

THE WHOLESALER

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SUPPLIER PROFILE

MTI Whirlpools sets standards in technology and innovations

SUGAR HILL, GA. — The high-end bathing industry is highly competitive, but there is one little company in Sugar Hill that is gaining a lot of attention. An uncompromising commitment to quality, innovation and customization has earned MTI Whirlpools the respect of its competitors and the loyalty of its customers. As an employee-owned operation, MTI invests heavily in itself, creating a world-class manufacturing facility, an experienced workforce and an effective



Russell Adams, vice president-new business development, and Kathy Adams, president of MTI Whirlpools, at their offices in Sugar Hill, Ga.

marketing mechanism that has propelled sales beyond projections.

New product development is a core value at MTI, and the company relies heavily on customer input and consumer feedback as they study design trends.

"Our goal is to make the very best quality and top-performing products," said Russell Adams, vice president-new business development. "That means being sensitive to the latest design trends and keeping an open mind to all new products that equipment manufacturers develop, like the quietest pumps and blowers, better performing jets and brighter LED lights."

MTI Whirlpools is renowned for its ability to customize its line of air baths, whirlpools, soaking tubs, sinks and shower bases. From finishes and dimen-



J.C. Henry, founder of MTI Whirlpools, back in 1996 when he was the recipient of the SBA Entrepreneurial Success Award.

sions to plumbing and jet options, MTI lets customers select their choice of hydrotherapy — soaking bath, whirlpool, thermo-air massage or a combination thereof. A state-of-the-art production plant allows technicians to complete custom orders in a very short time frame — usually less than seven days — a fact that sets MTI apart from its competition.

"We also have a very experienced production staff," added Ryan Whiting, director of manufacturing. "Most employees have been with us for well over five years and some more than 12 years. This highly trained staff is constantly evaluating product quality. We feel that nothing is more important than creating a product that the consumer will enjoy for years to come."

Emphasis on customer service

Although the options seem endless, a well-thought-out system has streamlined the ordering process. An online specification system on the company website



MTI's skilled production employees build a range of high-end whirlpool products to exacting standards.

makes it easy for customers to "configure your tub" to fit specific needs and then print a page with reference and model numbers that can be taken straight to a distributor.

Customers talk with "real people" on the telephone, and sales reps work directly with architects and designers to specify MTI for commercial projects, which are then pulled through distributors. Developing an ongoing customer relationship is important because each MTI Designer and Classic Series bath comes with a Lifetime Warranty, another key factor in earning high marks in overall customer satisfaction.

Embracing technology

MTI's latest innovation is a radiant heat technology that warms the interior surface of the bathtub. Inspired by popu-

lar radiant heating for floors, the patent-pending Radiance design integrates an ultra-thin heating system into the acrylic bath shell structure to provide an even distribution of warmth for neck, shoulders, back and bottom. This creates enhanced comfort for the bather and helps prevent bath water heat loss. The Radiance system is initially available only on soaking tubs and shower bases, although plans are in the works to incorporate it into air baths and whirlpools.

Radiance is a first for the industry, and experts predict that it will have a profound impact. "Innovation has been a hallmark of MTI, and we feel that this new technology will have a significant impact on the bathing industry as well as consumer expectations," said marketing director Michael Kornowa.

In the beginning

The history of MTI Whirlpools is a quintessential American success story. Originally known as "Mr. Tubs," the company was founded in 1988 by J.C. Henry, an entrepreneur with an engineering background who simply wanted to make the best whirlpool tubs on the market. He developed and patented a system to clean the internal plumbing lines of whirlpool baths and was delighted when his company reached sales of \$6.3 million by the end of 1994.

Although the company had developed a loyal following in the hotel industry, Henry decided to change market positions and pursue higher-end showroom sales. Gradually the company began to introduce new product lines and services and increase consumer awareness of the brand. When Henry decided to retire in 2001, he wanted his company to continue under the same corporate culture with which it had been started, so he turned down several lucrative offers and sold it to a group of 20 employees who mortgaged all they had to raise the cash — and then Henry lent them the remainder.

The new company — renamed MTI Whirlpools, Inc. — has prospered under its new ownership. The original group of 20 employee-owners has grown to 36 and sales have increased more than 60% in the past three years. Overall employee morale has blossomed as well.

"Because all managers are also owners, they care a lot about the quality of work and product that we produce," explained MTI president Kathy Adams. "That passion trickles down to all employees."

Leadership from the ground up

One aspect that adds to the uniqueness of MTI is their attitude toward employee input and involvement. Management actively solicits opinions



and advice from employees at every level, giving everyone a sense of pride and ownership in producing what they believe is the finest line of acrylic kitchen and bath products available.

"Great ideas have come from the employees," said Adams. "We all work hard and our employees take personal ownership in their work. They bring ideas to management — ideas as to how their jobs can be done more efficiently; ideas involving changes to specific manufacturing procedures or equipment; ideas for new products that may be the answer to a consumer need."

A large percentage of MTI's profits are invested right back into the company — into the equipment and training needed to meet their stated goal of being "the



Mold Shop manager Gary Whiting created a stainless steel tub with hand-painted red and yellow hot-rod flames. The tub, named in honor of NASCAR driver Jeff Gordon, was donated to a silent auction to benefit HomeAid Atlanta.

best in the world." Rarely does the company hire an outside advisor or consultant, preferring instead to use in-house woodworkers, welders and artists.

"We read all we can get our hands on concerning how to encourage a culture of creativity," Adams explained. "Then we provide the money necessary for ideas to come to life."

Product innovations from within

And speaking of ideas, MTI has had some impressive additions to their product line thanks to their own employees. Gentle Jet was the brainchild of Adams, who wanted to find a "gentler" way to launder fine washables. The patented Gentle Jet Laundry Sink utilizes whirlpool micro-jets in a deep sink to thoroughly launder delicate washables without the use of harsh agitators. Adams was later inspired by a knee injury to create Gentle Tread, an aquatic aerobic exercise vessel that combines water resistance and full-size whirlpool jets to deliver a "no impact" workout.

Another landmark innovation was MTI's development of the first practical system for thoroughly cleaning the

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Whirlpool manufacturer defines 'high end'

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entire internal whirlpool plumbing system. The patented Fill-Flush system, invented in 1996 by Henry himself, put the company on the map and gained industry-wide recognition. The system was embraced by the hotel industry, adding to the company's market share and advancement. The Fill-Flush system still sets the standard for self-cleaning whirlpools and remains unequalled in the industry today.

Wood Shop manager Tim Westbrook, who believed that the soothing sound of a waterfall would offer an added benefit for bathers, developed the Westbrook Falls. This patented design features two trickling waterfalls for soothing audiotherapy. And even Mold Shop manager and craftsman Gary Whiting

has gotten in on the action. An avid fan of automobiles and racing, Whiting created a stainless steel tub with free-hand-painted red and yellow flames reminiscent of NASCAR driver Jeff Gordon's vehicle. In fact, MTI has donated this model for silent auction to a HomeAid Atlanta event with Jeff Gordon, and it should bring thousands of dollars to this worthy cause.

Making the pie bigger

MTI continually strives to foster innovations in the industry so they can capture more business within the marketplace. This search for new ideas and developing unique products is a key element of their business philosophy and strategy. They are committed to a continuing emphasis on creative product

design and providing practical solutions for residential and commercial applications, as well as for hotels, luxury spas and beyond.

MTI takes an integrated marketing approach, mixing various tools in coordination with each other. Kornowa likes to call it "surround sound marketing." Their resources are varied, from print and Web advertising to the company website, strategic alliances, product placement and point-of-purchase materials. MTI was a big hit at the recent International Builder Show in Orlando and is planning to make a splash at the upcoming 2005 Kitchen/Bath Industry Show in May in Las Vegas.

Looking ahead

In order to be a leader, you have to

stay ahead of the pack. MTI is looking toward the future with ongoing product research. One area they are excited about is the increase in demand for acrylic sinks. In past years, stainless steel sinks have been the trend; now acrylic sinks are on the rise. MTI's line of sinks offers scratch- and stain-resistant Lucite cast acrylic with extra-deep bowls in more than 50 vibrant colors. Also on the horizon are new, exciting tub designs, more innovative products and smaller tubs for special applications and better water conservation.

Whatever product innovations are yet to be discovered, it's a good bet that the creative folks at MTI Whirlpools have something exciting on their drawing boards.

For more information about MTI Whirlpools, call 800/783-8827 or visit www.mtiwhirlpools.com.