

West Marine — rope to riches

By STEVE PETERS
Sentinel Correspondent

RANDY REPASS has got a line for everything. That's how the company he founded, West Marine Products, became the largest boating supply operation this side of the Mississippi.

In nautical parlance, where "port" means left and "she" means the boat, "line" means rope. And when Repass opened up shop in Sunnyvale in 1968, all he sold was rope. Six or eight spools of the same white nylon rope, in different diameters, mounted on one wall of the shop — his garage.

Now rope is just one of 7,000 nautical items he stocks in his 15 retail stores from San Diego to Seattle.

West Marine Products is truly a rope to riches story.

"Rope is still the biggest single-line product we sell," said Repass, sitting in his office at company headquarters in Santa Cruz. "Every boat needs a piece of rope to tie up to the dock, or for an anchor line. Since everybody was coming in for rope, I started carrying other products too, and ended up with what we carry now."

And what they carry now is everything from outboard engines to digital depthsounders, from bilge blowers to blocks and tackle, from windsurfers to winch grease. Everything for the boater.

IN DESCRIBING the success of West Marine, Repass doesn't beat around the buoy. In terms of sales, he said "we grew 41 percent this past year, 60 percent the year before, and we expect about a 30-percent growth this year."

Through its retail stores, its 190-page mail order catalog, and its wholesale business (under the name Port Supply), the company sold \$45 million worth of marine merchandise last year, he said. And that's no jibe.

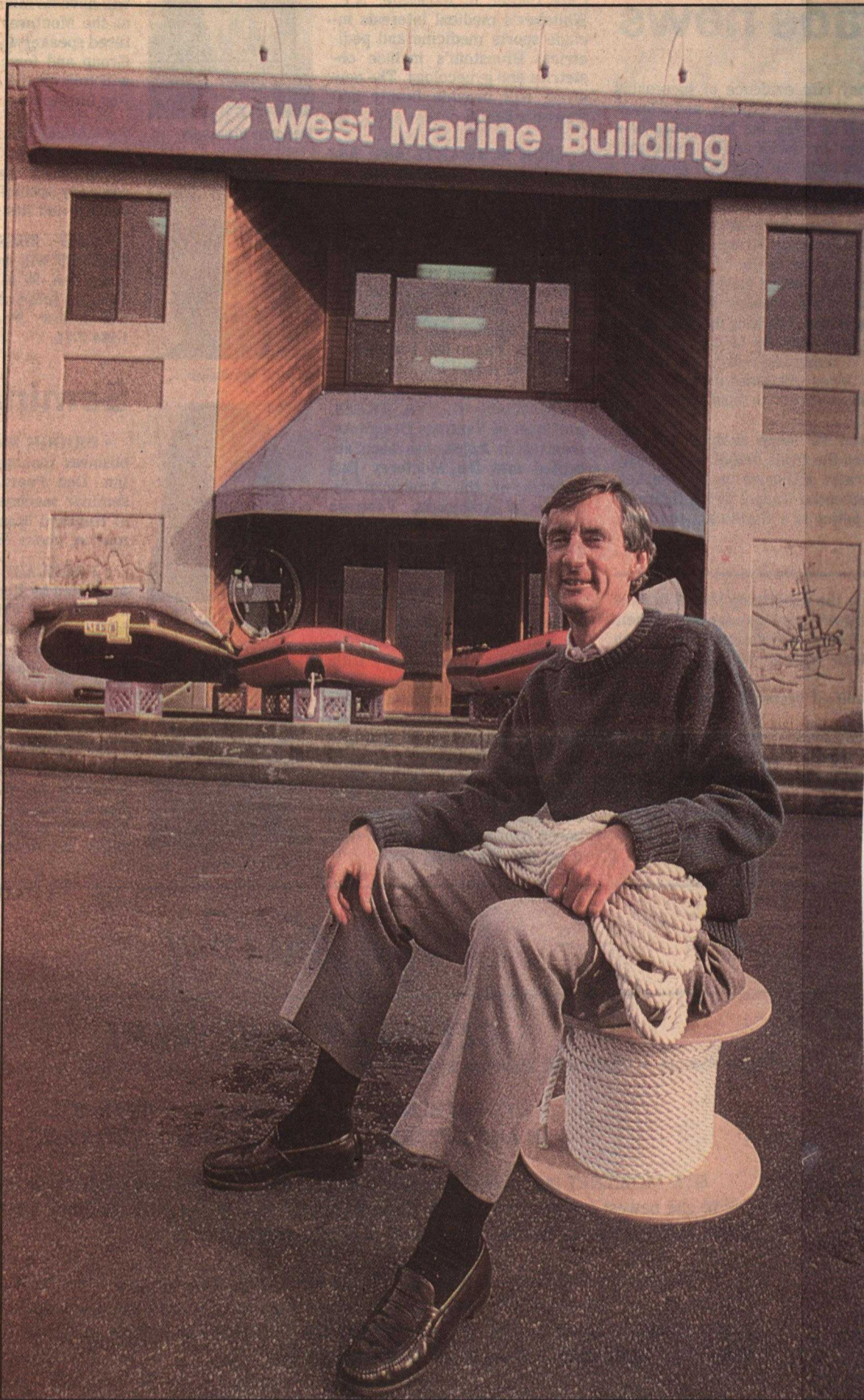
After opening three stores in 1986, West Marine christened two more last year, one in Stockton and another in Sausalito.

Repass bought out Anchorage Marine to acquire the Sausalito store; Anchorage had been West Marine's No. 1 competitor in Marin County. But Anchorage wasn't the first competitor to be eaten up by the opportunistic Repass. In 1983 he bought out Gulf and Western, then the biggest marine-products chain in Southern California and a Fortune 500 company, according to Repass. With that acquisition, he added five stores to the collection.

Repass said his business sense is mainly common sense. "It's logical — no black magic. Basically you treat people right and give them what they want at good prices," he said.

That almost sounds like, well, a line.

Although he advertises extensively, he said word of mouth



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Randy Repass has a firm grip on successful rope sales.

is what really reels the customers in. "I took a poll among some customers and about half said they heard about us through word of mouth. It's almost too simple to believe."

WEST MARINE headquarters will soon set sail for Watsonville, having outgrown its Santa Cruz facility. Repass gazed with pride at a model of the

new mooring: a white, angular structure ringed with trees, and with an outdoor volleyball court for fun after 5.

The new warehouse alone will occupy approximately 115,000 square feet of space — quite an expansion from the current facility's 36,000 square feet. But even that is huge compared to Repass' original warehouse. His

garage was about 300 square feet.

But all West Marine warehouses and stores have one thing in common: rope. It comes in a lot of different colors and braids now, and some is made of high-tech stuff like Kevlar and Spectra. But the best seller is still the white, three-strand nylon variety, Repass said.

That's one heck of a line.

REFERENCE

~~WEST MARINE BRANCH~~
~~7405 S. ... Drive~~
~~Antioch, Calif. 95693~~

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