



CAMPBELL THOMSON OF TROTAC MARINE

What it takes for a marine store to thrive

BY MARIANNE SCOTT

We are often told to prepare for the future and diversify our assets so when the inevitable economic downturn materializes, we can weather the slump. It's a lesson that Campbell Thomson, whose marine store has been a Victoria fixture for the past 45 years, learned early. When you walk into the emporium, recreational boating stuff seems preeminent, but it's the combination of pleasure craft stock with commercial and industrial supplies that keep the business flourishing. The store relies on more than one revenue stream.

TROTAC, a contraction of trolling and tackle, was founded in 1972 by Peter Thomson, Campbell's father. "He'd saved \$5,000 and so he partnered with a gigantic Japanese firm, Marubeni, to get the stock he needed," says Campbell. Pete had decades of marine experience and opened his small shop amidst a gaggle of marine stores near Victoria Harbour. He served the fishing industry, still robust in that era. "It was a tin shack without heat," says Campbell. "No insulation and it rarely got above 8°C in the winter.

Dad would put a tent over his desk with a heater under it to keep warm."

Campbell, 56, a big guy with a wide smile, exudes energy. He's spent nearly his whole life learning about the marine world, beginning in high school when he and his two sisters worked weekends at Trotac. "In 1979, there was a huge herring fishery and we worked after hours and weekends selling nets and other equipment," he recalls.

"The government still issued unlimited fishing licenses and we had 300 commercial fishermen in Victoria. BC Packers, longshoremen, we knew them all. The coffeepot went all day. Even today, we have third generation fishermen come in."

AS A CHILD, Campbell had a speech impediment accompanied by a bit of dyslexia. "I couldn't spell at all," he says, "so I had to count on memory to get me through." Although he'd planned to become a teacher, he started fulltime work at Trotac the summer after graduation and never left. The marine business and the people in it had bewitched him.

He's known for his prodigious memory. One day I called about a problem with a 10-year-old barbecue. Campbell instantly rattled off the part I'd need, including its number!

"Was it hard to work for your father?" I asked him. Campbell grinned. "Pete was wise enough to give me rope to hang myself. But sometimes I had to stand my ground. And I didn't want to call him dad in the store, so I called him Pete like everyone else. At least for a while." Father and son worked together harmoniously until Pete's death in 2014.

Even with customers he had to assert his growing knowledge, describing them as rough-and-tumble fishermen, Second World War veterans, who hand-logged in the winter. One day, shortly into his tenure at Trotac, a client walked in asking for a pump. He eyed Campbell and stated, "You don't know dipshit. You're too young." Campbell had developed a liking for pumps and ignoring the insult, explained what pump was required. After a bit, the fisherman conceded: "I guess

you know something after all."

"He's been a life-long customer," says Campbell.

IN MOST BUSINESSES, including the marine world, electronic communications have changed operations. "Once, it took a long time to get parts," says Campbell. "In

the '70s, Pete would write to Norway for fishhooks. Many letters back and forth. Months later the fishhooks would arrive. It was risky. Sometimes the Department of Fisheries changed the rules and the hooks were unsalable."

Today, Campbell can order quickly and obtain supplies

nearly overnight. "We deal directly with 300 suppliers world-wide," he says with pride. "And now that we've moved to our third location since 1972, we have a huge basement for inventory. Keeping inventory is expensive, but we stock about 42,000 parts. Sportfishing alone has ▶


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Trotac
currently
stocks about
42,000 parts.

10,700 items." He believes that having parts available when a client walks in keeps Trotac competitive with on-line sellers. "It's a straight-forward business. People like face-to-face interaction to discuss their issue. The internet has no face."

To keep stocked, Campbell travels the world, attends marine equipment shows like Amsterdam's annual METS, and tours manufacturers in many countries. He looks for strong, well-made equipment. "If a guy buys a part and it breaks 200 miles offshore and he loses his tuna catch, that's not on," he says. "I often ask a client to test a piece at sea. If it lasts, I'll order more. Good equipment can also be the difference between life and death."

BY THE 1990S, the fishing industry had declined markedly and become unsustainable. Trotac moved more into recreational boating and also

beefed up its industrial base. The company supplies the Department of National Defence as well as international navies and freighters with towline assemblies and mooring lines. These must meet exacting specs and are much more robust than what we sailors use to tie up or tow our boats. Splicing is a store specialty. They also supply equipment to whale-watching boats, the charter business, sport fishing, Ocean Networks Canada's projects, Pacific Pilotage and commercial ships. When a cruise ship comes here for refurbishment, Trotac is a good part of the supply chain.

When West Marine, the largest marine supplier in the US, opened its 10 stores in Canada in 2002—three on Vancouver Island—they forced several marine stores on the Island and Vancouver to close. "Some were teetering already," says Campbell. "For those of us who had the support of industry and a direct



relationship with suppliers, we could battle them. But it wasn't easy." (West Marine closed its Canadian stores in 2015 and 2016.)

SO TO WHAT DOES

CAMPBELL credit the firm's longevity? He begins by quoting his dad. "Pete said, 'don't rip off anyone but make a living so you can open the doors the next day. You must be sustainable. Profit is not an evil word. In other words, make enough profit to service the customer base.'"

Campbell adds his own philosophy to what makes his marine store viable. One of his main tenets is to pay bills within 30 days or faster. He's convinced that quick invoice payment makes suppliers eager to service him and allows him to service clients rapidly in turn.


He counts heavily on his talented staff of 17. "They're

very knowledgeable," he says. "They're passionate about boating. Several are liveaboards. Customers come in with a problem and they can toss around ideas for the best solution. I always say, don't bullshit a customer. If you don't know, tell them you'll find out. Our staff have the memory and interest in the business. There's really no reference manual for this industry."

Dennis McMillan, who's sailed the globe, told me why he goes to Trotac. "I actually enjoy going in there. The staff like problem solving and bounce ideas off one another. It's good, hometown service."

Ditto for Shawn McKenzie, who worked at Trotac for more than a decade before joining Seaspan. He speaks enthusiastically about his former employer. "Trotac's deep roots are a big part of

its success. Pete always told me, 'you never want to be number one, or number two, but number three. That gives you room to grow, while number one and two battle in the race to the bottom in pricing. Campbell, too, was a great boss. He exposed me to the world market by taking me to trade shows. And he exposes his customers to things they didn't know existed."

Campbell and his wife Elizabeth's two children now work at Trotac. Jessalyn, 28, and Ben, 20, are learning the business. Will there be third generation Trotac management? "We will see in time," Campbell responds. "Jessalyn is finding her own way, picking up more and more product knowledge. Ben, like me, likes pumps and is learning fast. I'm certainly not ready to retire and think I'll always keep my hand in." 

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