

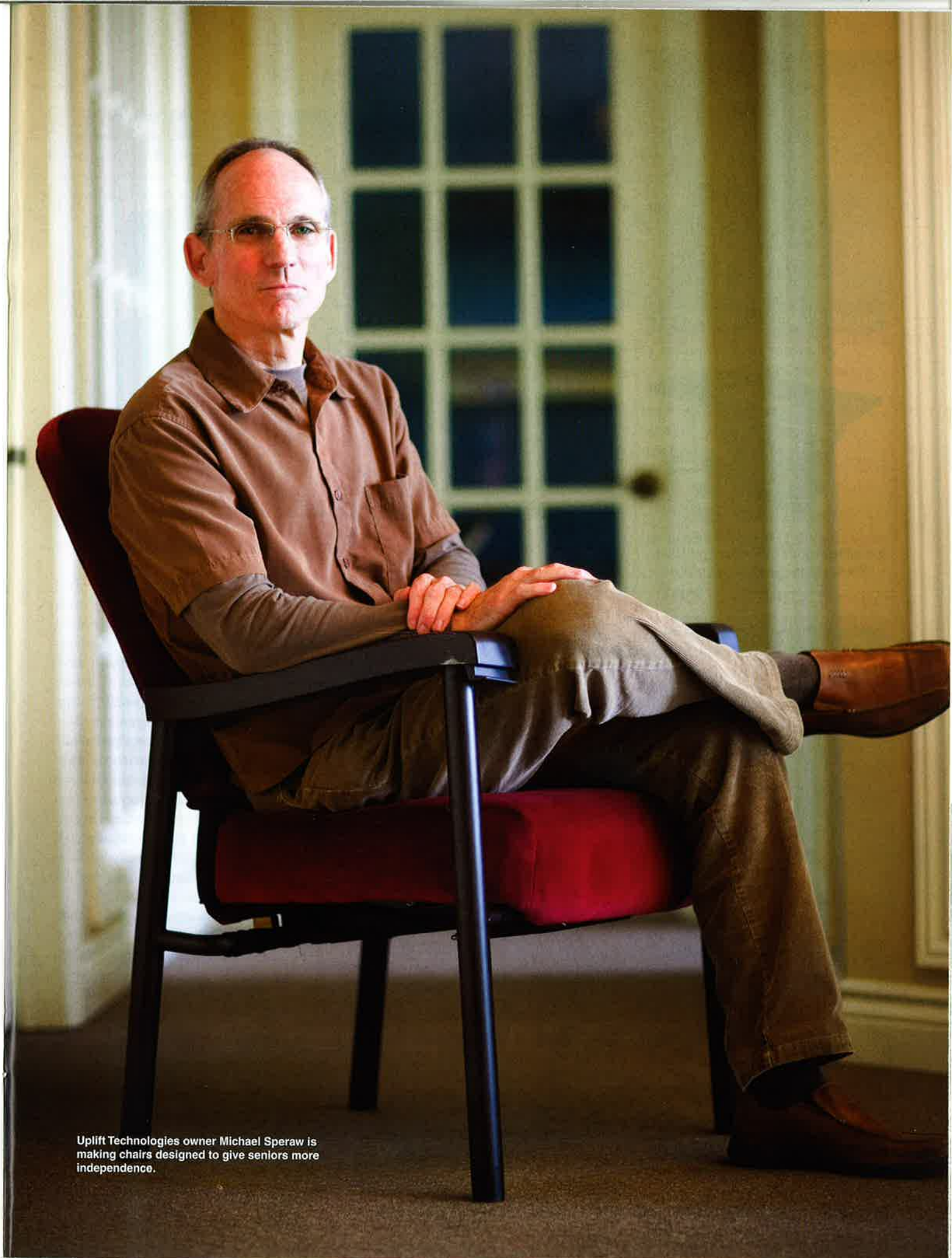
Take a seat

Collaborative research and good design offer customers better products. That's a good business model for Uplift Technologies

By Kathleen Martin

People aspire to a lot of things, but one of them usually isn't to invent an over-size plush chair that lifts up to help its occupant rise. Michael Speraw knows this; his company, Dartmouth N.S.-based Uplift Technologies Inc. (www.up-lift.com), creates and markets home medical equipment to meet the needs of people not yet in full "lift-chair" territory. Speraw is hoping Uplift's approach to product development will entice an aging population to see his chair as a sign of independence, not the loss of it.

The difference between a lift chair and the lifting seat Uplift creates is significant: discretion. Although the purpose they both serve is similar—to help people get out of chairs—Uplift concentrates its solutions on the seats themselves. Some are seamlessly incorporated into wing-back chairs and some are portable, while others are not even motorized, relying solely on hydraulics. "People who use our products still need some help, but they want that help to be discreet," says Speraw. "When our seats are down, they look like any other chair."



Uplift Technologies owner Michael Speraw is making chairs designed to give seniors more independence.

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Michael Speraw (left) and Glen Hougan are conducting research to improve products specific to seniors—a growing customer base in Atlantic Canada.

"Our design approach is going out to observe people. What people say they do on the phone and what they actually do in their homes can be quite different"

— Glen Hougan

People's aversion to lift chairs isn't necessarily to the chair itself; rather, it's to what the chair represents: aging, loss of mobility, an admission of need. To address this, Uplift has been conducting research with some of the top design specialists in the region, including Glen Hougan, an assistant professor at NSCAD University in Halifax and principal of Wellspan Product Research and Design (www.wellspan-design.com), a firm specializing in health care products and its design for an aging population. "Adapting is common as people age," says Hougan. He tells a story of an elderly woman who, when asked during one of his interviews if she had any trouble bending over to take off her shoes, she slipped out of her footwear, indicating she had no problems. The fact was that she had switched to laceless slip-ons so she didn't have to bend over.

The dilemma is, then, how to provide seniors with an appealing product that returns their sense of control. "There is ageism in product design," says Hougan. "It wrongly suggests that people care only

about function when they get older."

Speraw takes this challenge seriously. He notes the home-medical-equipment industry has come along way in the last 15 years, when products were "crude looking—functional but not very attractive." He's conscious, however, that hovering on today's horizon is a style-conscious, demanding, market-defining baby boomer population, and he wants to ensure that Uplift is ready to meet their needs.

Uplift is already a leader in its category. In fact, says Speraw, "we're creating the lifting-cushion industry." The company sells its products, which also includes a specialized light to treat seasonal affective disorder, throughout North America online and through pharmacies and medical equipment stores such as Lawtons Drugs, Shopper's Drug Mart, and Harding Medical Supplies. Despite its comfortable position in the marketplace, Speraw is always pushing Uplift further, developing different versions of its products in an attempt to address its target market's range of needs.

Speraw often consults research studies when developing products. When he was working on a new product for the light-therapy portion of Uplift's business, he teamed with students in a graduate course led by Dalhousie business professor David Roach. This allowed Uplift to harness what Roach calls "the power of the many" implicit in an open innovation system: many minds working on a problem from different angles.

NSCAD's Hougan helped out on that project, bringing design students from NSCAD together with Roach's class. But it was his work in his own Design for an Aging Population course that most impacted Speraw. Hougan's students spent time in seniors' homes to see how they lived, what their needs were, and how they might be met by good design. Speraw attended an exhibit showcasing their results. "I was really impressed both with the methodology and some of the product ideas," he says.

With Wellspan, Uplift has conducted user research similar to that of the students'. "The traditional design approach is telephone interviews," says Hougan. "Our approach is going out to observe people. What people say they do on the phone and what they actually do in their homes can be quite different."

In addition to helping Uplift solidify its understanding of its space in the market, the research helped provide insight into the product design and usability, such as how important it was that the lifting cushions fit the customer's favourite chair. "If it didn't, they wouldn't use the cushion," says Hougan, "even if they had already purchased it."

The research revealed the importance of not only how the product was designed but also how important the life of the product was within the consumer's home. Speraw doesn't just want to sell the cushions; he wants to make sure they're being used to their full potential and improving consumers' lives. "Design is valuable," says Hougan. "It identifies problems and uncovers opportunities. It used to be brought in only at the back end of product development, but that's changing. And this is where innovation happens—when people at the top are willing to look at different ways of problem solving. Michael Speraw gets it." ■

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