

T H E O R A N G E C O U N T Y
Register

Entrepreneur, 70, having too much fun to quit

No one ever washed my car while I interviewed him before.

But there was Adam Huber with a bucket and a chamois making my car door gleam.

At 70 years, 11 months, most guys would at least be thinking about retiring. Huber is building his second company.

"I'm having so much fun, I can't quit," said the stocky grandpa. "I should be out RV-ing and flying my plane, but when hundreds of people are calling and writing and telling you your product is great, what do you do?"

Huber's is one of those infectiously optimistic success stories that made America's entrepreneurship legendary. If you think you're too old, too poor or too disadvantaged to realize that business dream, read on and take heart.

If Huber ever gets discouraged — that's doubtful — he can look to his father for inspiration. The elder Huber was a German immigrant with \$4 and no command of English when he hit Ellis Island. He had 12 kids and bought a garbage business in Wyoming after working the rails for years.

Growing up in such a large family and such a small bus-iness, Adam Huber learned a little carpentry, a little farming, a little painting and a lot of work ethic. After he graduated from high school, he moved to San Diego because a friend told him he could make 50 cents an hour working in the aircraft industry.

At Consolidated Aircraft and in the Navy during World War II, Huber learned about machines and the lubricants that keep them running.

After the war he had a succession of jobs, ending with lubricant sales. When the company owner died, he and a friend developed a plan to sell solvents to Standard Oil. Sixty days into the project, the promise of business from Standard Oil dissolved.

Huber was married and had two children at the time. Failure wasn't an option.

"I had been making \$28,000 and dropped it to \$12,000 to start the company," Huber said. "But meeting even that was hard because we were growing so fast that cash flow was hard. But we always paid our bills on time."

The company built a plant in Santa Fe Springs with 22 underground tanks to purchase component chemicals in bulk. Sales soared to \$6 million a year.

In 1966, Ashland Chemical bought the company, and Huber stayed on as manager.

"That's when I got into making consumer lubricant products," he said. "I'm not a chemist, but I had knowledge of raw materials, so I worked with Ashland's chemical departments to make these products."

In the early '70s, Huber started a side business renting and selling motor homes. He quickly learned how tough these vehicles were to clean, using a dozen different products.

"I wanted one product to clean everything from the windows to the wheels. We went through 25 formulations. It took two years to develop the cleaner."

In 1976, Ashland decided to get out of consumer lubricants, so Huber bought the division for the cost of its inventory and named it Champions Choice.

The first month Huber made an \$11,000 profit. "They wouldn't read my financial statements, so they didn't know how well this company would do. But I knew."

Champion's main products were lubricants for machinery, motorcycles and other industrial uses. Its line has now grown to 250 products.

But Huber never forgot his all-purpose cleaner. At the age of 67, he created a new company, Protect All Inc., to make and market the cleaner.

"I knew I had to create demand or I wouldn't sell product," he said. "Why buy my product when there are 50

good ones on the market? We show people that they can replace five products with one.”

That’s why Huber works 50 trade shows a year and washes a lot of car doors like mine to create consumer demand.

He won’t give sales figures for competitive reasons but claims that sales have increased 500 percent since 1989.

Protect All is sold at its Anaheim headquarters, 1910 E. Via Burton St., by mail order and at Camping World stores. Wal-Mart recently agreed to stock it, which should boost sales dramatically.

While California was panting through its six-year drought, Huber added Quick & Easy Wash — which washes an entire car with just two quarts of water and no rinsing — to Protect All’s product line.

Goodness knows what Huber has in store for an encore. But you can bet it’ll be fun, or he won’t do it.

Jan Norman is the Register’s small-business columnist. Her column, It’s Your Business, appears in Monday’s and Saturday’s papers.