



Interview by Matthew Meier  
Photos courtesy of  
Dive Gear Express

**“Treat customers the way you want to be treated” is a tenet of client relations for which many businesses strive but, sadly, not all achieve. This concept of customer service was the primary building block with which Mark Derrick developed Dive Gear Express (DGX) since its infancy in 2002. In light of the five-star independent Google reviews from 97 percent of DGX patrons, I would say they are on the right track.**

and as Derrick says, “You won’t find any jacket-style BCs or pink snorkels.” Most of their customers are looking for brands and/or gear setups that their local dive shops do not carry. This circles back to the importance of the DGX team, because nearly every order must be personally customized to satisfy their clients’ wishes and demands. Several of the staff members are technical divers with trimix and/or full cave qualifications, plus a few have rebreather certifications, and each dives the equipment they sell.

DGX is based out of a dive shop and warehouse in Pompano Beach, Florida, considered by many of their clients around the planet to be their “local shop” and a destination

Recently, I had the opportunity to talk with Derrick to learn more about his history and that of the company. My takeaway, which he emphasized time and again, was that the success of DGX was only made possible due to his team of dedicated employees and their focus on satisfying the customer’s needs.

For the uninitiated, Dive Gear Express is a US-based online dive gear retailer with a global clientele, specializing in equipment for experienced divers and those in the technical diving community. They do not carry gear for beginning divers,



Mark Derrick (center) teaching students in a pool session



# Mark Derrick

*Founder of Dive Gear Express*

to which they come to tour the “mother ship” when in the area. The dive shop is an extension of their online store where customers can order gear from a website kiosk up front and have it brought out from the warehouse in the back. This family-owned and -operated small business is run by a staff of only eight.

## History

Derrick is a self-described tech nerd and was an early adopter of technical diving, based in part on his educational background in physics and chemistry. That knowledge allowed him to

understand concepts such as blending nitrox and accelerated decompression, and helped fuel his fascination with being on the bleeding edge of technical diving. In 1993, Derrick became a certified trimix diver through the renowned instruction of Billy Deans, and a few years later, transformed into an instructor himself for diving rebreathers.

By the early 2000s, Derrick envisioned retirement and was living and diving in the Florida Keys after successfully selling off an internet service provider (ISP) company. However, his days as a dive bum did not last long,

and in an effort to, as he called it, “be closer to civilization,” Derrick relocated to Pompano Beach in 2002 and started a technical gas fill company called Fill Express. Derrick stated that, at the time, it was nearly impossible to get technical gas fills in a reliable or timely fashion. So, with his tech knowledge and background, he created a fill station company that consistently, and with precision accuracy, banked nitrox at 32, 36 and 40 percent, as well as several trimix blends, all available as easily as getting an air fill. Using inspiration from his uncle,





# profile

Staff at work filling customers orders and checking gear in the DGX warehouse. Several are technical divers who dive the type of equipment they sell.



ucts sold were shipped and delivered the very next day.

Derrick soon became Dive Rite's largest dealer, though both he and Lamar took a lot of flak for supposedly "destroying the

dive industry" by selling dive equipment on the internet. Over the next few years, Derrick and his staff carefully curated the addition of gear from other manufacturers and also started selling cylinders online, all with the caveat that "if the Divers Direct website sold it, he did not."

The online store was rebranded to Dive Gear Express in 2009, and the following year, DGX moved to its current physical location in Pompano Beach's Powerline Business Park. Derrick also separated the Fill Express business from DGX, creating individual LLCs, before selling Fill Express in May of 2010. As part of the sales contract, Derrick agreed to a non-compete clause stating that he would not sell air fills from the new DGX location. In keeping that prom-

ise, Derrick instead gives away air to his technical diving students from the nitrox and trimix banks he still maintains at the mother ship—further illustrating his desire not to compete with local dive shops.

### A family business

From the beginning, Derrick has sourced gear from manufacturers and sold it online directly to his primarily consumer-based customers. Though Dive Gear Express does not manufacture any products directly, it does place its brand on a few items. By eliminating the middleman, DGX does not offer discounts, nor wholesale pricing, but there is a segment of the website called the Bargain Annex, with a nod to Derrick's late father, where you can find discontinued and clearance-priced items.

Derrick learned a lot about business practices and financial statements from working with his father, who ran a chain of small furniture stores. His dad's "Bargain Annex" was a section of the store that contained discounted furniture, and when Derrick created the website for DGX, he kept the name as a way to honor his father.

Keeping the family theme



# Beneath the Sea®



Photo courtesy of Arosigwo-Dominico -- Octopus Ballet

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Mark Derrick in Florida (right) and enjoying marine life on a dive (below)

going, Derrick's sister Lisa has worked with him at DGX since 2006. She started out filling tanks and photographing gear, which she continues doing to this day while also working on graphics and helping to manage the shop. In recent years, Derrick configured the documentation for his business so that it is 100 percent cloud-based, thus allowing his other sister, living in their home state of Alabama and an accountant by trade, to become his office manager, logging in remotely to handle book-keeping and accounts.

### User-friendly website

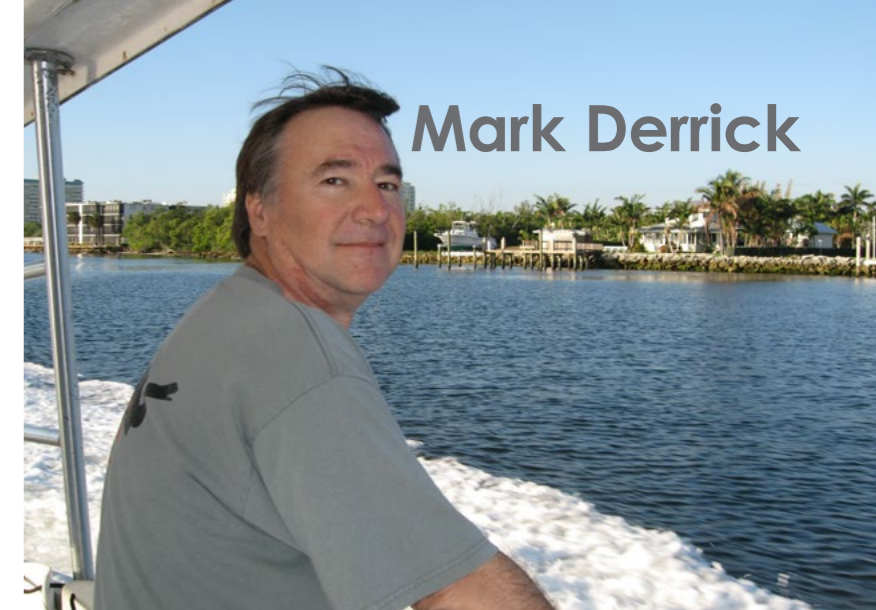
The unsung hero of the business is the website itself. Derrick designed it to be easy to navigate and filled the pages with "Tek Tips" to help answer questions from everything related to technical diving to shipping and return policies. Most customer questions are answered on the site, but if the staff discovers an unaddressed issue, they will

make a note so it can be added in the future.

Speaking of shipping and returns, DGX offers free shipping on everything they sell and guarantees the safe arrival of every order. They ship to over 100 countries worldwide and have one of the best return policies in the industry. Everything is explained in detail on the website.

I asked Derrick if he knew the percentage of their international sales, and he stipulated that while DGX does not track that specifically, he estimates it to be approximately 40 percent. Though he also admitted that now it may be slightly lower due to the ongoing shipping problems over the past few years, further explaining that there are a few countries to which he

Mark Derrick



can no longer ship as he cannot guarantee delivery.

### Global sales

Looking back at how DGX rode out the pandemic, Derrick said that his sales were down by more than 50 percent in April and May of 2020. As June and July came around and more divers got back in the water locally, his numbers began to climb. By year end, Derrick said that while their numbers were not terrible, his 2020 sales were certainly worse than normal.

Business continued to increase in 2021, and so far, 2022 is on track to keep pace with 2021, but he is still not back to pre-pandemic levels. Derrick explained that the ongoing challenge is dealing with decreasing margins on gear, as the cost of rent, payroll, wholesale goods, materials, shipping and other expenses continue to rise.

Undaunted, Derrick vowed that he and his staff will carry on providing the impeccable customer service upon which Dive Gear Express was built while doing their best to stay on the cutting edge of technology, as they continue to deliver high-quality dive gear around the globe. ■

