



Ramping UP for Success

By Suzanne Bowness

Amramp's first Canadian franchise team is making accessibility easier

You've probably seen wheelchair ramps, both permanent and temporary, set up to help people navigate around stairs. However, have you ever considered the logistics of a good ramp? For example, did you know that approximately 10 to 12 inches of ramp length is required for every inch of height? And the guidelines surrounding ramp design vary by jurisdiction. In Alberta, the Safety Code Council's "Alberta Barrier-Free Design Guide" summarizes the rules for that province.



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Alberta is key to this story because that is where the Wensels live. As the father-daughter team behind the first Amramp franchise in Canada, Lorne and Elfi have become the resident ramp experts in their franchise territory of Red Deer North, or “the top half of Alberta” as Lorne puts it.

If you call the Wensel operation, you will probably get Elfi on the phone. She's the franchise's sales and marketing coordinator who handles many of the initial calls as well as the marketing outreach. When you order a ramp, it will probably be Lorne who shows up to install it. While he has a team

of people to call on for larger installations, as a franchise owner/operator in the early stages, he likes to be involved in site visits personally. He meets with clients, taking the photographs that will be sent to Amramp to create the CAD drawings that will form the basis for ramp customizations. With a previous career path in marketing, Lorne sounds almost surprised as he expresses how well this logistical installation work agrees with him.

Founded in 1998 by Julian Gordon, Amramp is headquartered in Boston and has 43 franchises across the United States. Amramp's equipment is specially designed and painted to reduce slipping, and, particularly significant for Canadian winters, they are grated so that snow falls through. While ramp prices vary, residential ramps average between \$5000 and \$6000, with a small ramp costing as little as \$2000. Larger ramps, for commercial or public buildings, are more extensive installations and therefore often in the \$12,000 to \$14,000 price range.

Back at the home office, the Wensel family team maintains an easy back and forth, sharing a sense of enthusiasm about their business. "It's really about collaboration," Elfi says with regards to their working arrangement. "I might for example put some items in the accounting program, and then he'll make sure things look right. If Dad's out in the field, I'll talk to clients, forward some calls," she adds.



Elfi Wensel coordinates the franchise location's sales and marketing while her father and business partner, Lorne, consults with clients on the logistics and installation of the ramps.

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THE FIRST YEAR



Many of the Wensel's clients are new to the world of ramps and appreciate the experience and expertise the Wensels provide.

If you're not relying on them for mobility, ramps are not often top of mind. When your attention is called to it, you realize they are in use almost everywhere – at residential homes, construction sites, churches, veterans' spaces, schools, and many other public buildings. From this potential client base, the Wensels decided to start by approaching medical professionals, including occupational therapists. They also partnered with disability groups, advertise in seniors' magazines, and use Google Adwords to take advantage of Internet searches.

Even before they moved into this space professionally, the Wensels had long maintained a concrete ramp at their own home, as Elfi uses a wheelchair outside of the home. Having dealt with ramps her entire life has made Elfi sensitive to the variety of ramps out there, and the wide spectrum of quality. Working so regularly with ramps, both personally and professionally, the Wensels are also strong advocates for accessibility.

That personal connection also meant that Lorne didn't look too far beyond Amramp when researching franchise opportunities. Becoming Amramp's first Canadian franchisees meant navigating the new legal, regulatory, and tax issues related to crossing the border. With the help of their franchise, those matters were soon settled and the Wensels opened for business in January 2012. For Elfi, who had trained in marketing like her father, the franchise provided a great opportunity to join her Dad in business.

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From the start, Amramp provides a to-do list that keeps franchisees hopping. Initial tasks include finding warehouse space to store the modular ramp supplies, developing a marketing plan and support materials, establishing a partnership with a trucking company to transport the ramps and a customs broker (the ramps, made of Canadian steel but manufactured in Boston, are subject to NAFTA agreements), and setting up franchise software systems for accounting and customer management.

In addition to working on his own setup, Lorne also attended training at the franchise's Boston headquarters, which he says is very hands-on. "You live the life," says Lorne. "You visit the factory, and you put a ramp together so you know how to do it." Beyond the in-person training, franchise headquarters are available by phone for questions, tech support and accounting support. The company web site provides additional resources, and holds an annual conference in February.

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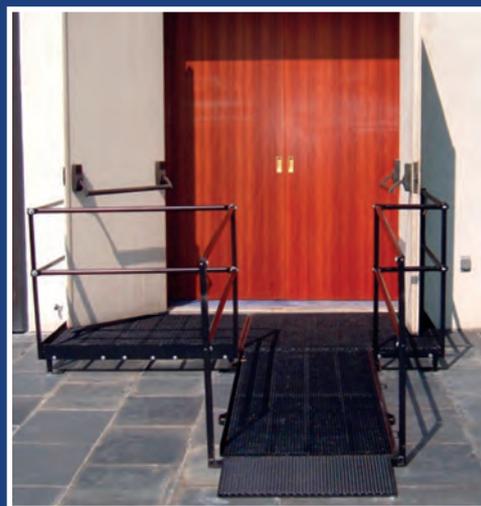
Once he was back home and the business was up and running, it wasn't long before the phone started ringing. These days, the franchise is fully operational, with several projects on the go at a time. Lorne estimates the split between commercial and residential at about 40/60, and a 70/30 split between renting and buying. "The 'rent or buy' program is big for us; it's especially helpful for people leaving the hospital who might not know what timeframe they would need a chair or ramp for," says Elfi. Competitors in this business include contractors and DIY enthusiasts, but Lorne is confident that his product generally beats these due to the Amramps' non-slip construction.

In terms of advice to other potential franchisees, Elfi notes that a business background is an asset and that franchisees have to be comfortable dealing with people. Her father agrees. "You are walking into rough situations. There's a reason why these people need a ramp – it could be an injury or disease – so you have to listen to their needs," he says. He also advises that potential franchisees educate themselves immediately about building codes and compliance rules.

Challenges in the first year included those common to any franchise such as developing a client base, as well as those regulatory challenges specific to their particular sector. "Finding specific contacts is a little tricky and not all of the information on the web is accurate," says Elfi with regards to developing target lists for her marketing letters. Navigating the Canadian healthcare system can also be a challenge, says Lorne.

Elfi adds that clients are often new to the world of ramps and need to be educated about available funding. Some opportunities, such as grants from the Residential Access Modification Program (RAMP), must be applied for by the client themselves. Other groups, organizations and programs, like the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada and even Workers' Compensation, can also be resources.

Yet beyond these challenges, operating the franchise has been rewarding for the Wensels, not only financially but particularly with regards to lifestyle. They maintain relatively regular business hours and, after years in marketing,



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THE FIRST YEAR



Elfi also likes the freedom becoming an Amramp franchisee has offered. "For me, being able to work in a home office is a great advantage."

Lorne enjoys being his own boss while having the support of the franchise system. Elfi also likes the freedom becoming an Amramp franchisee has offered. "For me, being able to work in a home office is a great advantage," she says. Last, but not least, both are clearly gratified by the notion that they are helping to make the world a little more accessible, particularly when they hear from clients who express their gratitude at how much the Wensels and Amramp have helped them in their time of need. 🍁

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NATIONAL POST

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Corporate Units in USA: 1

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