

STRATEGIES

Tools for growing your business



NANCY KUEHN

Sky Pro employee Jim Berres helps design and build the company's smaller automated window-washing units. Like this one.

A fall, a vow and a long climb up

SKY PRO FOUNDER INVENTED WINDOW-WASHING MACHINE AFTER EMPLOYEE'S DEATH

BY AARON HAGSTROM
ahagstrom@bizjournals.com
612-288-2113

In 1992, Mick Lange pledged to find a safer way for cleaning skyscraper windows after an employee fell 30 feet to his death while working on the atrium windows of the Carlson Center.

At the time, Lange was CEO for Final Touch Services, a window cleaning business, which he joined in 1985. He sold the business to Marsden Holding in 2007.

After his employee's death, Lange sought to build an automated machine in his garage that used similar technology as car wash systems, drawing on the advice of engineers and his own knack for mechanics. He gradually obtained 12 patents for his inventions and founded Sky Pro in 2008.

Since then, Lange has sold roughly 100 machines, which have been popular with hotels, hospitals and office buildings due to their concerns about privacy. Sky Pro

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SKY PRO

CEO: Mick Lange
Business: Develops and markets automated window-washing machines
Year founded: 2008
Headquarters: St. Paul
Employees: Three
Web: SkyPro.com

machines have cleaned the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, Fla., and the Wynn Las Vegas & Encore Hotel, and they'll begin servicing a New York hospital in 2016. Lange hopes to expand into selling machines to clean solar panels and wind turbines.

Lange made machines for various shapes and sizes of buildings that require only two operators, one on the roof and one the ground. They clean roughly 25 times faster than window washers, Lange said.

The Sky Pro Brush Machine, weighing up to 620 pounds, cleans flat-sided

buildings. The touchless 140-pound Sky-drowasher cleans buildings with recesses or protrusions. All designs use filtered water to be environmentally friendly and reduce streaking.

With no capital to invest in his machines, Lange outsourced the manufacturing to NuStar, a Shakopee company that has specialized in car washer systems. He runs product development, quality-improvement and marketing, while collaborating with NuStar on distribution and redesign work. He collects a royalty fee for each machine that is sold.

Lange's most recent designs are smaller versions of his other designs. These are the 100-pound Sky Pro Mini and 83-pound Sky Pro Mini Sprayer, which are used for smaller buildings. Sky Pro sells these directly.

Sky Pro's base machines range from \$18,000 to \$50,000, though custom systems may cost much more. Sky Pro sells most of its machines overseas, especially the Middle East, where buildings are easily soiled by desert sand. There are

roughly 25 international distributors, said Dennis Wight, NuStar's global sales manager. In the Middle East, Sky Pro has sold about seven in the United Arab Emirates, and several more in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain. There are also some in Ukraine, South America, Singapore, Australia, Mongolia, China and Taiwan.

Lange faces some challenges if the existing building maintenance system can't be integrated with his machines. To avoid these kinds of obstacles, Lange is working with Sweets Directory, an online directory for building products, which costs approximately \$10,000 per year, so that architects will take notice of his machines and design or retrofit buildings accordingly.

To bring more exposure for his machines, Lange is hoping for investment money to boost marketing, particularly the Sweets Directory listing, as well as doing more demos and trade shows.

"This is the way of the future," Lange said. "We are not going to have people fall off buildings."