

Survival Skills

Outdoor outfitter expands while navigating a rough economy

In 2008, when an avalanche of bad home loans, sour Wall Street investments and other financial calamities sent the U.S. economy plummeting, **Richard Wylly “Beezer” Molten III** '91 and the management team at his 15-year-old Half-Moon Outfitters faced a crisis. They recently had added three new stores to the chain, selling merchandise nobody outside of a wilderness expedition really had to have.

But befitting a company that sells outdoor gear, their survival skills kicked in.

Built on a commitment to the employees and the idea that enthusiastic workers inspire buyers, layoffs were a last resort. “Our product is the experience,” the Sullivan’s Island, S.C., resident says. “We want people to leave our stores happier than when they arrived, regardless of whether or not a purchase was made. If they leave happy, they will be back.”

The team decided they could not fire anyone, cut pay or drop benefits. What they could do was tighten up from top to bottom. “We banded together,” Molten says. “We knew all our jobs were on the line. We had to cut costs like crazy. We shopped everything from leases to insurance to supplies. We kept using old vehicles. By the end of 2009, we had eight stores running for the cost of five.”

The other strategy Molten employed to appeal to his outdoor-loving customers was offering an environmentally conscious place to shop. While not every store can be 100 percent green, the hub of the business is a warehouse and office space with LEED Platinum status — a top environmental certification. He remembers the day they found the old transmission shop and former Piggly Wiggly grocery store perfect for using solar energy. “It was crazy how well-oriented it was to the sun,” he says. “We put in a contract that day.”

The green building, salvaging and reuse of materials became a signature aspect of the company, one it wanted customers to notice. So when Half-Moon Outfitters bought a new space for the Columbia, S.C., store where the



LESLIE BURDEN

Beezer Molten '91 purges the filtration system of Half-Moon Outfitters' 3,000-gallon rainwater harvesting system. He says such environmental efforts attract and educate customers.

roof couldn't be seen from the street, Molten hunted down a sculptor to create a “Solar Tree,” planting the photovoltaics on the street. “We put the inverters in the showroom,” he says, “where children can read them and see how much power we are creating and how much CO₂ has not gone into the atmosphere.”

Those survive-and-thrive efforts earned Half-Moon Outfitters the 2011 awards for Retailer of the Year and Sustainable Business of the Year from the industry publication *SNEWS*.

An English major at UNC, Molten sells books and passes his favorites on to his staff. This year the top choice is *Born to Run*,

Christopher McDougall's story of learning from a Mexican Indian tribe how to run long distances barefoot and with great endurance. In that spirit, Molten offers up his own perspective on enduring the long-term economic downturn.

“I think if we had been sitting on our heels and hadn't had the opportunity to open those new stores, something we were committed to years in advance, it might have been different,” he says. “By going into that dark period on the offense, we had a strong, positive impetus.”

Spoken like a true adventurer.

— Susan Simone