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OCTOBER 2005

Boating INDUSTRY

**Everglades Boats:
Old-Fashioned
Innovation**

**Monterey Boats:
Out of the Ashes**

Eye Tigé of the



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TIGE BOATS
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*Charles Pigeon's vision
and a commitment
to quality have Tigé
Boats on the move.*

A focus on **INNOVATION** and
DEALER RELATIONSHIPS
has contributed to the
boat builder's **GROWTH**

Eye of the

Charles Pigeon still fondly recalls his boyhood days spending time with his family nearly every weekend at Dell's Boat Harbor outside Stockton, Calif. As a 7-year-old, he'd inspect every boat that was ready to launch, looking under the hull and asking questions of the owner.

"They say that most entrepreneurs get their idea from something in life that spurred it earlier," Pigeon says. "Mine was spending family time in that boat in Northern California."

It's no wonder that Pigeon spent his career in the marine industry. And it's no wonder that he struck out

on his own in 1989, founding Tigé with \$85,000 and an idea to build a family-oriented boat.

"The first boat was most ideal as a slalom ski boat," says Pigeon, Tigé Boats Inc.'s president. "At the time, everyone was building boats to slalom, jump and do trick skiing. I went after a niche within a niche."

Since selling its first boat in 1991, Abilene, Texas-based Tigé has grown into a \$43 million business that is on track to sell 1,100 boats this year. Pigeon says Tigé is the fastest-growing inboard ski boat manufacturer.

He shaped the company's first boat with two helpers in a barn he rented for \$100 a month. Manufacturing was contracted with a central California



Tigé

By Matt Bolch

Eye of the Tigé



Dealers commit to Tigé — and each other

But no company can succeed solely on the strength of innovative products. It needs a devoted sales force behind it and a commitment to quality customer service. And Tigé leads in those areas, too. "We have an extremely loyal and dedicated dealer network, and we're dedicated to them," Pigeon says.

By encouraging its dealers to hold owner reunion events, customers get a chance to meet, share stories and relate how they're using the boats. Tigé representatives use that information and data taken from customer satisfaction surveys to build better products.

Shortly after starting Tigé, which derives its name from a variation of Pigeon's childhood nickname, "Tiger," but with an update to reflect what he calls a little European flair, Pigeon offered Kip Davis, an advertising agency veteran he had worked with at a former company, 10 percent of the company in exchange for preparing brochures and ads for two years.

Davis continued working for an agency until last year, when he moved to Abilene to become director of marketing.

"From my standpoint, the rapid growth has astounded me," Davis says. "We not only had a good product and good vision of our main market, but in 1991, wakeboarding wasn't even known."

"It's a natural progression, taking a product keyed in on a professional-type sport ... and morphing it into more than a slalom-type boat,"

says Davis, who describes his early efforts as a labor of love, traveling to Abilene several times a year for photo shoots of new products.

Pigeon's first boat, the 2000slm Comp sold an unprecedented 100 units in its first year, gaining "1992 Rookie of the Year" accolades from *WaterSki* magazine. Pigeon also traveled the boat show circuit, picking up dealers such as Chris Ainsworth, who will sell up to 200 Tigé boats this year at Tigé Watersports, Corona, Calif.

"Tigé treats you like part of the family, valuing dealer input," says Ainsworth, a Tigé dealer since 1992. "Customers ask us (about possible changes) and we ask them. Charlie Pigeon is incredible about listening and responding — often for the next model year."

Pigeon established a twice-yearly dealer council for top dealers, bringing them together to network and learn from each other. The company also holds an annual meeting for all of its dealers in locations around the world, with new Tigé product offerings, seminars on sales training and customer service and another chance for dealers to share successes.

"We all share service issues and ideas," says Matt Dettman, who owns Tigé Boats of Nevada with wife Ingrid. "I've sold a

manufacturer that had excess capacity, and for the first six months, Pigeon ran the company himself, overseeing production, quality control and sales.

From the beginning, the company has been debt-free, even as it prepares to open a new manufacturing facility.

Tigé has become a force in the marine industry, known for its innovative approach to family fun. Tigé's LifePlus Lifetime Replacement Warranty, introduced two years ago, is the only such warranty in the inboard industry and covers the fiberglass hull, stringer matrix or floor.

Tom Austin, vice president of manufacturing, says he's "perfectly confident" that Tigé won't be replacing boats under warranty any time soon. "We don't take manufacturing lightly at all," says Austin, who moved to Tigé because of its reputation for quality. "We have several gateways through the laminating process to make sure the quality is there. Our boats have 400-600 pounds more resin and glass than most other inboard boats."

The lifetime warranty marks the latest innovation in the company's 14-year history that started with the patented Tigé Adjustable Performance System in 1995, which featured a variable hull that allowed the boater to change the wake profile. The TAPS2 technology and Convex V hull followed in 2003. The patented systems work together to allow boaters to slalom and wakeboard on the same boat without the need for ballast and drag hardware.

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*Chris Ainsworth,
Tigé dealer since 1992*

Eye of the Tigé



New products drive revenue **GROWTH**

Tigé has seen steady year-over-year growth since its inception with few exceptions, due in part to a continuous stream of new product introductions.



event, (owners) feel like they're part of a bigger family," Ainsworth says. "It creates a lot of brand loyalty."

Tigé also makes itself known in the industry by sponsoring national and international events. The company has sponsored five Wakeboard World Cup Championships, but has focused on the Tigé U.S. Open Wakeboarding Championships for the past two years.

The company will take on a higher profile with the opening of its new 135,000-square-foot manufacturing plant and office facility on a 40-acre tract nine miles from its current facility in Abilene, where Tigé relocated in 1995. Before moving from California, Pigeon put out feelers to communities in the central part of the country, and he said Abilene did exhaustive research on Tigé before providing substantial incentives to bring the plant to Texas.

Tigé currently employs 183 in Abilene, a number that's expected to

Tigé



rise to 250 when the new facility opens. The company also owns first option on 110 acres around its facility to attract suppliers. One interesting feature of the new building will be large glass windows that allow customers and dealers to watch the manufacturing process.

As it looks to the future, Tigé will continue to listen to its customers and dealers to keep abreast of trends on family-style boats. "Growth will come from the inboard niche, but I think we'll get percentage from the stern-drive market, too," Davis says. "There's definitely a lot of growth there."

But even as Tigé grows, Pigeon is striving to retain the entrepreneurial feel of his organization. "When you're in a situation where everyone knows everyone else by name, everyone gets involved," the company founder says. "You can change as market conditions change, very quickly, without bureaucracy."

Recently, younger designers have suggested bold graphics packages that don't appeal to Pigeon, but they were approved because the company founder felt that's what the market warranted.

So while the look of a Tigé boat might change, the company's commitment to family-style boating fun, to crafting quality products, to Pigeon's vision and to its dealer network remain unchanged.

"We're only as healthy as our dealers," Pigeon says. "We've grown together over the last 14 years, and we enjoy an unbelievably strong relationship." ❧