

Fire Equipment for Ontario Fire Departments



Angela Puddephatt
CEO

About M&L Supply, Fire and Safety

Established in June 1993, M&L Supply began as a single man-on-a-mission company with President, Mark Prendergast working together with his wife Lori – literally from their kitchen table. M&L has since grown to include an Ontario-wide team of 10 sales representatives, 6 service technicians and a full-time head office staff of 11. (Oh yeah – and a head office located in Ingleside, Ontario – the kitchen table was getting kind of small!). In 2013, a safety equipment retail store was added to the current head office and warehouse and the website was updated to offer online shopping.

Interview conducted by:

Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: Ms. Puddephatt, what is M&L Supply Fire and Safety?

Ms. Puddephatt: We sell fire equipment to fire departments all over Ontario.

CEOCFO: What types of equipment?

Ms. Puddephatt: Anything that a firefighter would use! The gear they wear – boots and bunker suits, helmets and gloves, fire hoses, foam used to extinguish fires, equipment that goes on fire trucks, extrication tools and lots more.

CEOCFO: Are there many fire departments in Ontario? Does each city have their own? Are there volunteers? What is the marketplace like?

Ms. Puddephatt: There are over 450 fire departments in Ontario and the majority of these are volunteer departments. Some are full-time, some are part-time and some departments are composites. We have eight sales reps across Ontario serving different locations.

CEOCFO: Are you working often with cities and towns?

Ms. Puddephatt: Yes, we work with cities and towns and municipalities.

CEOCFO: What are some of the challenges? Do you find much difference from group to group?

Ms. Puddephatt: Our company was built on service and providing service to fire departments – including training and educating fire departments on how to use different equipment. We sold directly to the fire department or the municipality. Now, the market is moving towards using the tendering process instead of a fire chief or training officer being allowed to make the purchase decision. It comes down to dollars and cents instead of service and quality.

CEOCFO: How can you adapt to the new model?

Ms. Puddephatt: The margins have definitely gotten smaller! We have had to become more competitive and by doing so, unfortunately, we have had to reduce some of the service that we formerly provided in certain areas.

CEOCFO: *Where do you source your equipment?*

Ms. Puddephatt: Most of our equipment comes from the U.S. We do have some Canadian suppliers but most are from the U.S. We have exclusive contracts with many of our vendors.

CEOCFO: *Are there many manufacturers that work in this industry and is there much competition in Ontario?*

Ms. Puddephatt: There are many manufacturers! There is lots of competition within the province and it can be quite fierce.

CEOCFO: *From local or from people going directly to the suppliers?*

Ms. Puddephatt: Some competition comes from companies that supply the same product we do – breathing apparatus is one example. These companies definitely create more difficulty for us. We try to push the products for which we have exclusivity.

CEOCFO: *You mentioned the range of products, but what are some of the items that people might not think about? What are some of the unique products that you carry?*

Ms. Puddephatt: Thermal imagers are definitely unique items. These are cameras used by fire departments to locate firefighters and victims and/or hot spots in an actual fire. They are also becoming increasingly popular for use by police at accident scenes. Extrication equipment in the form of a cutter used to cut open cars or a spreader used as a jack between doors or a door opener are also unique items we sell. We also have a tool that acts as a lift for a transport truck – you hook it up to a system and the truck is lifted so that whatever is underneath it can be removed.

“We’re selling to help save lives. Our customers know that and trust that we only sell what we would use ourselves. That is exceptional!” - Angela Puddephatt

CEOCFO: *Is the service a big part of what you do?*

Ms. Puddephatt: Yes.

CEOCFO: *Do many of the products require servicing?*

Ms. Puddephatt: Oh yes! Breathing apparatus has to be bench-tested annually. Nozzles that fit on the ends of hoses must be serviced regularly. Wildfire equipment – pumps and chainsaws – all require maintenance as well.

CEOCFO: *Do you need to maintain inventory or are you able to get products from the manufacturer as needed?*

Ms. Puddephatt: We maintain about a million dollars’ worth of inventory. Over \$200,000.00 of that is located in our mobile units.

CEOCFO: *What are your mobile units?*

Ms. Puddephatt: We have two mobile repair trailers on the road. Each is stocked with replacement parts and testing equipment.

CEOCFO: *What are some of the challenges with the inventory, particularly as products are updated and changed? How do you have enough on hand without running short, but not be stuck with the old model?*

Ms. Puddephatt: That is definitely something we strive to keep on top of, for sure! Trying to stock items regularly used by our customers means depending upon our experience and intuition. We always have basic products on hand, like helmets, boots, and gloves because these are things that fire departments need ‘yesterday’! It’s impossible not to get caught with a few older items that just

didn't sell. Often times, these items are donated to fire departments that may not have funding to purchase what they want. East Gwillimbury Fire Department just had a fire at their firehall about two months ago – everything burned right to the ground, including all their equipment. We were able to take a whole load of equipment to keep the department running.

CEOCFO: *How do you evaluate when to add new products?*

Ms. Puddephatt: Our accounting system keeps track of that. We have re-order points built into our system and that gets analyzed every week. We analyze the numbers prior to placing orders. It's a very hands-on approach.

CEOCFO: *When new products come out, how do you evaluate whether you need to pay attention?*

Ms. Puddephatt: All of our sales representatives are firefighters themselves so they have sat on both sides of the desk! We attend a few key trade shows and that's when new products are viewed and assessed by our team. Our President, Mark Prendergast, along with some of our sales reps, attend these shows annually. We have a debriefing session after each show to get the rundown on new products. M&L is very picky about what gets promoted – the products have to be the best. For example, anyone can sell flashlights. You can go online and buy the same flashlight from any fire equipment supplier – except M&L. What we look for is a company that makes quality items – possibly even overlooked by the competition – and that stands behind its products. Those are the companies we like to build relationships with.

CEOCFO: *Does the fire department community in Ontario recognize the depth and quality of M&L? Do they understand your basic philosophy?*

Ms. Puddephatt: I believe so. The unfortunate part is that most purchases now have to be made through municipalities' purchasing departments – it's often a frustration for the fire departments and for companies like M&L.

CEOCFO: *What is the plan for the next year or two and how might things be different?*

Ms. Puddephatt: Our company has gone through tremendous growth in the last three or four years. Last year, we contracted a private company to assess our processes and come up with a strategic plan. We'd now like to put all of those plans into place, embrace our growth, and become more competitive in the market.

CEOCFO: *What accounted for the growth spurt?*

Ms. Puddephatt: I think probably the previous ten years of hard work!

CEOCFO: *You mentioned, for example, that there were certain products that police could use; do you reach out to those communities or do you see the possibility of expanding your offerings?*

Ms. Puddephatt: Yes, we are expanding to that sector. We have hired someone to help us move into the industrial area and policing area. We opened a retail store at our head office location so that we could move into those areas slowly while we continue to research and learn about the products. Basically, these products go hand-in-hand with firefighting products. It's all about safety. Our sales reps are very comfortable in the fire industry and are now working at becoming more comfortable in the policing and industrial areas. Our new-hire will be helping us to move into the hospital sector as well (i.e. decontamination, etc.).

CEOCFO: *Put it together for our readers. Why does M&L stand out and what makes it an exceptional company?*

Ms. Puddephatt: I believe that this company was built on an exceptional foundation of family, common sense, trust, and leadership. Mark started M&L at his kitchen table and when it got too busy for just him, his wife Lori stepped in to help. After that, it grew one person at a time. I was about the fourth support person to be hired and I've stayed with M&L ever since. All of the people that Mark has hired have quickly become part of the M&L family and it goes without saying that we all really believe in the company. There's a great family atmosphere so it's not a chore to go to work! Everyone here has a purpose and feels good about their individual accomplishments as well as those of the company. The majority of our sales reps have been with M&L for well over ten years and are, of course, integral to our success. They too, fit snugly in the M&L family! Most of our sales are geared towards serving the emergency services sectors, so we are basically one close-knit family serving another. That in itself means that we have to be confident to stand behind the products we promote and sell – because we're selling to help save lives. Our customers know that and trust that we only sell what we would use ourselves. That is exceptional!



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