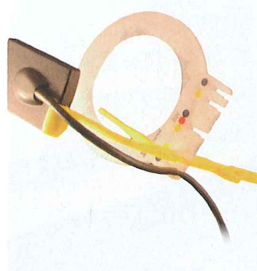


The man in con-troll

From home garage to global dental arena, Australasian Dentist follows the eventful trajectory of TrollDental and founder, Hans Ravik.

By Danny Chan



Hans Ravik's success story is more than that of a Swedish migrant made good in Australia. To many dentists, it relates the founding of a company that manufactures and supplies seemingly nondescript yet indispensable products that improve the clinics' overall workflow and orderliness, such as dental X-ray holders and storage devices.

Indeed, it is impossible to mention TrollDental without bringing up the company's impressive range of dental X-ray storage systems; although many would probably still recall 'Trollplast', the name of the company that Ravik founded in 1981 before it was changed two years ago to reflect their "renewed focus on the dental industry". Since then, the company has consolidated the success of their storage systems and branched into other product categories including temporary crowns, diamond burs, handheld instruments and dental applicators.

New migrant, new company

Remarkable as TrollDental's product evolution has been, Ravik remains sentimentally attached to the company's maiden ware. To this day, the former Chief Dental Officer and Head of a 140-staffed Prophylaxis and Children's Dentistry division reminisces with heartfelt pride, the

fateful day he encountered the product that started it all for him.

It was late autumn in 1980 when young Ravik visited the Stockholm-held SweDental show in search of an exhibition booth that would be displaying a certain X-ray storage product he had come across during the course of his work. He was keen to import the innovation to Australia since he had plans to migrate there. Months later, Ravik arrived in Sydney with luggage in tow and the import rights – harbouring a dream that would later become known as Trollplast P/L.

Ravik relates how upon his arrival in Australia, a dentist friend had helped him get started with a telephone line and mailing address, to which was sent Trollplast's first order just one week following its business registration. With uncanny vividness, Ravik recalls:

"The first order arrived by mail to P.O. Box 924 in Armidale for 100 mounting cards. A dentist from Sydney's Double Bay is Trollplast's very first customer, and I'm happy to say that they are still our customer 27 years later."

In the early days, Ravik operated his business from the garage of his Armidale home, beginning with just two products: TrollMount, a mounting card; and TrollBite, a film holder. The product range would grow steadily over the years.

Through a working relationship with German firm Dentina, Trollplast was selling temporary crowns and diamond burs at one time, until the company was sold to another German counterpart Henry Schein, then little known but soon to become one of the largest dental suppliers in the world.

Keep an eye on the rear view mirror

Trollplast was incorporated in 1985 during which its shares were split between its Swedish and Australian entities, an event Ravik describes as "an important step forward in the life of the company."

In successive years, Trollplast P/L forged important ties with companies like Finland's LM Instruments and Sweden's Dentonova. The company's success with LM's innovative lightweight instruments continues to this day,



but Ravik still laments about unfair practices that affected his deal with Dentonova. He says ruefully:

"Dentonova was the first company in the world to introduce a Swedish invention Multibrush, the dental applicator. Sadly that was followed by a number of copies from Germany and USA.

"If you have a good idea you have to expect it to be copied one way or another very quickly; and I have seen that happened with one product after another which Trollplast introduced to the market over the next 20 years."

Interestingly, Ravik's first brush with the dental applicator proved to be just as disappointing.

"In 1987 I was given initial samples of what would later become the Multibrush and Microbrush. A professor friend told me that it had big market potential but I failed to see it until the market exploded in my face."

Conceding that property rights and patents remain a "very tricky matter", says Ravik.

"It takes only a small alteration, that intrinsically does not change the product but makes it different enough – albeit in a very small way – to make it a 'new' product.

"Intellectual property rights are hard to defend. One just has to be first over the line while keeping an eye on the rear view mirror for competitors."

Despite the missed opportunity and copycat fiasco, Trollplast was soon wowing the applicator market with another Swedish brand product, Interdental brush from TePe, which Ravik calls "the best thing since sliced bread". Acting fast to import the colour-coded applicators this time, Ravik attributes his paradigm shift to a quote by outspoken billionaire entrepreneur Richard Branson: "Screw it, lets do it"

Don't lose con-Troll

The search for new products and partner companies continued throughout the nineties with a string of hits and misses. In the interim, Trollplast formed a subsidiary company dealing in crystal sports trophies and Australian blocks. This company was in operation for 11 years before it was sold to a group in Sydney.

With this exception, TrollDental remains entrenched in the dental side of its business. The Troll family of products gained widespread popularity both at home and abroad. Fol-



lowing the proprietary success of TrollMount and TrollBite, the industry has been equally receptive to TrollByte and TrollByte Plus, initially developed for positioning digital sensors but is now also available for analogue film and phosphor plates; and the ultra-strong and elastic TrollBag.

Unfazed by the looming threat of copycats, Ravik firmly believes in R&D and manufacturing his own products. He iterates:

"When you make your own products, you know what you get and when you get it.

"R&D is an important department in our company and we do test a lot of product ideas. We used to say that if you tested a hundred products and get one that becomes a top seller, you're not doing too badly."

Today, TrollDental's office and warehouse is located in the semi-rural, north coast region of NSW in Alstonville, just 30kms from Byron Bay. Globally, the company employs about 30 staff, including seven in the Australian office. Headquartered in Sweden, TrollDental owns subsidiaries in 12 countries spanning the globe from Europe to Asia and South America.

"If we are to be considered a success, it is because we have always been forward-looking and willing to develop new products and pick up ideas from dentists. We listen to the end users for all our own products and we prefer to trade in products that are developed by dental practitioners," Ravik says.

Success, it seems, has not gone to the head of TrollDental's founder. At the day's end, the self-titled Head of Research and Development is still a family man at heart. Without sounding mawkish, Ravik readily counts his marriage as a milestone in his life, saying:

"My biggest achievement is getting married and having a family that has given me so much happiness though at times a little sadness, but how else can I understand the day if I never were to see the night."

As for what keeps him going strong after 27 years in the business, the indefatigable ex-dentist enthuses:

"The kick... you never know for sure what the day will bring.

"Some days you feel like shouting: " Yes, yes, yes!" Those are the days that you constantly look forward to – so that life never gets boring."



TrollDental