



with Roland Baumeister

Leading the Pack

Many companies fail in their efforts to be innovative. Often the reason is a simple one: they have not invested enough thought into the areas where they can be the most innovative.

In many cases, the need to innovate is forced upon companies by external factors, such as changing raw material supplies, a labour shortage and increasingly, the need to be “green.”

One Canadian company that has made sustainability and innovation the cornerstone of its business strategy is Upholstery Arts (UA) in Vancouver, B.C. (upholsteryarts.ca). An interview with company owner Len Laycock, a former marketing director with Ikea, revealed some unique approaches to the development of its products and the way the company positions itself in the marketplace.

For Laycock, innovation stems from the company’s philosophy — to produce high quality upholstery products that serve the planet and save consumers money.

The elimination of polyurethane foam material was another goal that has been achieved.



The path to developing “the greenest upholstery company on the planet” began with a 2005 conversation with Laycock’s then 10-year-old son. While always interested in sustainability issues, it was his son’s fear of environmental degradation that caused him to act.

Rather than applying a limited number of eco-friendly components to his products, Laycock took a holistic approach to his products, looking at all components that make up his definition of a high quality item. The end result? Pieces that use tangible “green” elements such as non-toxic glues, stains and finishes while offering intangible must-haves such as long lasting comfort and beauty.

Laycock’s commitment both to quality and the earth has meant a few challenges. Sourcing FSC certified wood products was initially difficult as was locating other



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components and products such as fabrics, adhesives and finishes that emitted low VOCs, and could be recycled.

“We first went to our regular suppliers of components,” says Laycock. “However, we had to change to new suppliers that not only could supply the products we needed, but also had the same philosophy about the product as we did.” Unfortunately, there was no Canadian manufacturer of FSC certified plywood — an opportunity that he believes needs to be filled locally.

“Developing sustainable products moved the company to become very conscious of materials and cost,” says Laycock. “By re-thinking our products, we were forced to work smarter and become more innovative, and as a result we became more efficient.” For example, the frame for UA’s sofas are now made out of plywood, which offers them greater design flexibility, less waste, more precise manufacturing, fewer parts and a resulting product of higher quality. “Many people have the false idea that green products are more expensive,” says Laycock. “Going green forced innovation onto us and one of the benefits was that the assembly time of our frames dropped.”

The next generation of UA products will build on the lessons learned and will also incorporate new technologies and materials. Even fabrics will get the innovative treatment. “We will be able to send that product back to be recycled directly by the manufacturer of the material itself.”

The benefits of UA’s products and innovative techniques and technologies have been substantial both personally and professionally for Len Laycock. “When I get up in the morning, I feel I have a purpose.” ■

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