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# A Career of Exploration

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If you've stepped into a Dramm booth at a trade show within the last decade or more, you've probably met and conversed with Ron Greening, Dramm's gravelly voiced, jovial, mustachioed director of sales and marketing. You've likely also been regaled with a story or two, whether it's about the creation of the now iconic colorful Dramm Rain Wands and accessories, or something more technical on watering and irrigation. Regardless, you've been educated, and likely entertained, by someone who has more than 35 years invested in the company and the industry. As Ron (mostly) steps back from his duties into retirement, I sat down with him to hear more about the defining moments of his career and the industry, and where he thinks growing and retailing is heading.

**In the beginning: A Garage**

Today, Dramm operates out of a new, nearly 100,000 sq. ft. state-of-the-art manufacturing facility in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, where they make everything from their signature Rain Wands, irrigation tools and sprinklers to water testing and sanitation equipment and even organic liquid fertilizer. But it wasn't always so high-tech and sophisticated. When Ron started in March 1990, there were 17 employees operating out of a garage.

"When Kurt Dramm hired me, I did a lot of stuff. I ran the plant, I worked on engineering the products," Ron recalled, adding his degree from University of Wisconsin-Stout was industrial technology, which is all about plant management and material science. That was expertise Dramm didn't have yet. "I did a lot of the purchasing of material and things. Originally, it was a lot of production line changes and production method changes to modernize things and make them more efficient."

What I didn't know about Ron is that he had two jobs before working at Dramm—one as a high school auto mechanics teacher and another as a plant manager for another company that made wiring harnesses and heating elements. He brought those experiences to Dramm, helping the company grow incrementally by implementing the new ideas owner Kurt Dramm brought back from trade shows he attended all over the world.

One example was the AutoFog concept, which Kurt was inspired by overseas and brought back to recreate and meet the electrical standards in the U.S.

"We would undertake a project like that and then you learned how to figure it out and how to make the stuff and how

to market it," Ron said. "We got really good at that."

As they added products, the company continued to grow and innovate. They didn't always play in the horticulture market, either. Dramm created a backpack sprayer, for example, that could distribute vaccines easily to chickens. It sounds weird, but it was an example of a niche need they could fill—large agriculture companies didn't want to mess with it because there were only about 35 hatcheries in the country. But it was a perfect opportunity for a small company like Dramm to innovate and fill a need.

"I think that was the big basis of all the organic growth that we've gone through over these years is to find items that made sense in a niche that we could exploit or look at something that already existed and go, yeah, we can make that much better," Ron said, adding for Kurt it was always about quality, never about price or shortcuts. "You can't shortchange them and you can't make it cheap. It's got to be durable and it's got to last. And that was always his mantra is to make it better."



**Let's Invent Something Cool**

It was that entrepreneurial spirit and goal of "let's find something cool or let's invent something cool," Ron said, that drove the growth of the company and resulted in some pretty awesome products, like the colorful Rain Wands retailers sell today. Back in 1993, watering tools were essentially the main brand color of the company manufacturing them. So for Dramm, they were blue. But color was exploding in the housewares market and traditionally shiny aluminum pots were now anodized colors. Ron brought a kaleidoscope of colors from a local anodizer and laid them on Kurt's desk.

"I laid out this rainbow of colors and said we should do this,'" Ron said. They took the plunge, and once orders started coming in, the company couldn't keep up with demand. That success led the team to continue exploring additional product lines where color played a role.

The challenges weren't just in getting retailers to buy in to a new, colorful product, although that was a big one. On the retail side, the logistics of purchasing and stocking became an issue because of the amount of individual SKUs and trying to replace certain colors that sold faster than others.
"Now stores do it all the time at retail, but garden centers weren't used to that," he added. "It was a big change from a business operations standpoint more than it was people didn't think it would sell."

**Change is Constant**

One of the only constants over the past 35 years is change and Ron has seen a lot of change in the industry over that time. The amount of technology growers have now requires vendor companies to continue to evolve and the scale at which many operations have grown to has changed dramatically. An industry that used to be dominated by couple-acre greenhouses has now scaled up to mega-greenhouse levels.

"Those are the big things that I see: the change in ownership, the scale of the businesses and the way that they're managed, and the adaptation of technology," Ron said, adding breeding has also gone to the next level.

With all the changes over the years, Ron is optimistic for the future of the industry, noting that despite the availability of online ordering, there's still nothing like walking around a greenhouse and buying plants to shake off winter's chill.

"We've walked into greenhouses in the middle of February when it's below zero and you walk in there and you smell

the plants and you feel the humidity and you don't want to leave," he said. "I mean, you could probably charge for that experience when you think about it, right?
"I think it's that experience that people are looking for. They're looking for more than just shopping."

He added retailers who offer more, whether it's coffee and food or workshops or targeted gardening education for their local climate, will be the ones who will continue to be successful.

"Business is still about people doing business with other people and the comfort and the trust of that, and you get less and less of that electronically every day."

**What's Next**

Another life lesson Ron has learned is taking the time to smell the roses. Or in his case, restore some cars and hit the ice.

"I've accomplished the goals that I set out to accomplish and I feel really good about that chapter in my life. But now I want to live that chapter where I restore cars and I want to go down and work in my shop full time," he said, adding he won't have to check the trade show calendar now when his curling team signs up for a tournament. "I don't have any commitments. Yeah, so it's that spontaneity."

Whether it's a tournament or a concert or an impromptu hike, Ron and his significant other, Lisa, can now set off without worrying what trade show is coming up. And while the work is done, the exploration continues. **GP**