

PEOPLE

Arnold links business with pleasure via Web

By Brad Dawson

Rubber & Plastics News Staff

BUFFALO, N.Y.—If DeWitt (Woody) Arnold had his way, he'd make his living hitting golf balls.

But even a 1-handicapper can't play professionally, so the former Dunlop Tire Corp. and B.F. Goodrich Co. executive is using another of his skills, marketing, to sell those white dimpled balls instead.

Earlier this year, Arnold started Zipline Golf, a customized golf ball business. Through its Web site (www.ziplinegolf.com) the Buffalo resident's company allows customers to choose and design their own golf balls, then has the product delivered to their door within seven days.

"I'm a golf nut, so the subject is right up my interest alley," Arnold said. "Plus, I've been able to do it at my own pace, which right now is what I want."

The 51-year-old Arnold spent the previous 25 years working at the pace of the tire industry. After graduating from Boston University in 1973 with a master's degree in business administration, he joined B.F. Goodrich, where he worked as a product manager and later as director of marketing operations for Goodrich-brand tires.

In 1986, as Goodrich was merging its tire manufacturing business with Uniroyal Inc.'s, Arnold was offered a job with Dunlop as vice president of marketing. He stayed in that position at the company's Tonawanda, N.Y., headquarters until August of last year.

"I just got burned out," he said. "Either I got tired of the business or it got tired of me. I'm not sure which. It was a good time to make a transition, so I did."

Arnold started doing some marketing consulting, and recommended to one of his clients that it should use the Internet. The client wasn't in a position to do it himself, so Arnold said he would be the sales arm and run the Internet marketing project.

The concept of creating an online business sounded

potentially profitable and fun to him, so he researched the idea. He found few businesses were creating personalized golf balls, and figured there would be a demand for it.

"I went to seven different local Web-site developers, and most didn't believe the idea would fly online," Arnold said. "Finally I found someone who wanted to design a site and could do it reasonably cost-effectively."

After taking time to organize the structure of the company, Arnold got Zipline up and running this past June. At the site, customers choose the type of ball they want, select lettering and artwork for the ball and fill out shipping information, all in a few steps.



Woody Arnold

Patrons can choose from among several golf ball brands, including Titleist, Maxfli, Pinnacle and Top Flite, and numerous models and compressions costing \$22.50 to \$42 per dozen. A minimum order of a dozen balls, which cost \$5 to \$6 more than at a retail sporting goods store, is required to complete an order, Arnold said.

Available graphics include animals, birds, symbols, flags, weapons and zodiac signs. Customers can put various types and sizes of lettering on their balls as well, he said. There is a one-time design fee of \$10 for a dozen balls.

"There's very little service involved on my part because the customer does all the work," Arnold said. "Yet we get the balls out within a week, there's little

room for error and the customer gets to be creative and have a little fun."

A local golf business with a pad printer does the imprinting for Zipline and the balls are supplied by a Buffalo ball manufacturer, Arnold said. The company has been shipping about 100 balls a month, mostly for people wanting them for special events such as weddings, birthdays and retirements.

The current sales volume is ideal for a company trying to gauge its potential, but Arnold admits that to make Zipline a worthwhile venture he'll need to beef up business 10-fold.

"We couldn't have handled any more orders than we did and kept the customers happy," he said. "But if I want to expand our customer base and make some more money, I'll need to make some adjustments."

The biggest problem is figuring out how to increase sales in the most cost-effective way, Arnold said. Business has increased every month, but advertising dollars may be the only way to reach his goals, he said.

One advantage is that Zipline is Internet-driven, meaning that just because it will be snowing in Buffalo soon doesn't mean business will dry up, Arnold said.

"I've got customers in California and Texas and even received an order from Vienna, Austria," he said. "I know people will be playing golf or will have a need for personalized balls somewhere."

Arnold certainly has been strutting his stuff on the links this year. He finished 6th in the New York State Mid-Amateur Tournament this summer, posting a 71 on the final day, his best result in a state event. He also would like to compete in some senior events beginning next year.

"I've been able to work on my game, make a little money on the stock market and put a couple hours a day into Zipline," he said. "I'd like to continue this lifestyle another six to 12 months, then either increase sales in Zipline or find more gainful employment."