

# BOSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

BOSTONBUSINESSJOURNAL.COM

VOL. 33 NO. 01 JANUARY 25-31, 2013



W. MARC BERNISAU | BUSINESS JOURNAL

Julian Gordon, who founded Amramp in 1998, said demand for temporary and affordable equipment for recovering patients in wheelchairs is a fast-growing segment of his business.

## Fast ascent

Inventor of portable and temporary ramp equipment finds the easiest path to expansion is cleared by quality people

By Marcela Garcia  
Special to the Journal

It took Julian Gordon four years to fine-tune his strategy to grow Amramp, a company he founded after creating and patenting a portable metal wheelchair ramp in 1998. Gordon, 62, had been in business since the '70s building other metal-based products, such as doors, railings and stairways for high-rises throughout Boston.

"It turns out that 45 percent of people who are in wheelchairs are not going to be in them forever; 55 percent do have permanent disabilities," said Gordon. "If you fell on the ice or had hip replacement surgery, you don't really want to permanently modify your home by building a wood or a concrete ramp on it."

With that in mind, Gordon concluded there was a really good market for temporary ramps that was not being served.

"Christopher Reeve was one of our first customers. He used a ramp from us as often as three times a month in the late '90s," he said. "We also provide ramps for graduations — it is the busiest time of the

year for us."

But despite having the right product and a solid demand, Gordon struggled to ramp-up sales, partly due to a suspect distribution strategy. "I wasted two years trying to set up dealerships all across the country," he said. "I needed to figure out a way to get the ramps efficiently to the customer, and invested in intelligent people to sell them. So, I turned to franchising. It took another two years and a lot of money to get the franchising process going."

By 2007, his sales had soared to \$12 million, up from \$1 million in 2002. With an average ramp costing about \$4,000 and an average rental around \$100 per week, Amramp's annual sales now top \$20 million, the company said.

"Each of my franchisees has a little warehouse so that they can deliver quickly. You can't go shipping ramps from coast to coast. I have three warehouses in Florida alone."

Gordon now has 46 franchises in the U.S., with one more coming in Boise, Idaho, by the end of this month, he said. There also is a franchise in Edmonton, Canada, and he is ready to sign a second

one in Ottawa.

"I go very slowly because I look for the right person," Gordon explained. He personally interviews and approves the franchise owners, who have to invest \$49,250 per million residents in the areas they're targeting. "Not only do they have to be able to afford it but I look for people who have been successful, they have to be good with people. I won't have someone without any fire in the belly."

An aeronautical engineer by way of college and an entrepreneur at heart, Gordon has been in business for himself since his 20s. He employs 50 people in South Boston, where virtually all of his products are manufactured.

There is still more territory to cover with Amramp franchises and other patented products, Gordon said. "We have about 20 more metro areas that we have yet to do."

He said 85 percent of Amramp's business is ramps, although the company also offers portable and roll-in wheelchair showers. The company's latest innovation is a system called the Home Nest, a patented home set of ramps, lifts, showers, commodes and a sling that together work as a comprehensive alternative to a nursing-home setting.

"What really differentiates us from our competitors is the fact that I have the right people going to the home to quickly install our products," said Gordon. "I'm always flying somewhere to meet potential franchise owners. It's costly. But we make a lot more money with a person that's good at this."