



# REVIVING SWIM SPAS FOR LONGEVITY

EVER WONDER  
WHERE A SWIM SPA  
GOES TO DIE?

SINCE SWIM SPAS ARE OVER A DECADE OLD, THE INDUSTRY SHOULD BE GETTING CLOSE TO THAT FIRST ROUND OF DISCARDED SWIM SPAS. BUT ARE THEY?

**RETAILERS SELLING SWIM SPAS SAY** the high-ticket item has more longevity than one would think. But it's up to both customer and retailer to make sure swim spas don't end up in a dump.

"They're built to last," says Christian Ryan, owner of Premium Wholesale Home & Leisure in Ontario, Canada.

In 2018 alone, his company sold 80 swim spas. In his experience, the expense and maintenance intervals of the product haven't slowed sales.

And when it comes to disposal, most customers are on top of maintaining their swim spas, he says, so he has only seen disposal happen once because customers usually don't want to let go.

"The shell is a lot like a fiberglass pool," Ryan says. "It's going to last 20, 30, 40 years. You just have to replace equipment as you go."

Like a hot tub, similar parts wear out first on a swim spa, like heaters and pumps. Sometimes the odd LED light will burn out, but those are all easy fixes; not enough for a customer to throw in the towel and toss the spa.

"For the shell, it would be similar to a hot tub in terms of longevity," Ryan says. "Most people tend to get rid of hot tubs after 10 to 15 years. Because it's a swim spa, I would think you would put more [effort] into the equipment because it's a bigger-ticket item."

Jim Ornce agrees.

As the sales and training manager at Pettis Pool and Patio in Rochester, New York, he hasn't seen many customers deterred by the thought of maintaining — or discarding — a swim spa.

"In our experience, we've seen people keep up with them," he says. "Even homeowners who are moving locations want to take it with them, not toss it."

When customers are spending up to \$40,000 a swim spa, maintenance doesn't often get ignored, Ornce says. Even if it does, professional spa retailers can take care of it in a refurbishment process.

"It's completely feasible to be reused so it doesn't end up in a recycling bin," Ornce says.

### WORST-CASE SCENARIOS HAPPEN

Even when the unthinkable happens, swim spas can be brought back to life.

Ornce gives the example of a customer who accidentally had their swim spa freeze over when power was interrupted.

"This is the worst-case scenario: Someone shuts off their power," he says. "The shell is fine. The organs of it need to be replaced."

A few thousand dollars later, the previously damaged swim spa is up and running, and Ornce's company is selling it for \$6,000 less than the price of a new one.

For dealers willing to put in the effort of restoring swim spas, it can be a profitable second go-around. It also means swim spas stay out of already sky-high landfills.

"If you have the ability to repair a swim spa, you can repair it and resell it," Ornce says. "It's just a big hot tub."

The only reason that particular spa could be saved and resold was because of the installation process, Ornce says, crediting the installation crew for putting everything back in the right place. Because technicians could easily access the plumbing, they were able to restore it, he says. Access is everything.

"We can bring it back to life," he says. "Even in a worst-case scenario like a freeze."

### IMPROVE THE LIFE CYCLE AT PURCHASE

Ornce believes that educating customers from the get-go improves the longevity of a swim spa, too.

That starts with the installation process and asking the right questions, he says. For customers to avoid the hassle of moving a swim spa or discarding it too early, the spa salesperson should be intuitive enough to ask the right questions, such as:

- Will this be your forever home?
- If you do move, will you take the swim spa with you?
- Do you have the budget for extra construction, if needed?

Overall, thoughtful and proper installation of a swim spa can maximize its lifespan, which is what both retailers and customers want. As long as a technician can access equipment, it can be maintained, Ornce says.

And considering a swim spa investment — which often includes additions on homes — it's one of the most important aspects of the installation that can't be overlooked, he says.

Quality products are another aspect to consider, Ornce says.

"Your buyers have to really research this. Not just to price it, but how are you going to fix it down the road? Is it going to be repairable? Don't just go by the features and the price," Ornce says of coaching customers through the buying process. "You have to look at it as a long-term investment and that you're keeping it significantly longer than a hot tub."

Even if a customer might one day move from their

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**Christian Ryan**  
owner, Premium  
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Leisure

home, a swim spa could still be the right purchase.

“You can take it with you,” Ornce says. “You can’t do that with any swimming pool.”

For those who refuse to take a swim spa with them if they move, it can add value for the next owner.

“A swim spa can be more of a selling point for resale of a property,” Ornce says. “It’s a hot tub, but it’s also a pool.”

## KEEPING PROFITS GOING

Most swim spa owners are passionate about keeping their swim spas operational. If they need to get rid of their swim spa, however, it’s still possible for dealers and customers to make some money back.

“They have a value that pushes it over the disposable product category,” Ornce says of a swim spa’s resale value.

In most cases, the swim spas end up refurbished and back on the sales floor. When considering the time and money that retailers and customers invest, most prefer to refurbish. The customer gets a bit of money back, and the retailer gets a chance to put another customer in a discounted swim spa, diverting the product from the landfill.

Ryan says the aftermarket for well-maintained and refurbished swim spas is a great focus for retailers.

“They do have value in the aftermarket,” he says, remarking that most customers find swim spas in online classifieds or as walk-ins. “We only buy the ones we sell. It’s pretty easy. We’ll fill it up, run it. Replace any equipment that needs to be replaced. Take a good look at all the systems.”

In one to two weeks, Ryan says his staff can have a refurbished swim spa on the floor. And while swim spa trade-ins aren’t a huge part of his business, it still is a valuable offering to customers — even if they don’t get all their money back.

“It’s worth it for them because they get something for it,” Ryan says. “We might pay five grand for it, and it’s out of their hair.”



Swim spa installations sometimes require ingenuity in construction builds. A swim spa installed by Pettis Pools & Patios sits atop a brick “pedestal” inside a basement. Such platforms allow spa technicians to come back later for easy access to maintain the spa. The finished product is below. Photos: Pettis Pools & Patio



A refurbished PowerPool swim spa on the floor of Pettis Pools & Patio in New York. After a customer shut the power off to the swim spa, it had significant water chemistry damage. The staff refurbished pumps, plumbing, heater and pillows. Pettis Pools is currently reselling it with a three-year warranty. Photo: Pettis Pools & Patio



In his case, the more swim spas his store displays, the more it sells. His 12,000-square-foot store can have up to five models on the floor.

"If you want to do more volume in swim spas, it's important to have more than one there," he says. "We usually display at least three."

### THE LAST RESORT

When all else fails, disposal may be all that's left.

Since his company started selling swim spas in 2007, Ryan has only heard of one of swim spa being disposed of by his company. In that particular case, it was due to an insurance claim where the spa had been damaged beyond repair in a windstorm.

"We had our delivery guy take it to the dump," he recalls. "They just run it over with a giant machine. I don't really know of any way of recycling it, unfortunately. It's like [disposing of] hot tubs; they bring them to the dump."

Some dealers are willing to do it, though, like Jerry Thrasher from Innovations for Quality Living, located in Bellingham, Washington.

"We can take anything to the dump," he says, "but we have to pay by the pound."

That route can be costly for dealers that are not moving large volumes of swim spas, however. Even refurbishing swim spas can be too much for smaller dealers compared to hot tubs, Ryan warns.

"The only downside is that they can be difficult to [sell] if you don't do volume in swim spas," he says. "We do quite a bit of volume, so it's not hard for us to move them. A smaller dealer might sit on them for years," which is an extra cost to consider. Just like the swim spa went in, it will have to come out the same way. That may mean an extra trailer, a crane and other special equipment.

### A HOPE FOR A GREENER FUTURE

In 2017 alone, 267.8 million tons of waste went to landfills, according to the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

And while it's impossible to know how much of that is due to the spa industry, it's a thought that's not far from retailers' minds.

Ornce has seen the industry become a bit "greener" over the years. Whether that means there will be completely "green" swim spas that never need to be disposed of remains unseen, of course.

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**Jim Ornce**  
sales and training  
manager, Pettis Pool  
and Patio

"The main sustainability factor that swim spas have to answer is what their operational cost is going to be," Ornce says. "They had to make sure it wouldn't be cost-prohibitive to own a swim spa. I think the whole hot tub industry had to overcome that. The industry's had to become more flexible and have more energy efficiency. The swim spa had to go along with that, too."

While durability is a plus-side for the products in the industry, one day, even the best-made swim spas will end up in a landfill somewhere.

In the meantime, there's always room for improvement.

"I would like to see more done for efficiency," Ornce says. "I'd like to see this industry push itself to be even more green and cost-effective in ownership. I think that's where a lot of people are inspired to go more green is because they save money." ■