of a business adviser, Lanzafame decided to partner with ladder companies and utilities — if those companies could endorse his ladder-leveling system, he would be in business.

"She said a lot of people emulate what utilities are doing," Lanzafame recalls and adds with a smile, "I don't think I even knew what emulate meant."

Lanzafame traveled all over the country to show his products to any utility representatives who would meet with him, from telecoms to cable providers to power companies. "I was getting excellent reaction," he says.

His Seattle-based distributor sold as many as he could make — and Lanzafame was literally assembling the systems by hand, working on them late at night after his young daughters were in bed. During the day, he was still working odd jobs to support the family, making sales calls in between.

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A sweet spot for helping
By Tim Kelly, Editor
A year removed from a double whammy that left him busted up, unemployed, and his family temporarily homeless, Marcus Croman is all smiles as he sits down at a table inside Cuppa Bella, the coffee shop and bakery he and his wife operate in Kitsap.

When they bought the business in September 2010, using their savings, Croman wasn't planning to change careers and spend his days there wearing a white baker's apron. But now that the former computer systems specialist has become a self-taught baker by necessity, he's

By 2000, Lanzafame was ready to make the leap into mass-manufacturing.

"I spent close to a year to find a U.S. manufacturer at a competitive price. I fell flat on my face. I was exhausted, I tried so hard," he says. "I would have to sell accessories for almost as much as the ladder if I made them in the U.S."

He notes that the factory he uses in China has an exceptional quality record, and his own products have a return rate of less than 1 percent.



Both Levelok's patented permanent-mount leveler/stabilizer system and the patented Keylok "Quick Connect Leveling" system can be enabled with the touch of a toe. Each leg extends in small increments so the system can be used on uneven surfaces, and an automatic backup safety lock prevents the locking mechanism from accidental slipping or tripping.

The ladder standout brackets, another popular accessory with professionals (and also sold retail), can be attached to most ladders that have open rungs. The brackets are designed to both prevent slips (Lanzafame notes that a lot of falls happen during gutter cleaning) and protect gutters or windows.

Although most of the Levelok products are manufactured in China, Lanzafame continues to look for ways to source locally. All product development including prototype creation is local, and one of the company's products, safety straps, are made in Seattle. The company has an office and a small warehouse in Poulsbo.

Since his modest beginnings in 1997, Lanzafame has steadily added to his company's products. In addition to the ladder leveling kits (both "quick-connect" and permanent style), Levelok manufactures items such as ladder dollies, ladder stabilizers and nonconductive umbrellas (made without any metal). The company has more than 5,000 dealers around the country, and some of the products are also sold to retail consumers through stores such as Home Depot and Amazon.com.

"We're not just concentrating on ladder accessories. The primary aspect of any product we make is going to be ultimate safety," he says.

That's also one of the aspects that make his job rewarding, "knowing how the products we develop and manufacture are actually reducing the number of injuries people may have otherwise experienced without our equipment," he says. "This one thing really helps to keep pushing me forward each day."

Lanzafame says he's overcome a lot of hurdles, but it was largely with help from family and friends. His wife, Peggy, helps run the business; the couple's daughters help out regularly and Peggy's father, Jim Harney (a retired North Kitsap High School counselor and coach), is the vice president. Lanzafame also gives credit to his previous engineer, Steve Morgenstern, who died recently from lung cancer.

"His engineering expertise, patience and attention to detail helped us immensely when designing and refining the original products before taking them to market. A good measure of any success we have achieved since our founding can surely be attributed to Steve," he says.

These days, it's competitors that end up emulating Levelok. With the company now so successful in the market, Lanzafame says others are trying to come up with similar products. Which is why he is constantly improving and inventing, whether it's making small tweaks or adding brand new products.

"It's important to stay ahead of the game because we want to be the leaders," he says. "You have to be truly innovative — you can't sit back and sell the same-old."

He is also not becoming complacent, despite his company's international success. While he feels more comfortable now with the idea of not working 12-14 hours a day, the family still doesn't take vacations, save for a few days here and there.



"The hard work is worth it," he says. "But it's a double-edged sword because there are times you question yourself and you know you're walking on thin ice. Being able to push through a lot of the hurdles ... is rewarding, but I couldn't have done it without the help. Nobody becomes successful by themselves."

