



DW PROFILE

Midwest Scuba Center

The owners believe they have one of the sleekest, most modern dive stores around.

By Lenny Giteck

When Tom Kepler made his first dive, at the age of 13, it wasn't in warm Caribbean waters or the swirling ocean off the coast of Hawaii. It was in an old limestone quarry that had filled with water, near the town of Logansport, IN, some 60 miles from his home.

Kepler and his diving career have come a long way since then. Today, he's an owner of Midwest Scuba Center in Indianapolis, IN—one of the brightest, sleekest, most modern dive stores around.

After his early start in the sport, Kepler's love of diving eventually led him to become the manager of another dive store in Indianapolis—a job he held for seven years.

"Then, one of the instructors at that store decided to start this place, and he asked me to come work for him," Kepler says.

That was in 1976; four years later, Kepler, two other employees of the store, and an additional partner bought out the original owner.

Early on, Kepler and his partners made a fundamental decision about their venture: They

would deliberately avoid the standard nautical ambiance of many dive stores.

"Although a lot of the stores we saw had the weathered-wood atmosphere, we didn't think it fit the high-tech look and high-fashion colors of today's diving outfits and equipment," Kepler explains.

Rather than pattern their operation after other dive stores, the partners visited local department stores and sporting goods shops, hoping to be inspired by ideas about how to display merchandise more effectively. They decided to line Midwest Scuba Center with slatwall and gridwall, both of which would offer a sleek look and a high degree of flexibility.

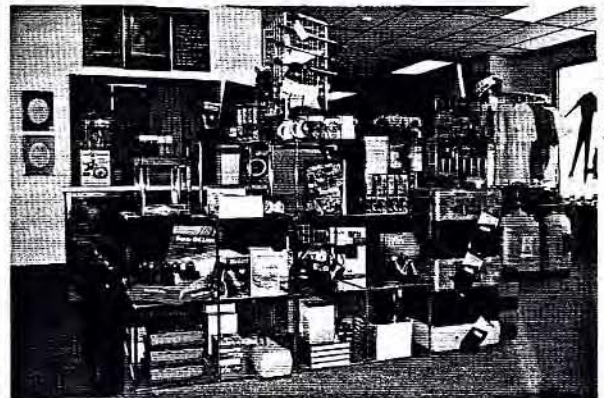
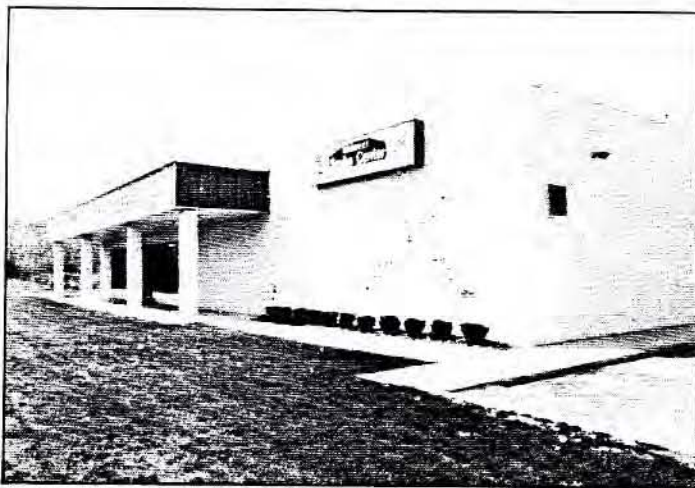


Photo by Tom Kepler

Kepler



The thing that makes the greatest difference is having a committed and highly qualified staff.

Slatwall, Kepler explains, comes in four-by-eight-foot panels with horizontal grooves; special fixtures fit into the grooves to hold displays of merchandise. "It's a lot better looking than painted pegboard, which has been the traditional approach," he asserts.

Gridwall, Kepler says, is a display system with wires crisscrossing every few inches. "The wire panels can either go up against the wall, or there are brackets to keep them extended out three or four inches," he says. "You can do a lot of different things with gridwall."

And they have. Unlike many dive stores, Midwest Scuba Center makes a special effort to display color-coordinated ensembles of equipment and outfits. That way, Kepler explains, customers don't have to march all around the store to gather the pieces—wet suits, masks, fins, snorkels, BCs—that form a unified look.

"We use mannequins and other displays

to give customers an immediate sense of what is available and possible in all the new high-fashion colors—turquoise, neon greens, hot pinks, and fuchias," Kepler notes.

The most difficult problem in displaying today's dive equipment, he believes, is how to educate customers about the equipment's complex features while employing only a small staff of store personnel. To help, Midwest Scuba Center uses a computer graphics software package to create highly professional-looking tags for all items. The tags outline the features and benefits of the products, as well as specifying prices, model numbers, and available sizes and colors.

Kepler is convinced that the sleek, high-tech look he and his partners have creat-

Keeping its clientele interested and involved means having a large rental department, plenty of equipment, and giving good service.

ed at Midwest Scuba Center is the wave of the future for all dive stores on the cutting edge—and he's surprised that the look hasn't already spread more widely.

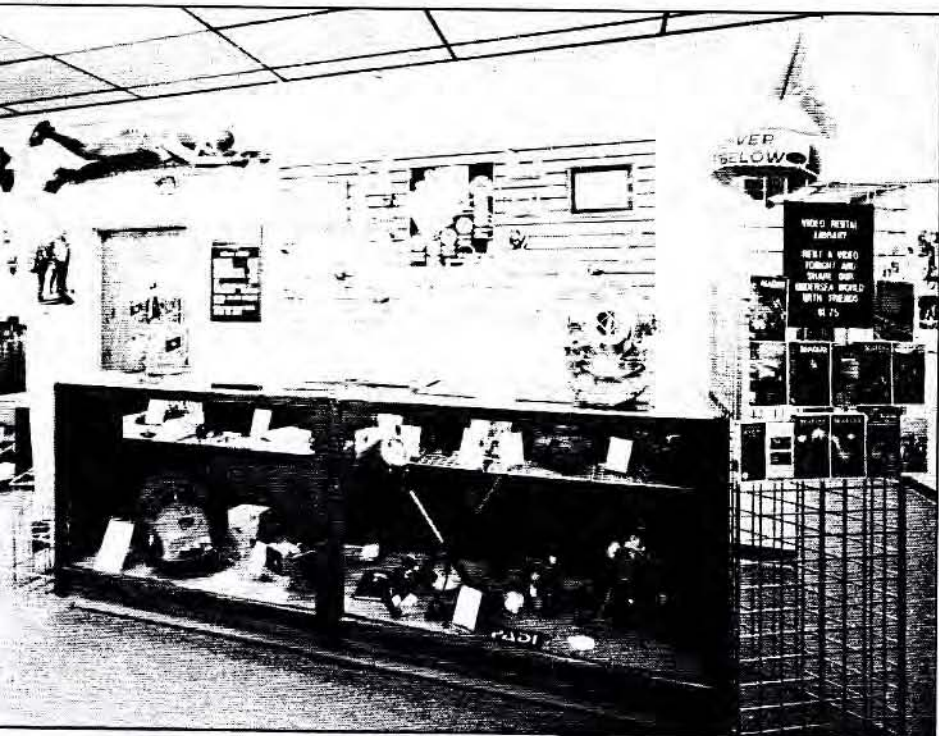
Not long ago, Kepler visited seven or eight dive stores in Florida.

"Clearly," he says, "it was a very exclusive area with a lot of money. Frankly, I was a bit surprised by the way the stores displayed their merchandise. I found only one store that equaled what we've done."

Still, Midwest Scuba is not content to rest on its laurels: "We're constantly trying to come up with new ways to display our merchandise," Kepler says. He is especially proud that the store sells a wide range of underwater photography equipment—both 35 mm and video. It's a line of merchandise that other stores would do well to carry, he contends.

"A lot of store owners think that if the visibility in their area isn't perfect, people aren't going to be interested in underwater photography," he says. "That's wrong! The Midwest probably has the worst visibility of all, yet people here take a lot of underwater photographs."

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Underwater video has become particularly popular, according to Kepler. The reason is simple, he says: To get good results from 35 mm, you really have to know something about what you're doing; with video, even novices who know nothing about underwater photography can get fairly good results simply by pointing and shooting.

Kepler admits that the photography equipment doesn't have as big a markup as some of the store's other merchandise, but, in his view, getting people interested in underwater photography is a good way to reinvigorate their general interest in diving.

"After a while, people get tired of just going out on dives," he says. "When they start to take photographs, it opens a whole new world for them."

To help customers discover that world, Midwest Scuba Center offers classes in underwater photography. The basic beginning course lasts three sessions and costs \$45. Instructors teach composition techniques, lighting, and how to take care of the equipment. A more advanced 35 mm course costs \$125 for eight sessions. Similar courses in video techniques are also offered.

Keeping its clientele interested and involved is a primary concern of Midwest Scuba Center. "We want people to know that we're a complete training and retail facility," Kepler says. In part, that means having a large equipment-rental department and servicing all of the major brands the store stocks.

Another big draw for the store is its 20-by-40-foot indoor pool, which is available to customers who want to keep their skills up, practice before leaving on diving trips, or simply familiarize themselves with new equipment.

"It gives a customer a chance to try out a piece of equipment before he purchases it," Kepler says. The store charges a nominal \$5 fee to use the pool for practicing diving techniques.

In the store's two classrooms, seven staff instructors offer a complete PADI training program—everything from beginning to instructor levels. The beginners class lasts three hours a night, two nights a week for three weeks at a cost of \$125.

The store also piques customer interest by organizing diving trips to places like Grand Cayman Island, Cozumel, and the British Virgin Islands. "We try to find unusual locations that most people in this area haven't visited recently," Kepler relates. On the average, 12 to 16 people take part in each trip; most of the four- to five-day excursions cost \$500-\$600.

The trips and classes are promoted in a quarterly newsletter, put together by the staff, that goes out to a mailing list of

1,500 names. The store also promotes itself through Yellow Pages ads and radio spots.

Although fancy merchandise labels, advanced display techniques, comprehensive training classes, and trips to exotic destinations all help, the thing that can make the greatest difference, Kepler admits, is having a committed and highly qualified staff. Finding and keeping topnotch employees is one problem Kepler and his partners have not yet fully mastered.

"One thing that helps is the fact that everyone we hire is a certified diver," he says. "You can always bluff customers who ask questions because they don't have a clue about what the right answer is. But that's not what we want; we won't put people on the sales floor until we feel confident that they know what they're talking about."

Such attention to detail has worked. Midwest Scuba Center, Kepler reports with pride, has had a very successful year. That does not mean the road hasn't had some rough stretches, or that the enterprise still doesn't struggle from time to time. "There will always be days that are a struggle," he admits. "The main problem is that we all get burned out from time to time."

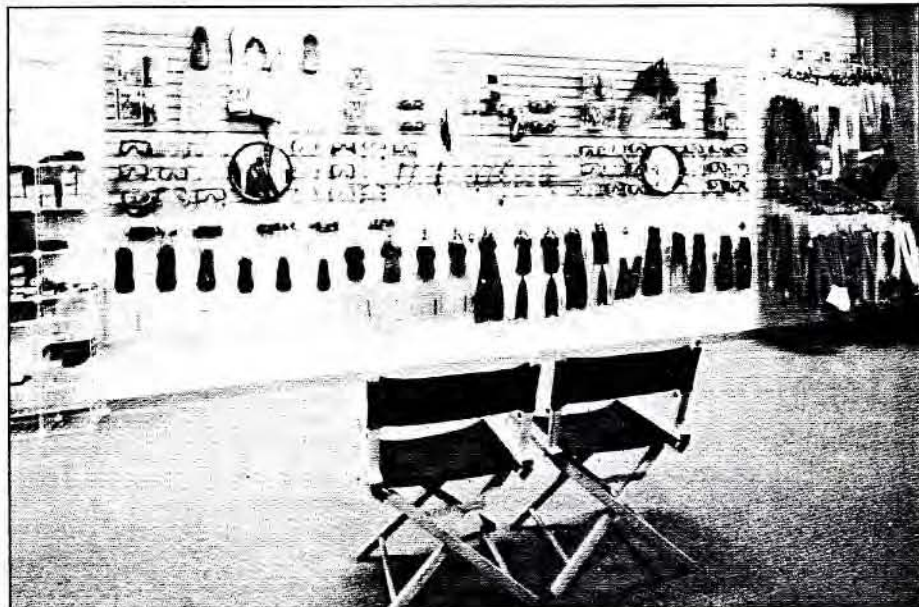
How does Kepler, who works 50-60 hours a week, deal with such periods?

"I try to get out of the store as much as possible," he replies. "Whenever I can, I go away on a trip—even if it's just for the weekend. It makes a big difference."

Lenny Giteck is a Los Angeles-based freelance business writer.

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The use of slatwall and gridwall for displays offers a sleek look and a high degree of flexibility, and looks better than the traditional pegboard.