



Pedro Perez / Seattle Times

Paul Nelson, co-manufacturer of Odyssey Skis, checks the finished product.

Pair discovers the Odyssey of selling skis

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■ MOUNTLAKE TERRACE

Build a better mouse trap and you need only sit back while the world beats a path to your door.

Build a better snow ski, however, and you will be considerably busier.

Just ask Paul and Coni Nelson.

The two are in their first season of selling Odyssey skis from their Mountlake Terrace-based company. Since beginning to manufacture and sell their skis, the two have risked \$50,000 of their own money, discovered that marketing is a high-cost effort and that many retailers are slow to sell new products.

"This year has been a learning experience," says Paul Nelson.

Still, Odyssey is gaining ground and the Nelsons are optimistic.

The company's product is a multiterrain ski that is wider and shorter than an average adult ski. Because of its design, the Nelsons say the ski is energy efficient so

middle-aged people, in particular, may find it less tiring than conventional downhill products. It also turns more quickly than a conventional ski and performs particularly well in fresh snow, Paul Nelson says.

The Odyssey comes in only one length but in three different flex levels, matched to the weight of the skier. A lighter than average adult would buy the most flexible Odyssey and a heavier person the least flexible version.

Ron Fisher, owner of the Alpine Hut sports shop in Seattle, says he sells quite a few Odyssey skis and consumers who purchased the skis are happy with them. Although the Odyssey is an all-terrain ski, Fisher mostly sells it to experienced skiers who are looking for a speciality ski designed for deep snow. "It really fits that certain niche. It's a good ski for those who like to get off the beaten path into the powder," Fisher says.

Judy Nagel Johnson, owner of the Crystal Mountain Sports Shop, tried the skis and says they're fun. Because the ski is easier to use,

Odyssey allows less advanced skiers to more easily ski through trees and in various snow conditions, Johnson says.

Babe Zukowski, an employee at the Crystal Mountain Sports Shop, agrees. "It's wonderful for back-country terrain and heavy snow, she says. "It really boosts your ego and makes you feel confident."

Despite early successes with the skis, the Nelsons were reluctant entrepreneurs. Paul Nelson had been experimenting with his own ski designs for several years before the two launched their company.

Even after perfecting the Odyssey multiterrain ski, called MAX, the Nelsons did not want to start a ski manufacturing company. Instead, they tried to convince established ski manufacturers to produce the product. Only after those efforts failed did the Nelsons launch their own manufacturing company.

Since then, the Nelsons have learned that it's hard to sell to retailers without providing skis for them to test. "Everyone wants free

skis," Coni says. Unfortunately, the Nelsons do not have the working capital necessary to provide too many free skis.

During the next several months, the Nelsons plan to raise more money through either investors, a small-business loan or both. The two have not determined how much money they will need.

The Nelsons goal for next year is to sell about 1,000 pairs of skis, if they continue to manufacture the skis themselves, Coni Nelson says. Ideally, the couple would like to contract out the manufacturing of the skis and then sell about 2,000 pairs next season. The company has not set sales projections beyond next year.

Currently, Odyssey Skis are all made individually by Paul and Coni in their small shop in Lynnwood. The skis consist of 22 different materials.

So far this season, the two have sold 150 pairs of skis and hope to sell another 100 pairs before the end of the season. The suggested retail price for Odyssey skis is \$475 per pair, Coni says.