

# **An Accessibility Company Comes of Age**

by Scott Bogren

The words were strong and spoken with conviction. It wasn't just another corporate slogan or motto, clearly, because he smiled slightly as he finished his thought - as if the concept had just come to him. "We're not a lift company, we're an accessibility company," said Andy Loduha, vice chairman of the Ricon Group. And that, better than anything else, explains the tremendous innovation and astounding growth of Ricon, which recently moved to a spacious new 200,000-square-foot plant north of Los Angeles in Panorama City, Calif. It's an organization that understands its customers, both current and potential, and one unafraid to take risks. In fact, taking risks is part of the business plan at Ricon.

## **The Story of a Modern Business**

The history of Ricon is the tale of the modern business world, complete with internal growth as well as outside acquisitions. What was first launched in 1970 by two aeronautic engineers, whose last names - Rice and Deacon - combined to create Ricon, has become one of the nation's foremost accessibility companies.

The new Ricon began to take shape in late 1986. A Canadian holding company, Mediquip, had begun consolidating accessibility companies and purchased, among others, Ricon and a Wisconsin-based company called Cheney. Andy Loduha had been with Cheney and was asked by Mediquip to become Ricon's new president.

"The industry was fragmented at that time," recalls Loduha, "and my mandate was to 'grow' the company." He knew what he had to do. While in Japan with Mediquip leaders at a business meeting, Loduha sketched a quick map of the U.S. on a napkin in a sushi bar. He drew dots at the locations of Ricon's main competitors and then pointed north of the map into Canada.

"That's the company we need to get," he remembers saying.

Loduha had seen a commercial lift being manufactured in Montreal, Quebec, by a company named Jure and knew what had to be done.

"The Jure product, which became our most popular lift [Ricon's "S" Series lift], was different from anything else on the market," recalls Loduha. "Our dealers needed a commercial lift and Jure needed U.S. distribution, which sounded like a perfect partnership to me."

And so entered Jules Tremblay, inventor of the lift that Ricon so desired. In November 1987, Ricon purchased Jure - and the rest, as they too often say, is

history. Finally, in 1991, Tremblay and Loduha bought Ricon outright when Mediquip encountered financial problems. The partnership has proven fruitful because Ricon's leadership understands the industries it serves and is unafraid to take risks and innovate.

"My relationship with Jules has been a gift," smiles Loduha.

"The team we put together in 1987 is still intact today," adds Tremblay. "That's the secret to our success - we have a great team."

Up until 1987, Ricon had focused the majority of its products on the personal market. But with the addition of Tremblay's "S" Series lift, the company set its sights on the commercial transit market. Today, a significant portion of Ricon's business comes from commercial sources, particularly community transportation.

"We've changed, but so too have the markets," explains Loduha. "The personal market used to be almost exclusively wheelchair lifts, but now low-floor minivans are the key. Without question, we have transitioned into a manufacturer for the commercial market, but we still maintain a significant presence in the personal market as well."

As for Ricon's future, Loduha points out that the company stands ready to meet its customer's needs. He also sees terrific opportunities overseas.

## **A Diversified Product Line**

With a successful history based on wheelchair lifts, Ricon has begun to diversify its products. Living up to Loduha's claim that it is an "accessibility company," virtually anything having to do with accessibility and mobility is manufactured in the Panorama City plant - ramps, low-floor minivans, power seat bases and a wide variety of lifts. The company also manufactures full-size accessible vans.

The plant is clean, spacious and orderly. Its layout is well-designed - raw materials in one end and finished products, including lifts and vehicles, out the other. Motivational signs posted strategically throughout the plant floor offer such encouragement as We Do it Right the First Time and Quality Means Special Attention to Detail. Each phase of the manufacturing process has its own area (sometimes cordoned off from the others), making the gigantic complex seem more manageable.

Dale Carpenter, Ricon's Vice President of Special Products (a department Carpenter says is really research and development), is the ideal plant tour guide. Carpenter is, at heart, a salesman and he clearly enjoys his work. He's prone to extolling the virtues of stainless steel and gets genuinely excited by the rows of wrapped lifts ready to be shipped.

"It's like a candy store in here," he says smiling broadly while casting a glance around the plant floor.

His start in the accessibility business came in 1973 when, at his van customizing shop in Connecticut, a customer asked if he could install a wheelchair lift. He immediately answered, "Yes," and then wondered aloud after the customer left, "What's a wheelchair lift?"

Nearly 30 years later, Carpenter's still in the accessibility business, though he quickly notes that suburban LA is a far cry from his roots in Connecticut. But, wherever he goes, Carpenter's heart remains in the east. After seven years in California, he still keeps his wristwatch on eastern time.

## **Research and Development Done Right**

Ricon fabricates many of the parts needed to build its products in Panorama City. From a computer on his desk, Kingson Lai in the Special Products Division, as well as the many other engineers, can design from scratch any part needed for, say, a new lift. He uses three-dimensional computer-aided design software that is wired directly into the plant. Whatever he and the research and development team dream up and design, they can almost instantly see out on the plant floor.

Ricon technicians operate computerized heavy machinery that can punch, bend and cut metals of various thickness. Though typically producing parts by the hundreds, these technicians - in the research and development role - might simply be making a single piece. But once the design is set, these same technicians mass produce the parts which, eventually, will combine to form a wheelchair lift or ramp.

Daniel Keating, who operates a precision laser metal cutter, says: "This is the kind of company that allows people from R & D to be a real part of the entire process, and that makes everything we do better."

Precision is critical in this area of the plant. Every bend and hole punch in each fabricated part is measured and tested. Carpenter, clearly, takes great pride in this section of the facility and the top-notch work being done here.

"We use the best materials available, even in interior parts of our products, parts that the customer will never see," he says.

Before assembly begins, the parts are powder-coated - rather than painted. They are attached to an overhead assembly line and slowly travel through the powder-coater and several dryers while dangling at eye-level. Once coated, the parts are again inspected, this time by quality control employees, before heading over to assembly.

The wheelchair lift and ramp assembly area is, at least in terms of personnel, the busiest section of the plant. These employees, many wearing snug back braces adorned with the Ricon logo, assemble and then test the lifts before sending them to shipping. I watched several workers cycle their newly assembled lifts numerous times, often with testing weights riding up and down. Another employee crouched down to inspect the smoothness of a ramp's operation, running it back and forth, again and again.

In the vehicle area of the plant, Ricon's Activan and the new VersaShuttle are built. Although it may seem odd for what was a traditional lift manufacturer to become involved in modifying vans, the reasoning of Ricon officials makes sense.

The advent of the minivan created new competitors for the lift market that Ricon was serving, and the new competitors were manufacturing completed dropped-floor minivans. Sales that would have gone to other minivan converters returned to Ricon with the introduction of the Activan.

"Sure, we could have simply continued manufacturing only lifts," says Tremblay, "but then we wouldn't have been responding to the needs of our customers."

In Ricon's converted vehicles, the lifts and ramps aren't add-ons, they are intrinsic components as much as a steering wheel or a quarter-panel. What once may have seemed a risk has proven to be lucrative for Ricon.

The Activan, first marketed back in 1992 and now Ricon's top-selling vehicle, is a standard Dodge, Chevrolet or Ford minivan outfitted with a new floor and one of the company's ramps. From start to finish, an Activan takes Ricon employees between three and four weeks to complete. It's a process of stripping the minivan down, precisely fitting the ramp and other accessibility components and then rebuilding the vehicle. What emerges at the end of the assembly line is a minivan that is seamlessly accessible.

The VersaShuttle is Ricon's newest addition. Built along an assembly line parallel to the Activan, the VersaShuttle begins as a standard Dodge van so it is larger and can accommodate more passengers. But the most revolutionary aspect of Ricon's newest product is the wheelchair lift it employs. This side-door, fold-up platform lift also serves as a vertical step elevator. Not surprisingly, the VersaShuttle is Carpenter's pride and joy and the result of many hours of research and development.

"This new vehicle really takes advantage of our ingenuity and our technology," says Carpenter. "We came up with some great ideas because we had a realistic design schedule and adequate financial resources."

## **The World is a Different Place**

With the brisk pace of the modern business world, sometimes it can be difficult for anyone - transit managers and suppliers alike - to step away from day-to-day operations and truly assess the market and industry. At Ricon, however, the leadership understands the company's role.

"The world is a different place because of what we and our competitors have accomplished in the past decade," sums up Loduha. "Now, we're on the lookout for the next challenge."

With the advent of the Americans with Disabilities Act back in 1990, the accessibility industry changed forever. "Accessibility, as an issue, is here to stay," says Loduha. "And once you're aware of the freedom that our products allow, you can't go back, only forward."

Moving forward, in fact, is how Loduha ultimately describes Ricon. Moving forward and taking risks.

"A healthy company, business or organization, no matter the field, must keep moving forward or it dies. We've been moving forward at Ricon for almost 30 years... and the journey has just begun."