



With Roland Baumeister

Kitchen Cabinet Manufacturing

KEEPING AHEAD IN THE INNOVATION GAME

The number of kitchen cabinets being built and installed has significantly increased over the last few years, thanks to the boom in housing construction and renovation. Today's kitchen cabinet sector has become a fashion industry, with various styles ranging from suburban classic and rustic to sleek urban contemporary. Along with this, consumers are becoming more knowledgeable and are looking for unique designer items to personalize their kitchen.

Offering an assorted cabinet selection is essential for manufacturers looking to gain a marketing edge. To respond to the wide range of tastes, manufacturers need to provide products in a vast variety of wood species, stain colours and with detail features such as columns and hood canopies.

There is no doubt that the manufacturer who keeps abreast of what is happening across North America will be more competitive and able to build a loyal customer base. But does this mean becoming a trendsetter is the key to success?

Adapting the shape, size, colour, style and features of products quickly and efficiently to meet customers' distinct demands has become a very real, and major challenge. For today's kitchen cabinet manufacturer, it all relates to the issue of how efficiently they can take a customer's concept through the design and approval process and match it with their manufacturing constraints.

One company that has succeeded in balancing product innovation with excellent turnaround is Nickels Custom Cabinets in Richmond, B.C. (www.nickelscabinets.com).

Sales and marketing director David Campbell stresses that listening to its customers is the company's first maxim. While Nickels is always watching new trends, especially from Europe, it is not trying to create trends that lead to a new buying frenzy. The company's focus is on having the products its customers want in a timely manner. And this, first and foremost, requires a manufacturing system that allows Nickels to do this.

Production manager Ted Federau lists the factors in the company's manufacturing system that ensure that products and designs require minimal handling and processes to

complete them within the manufacturing circle. They are all based on lean manufacturing principles, such as keeping a low inventory, grouping processes and producing prototypes.

Carrying as low a raw material inventory as possible is essential. This in itself eliminates the problem of getting rid of stock when an old line is discontinued.

In weekly production meetings, members from both the sales and marketing team and the manufacturing team present and discuss new design ideas.

"It is a group process," says Federau. If an idea has potential, it is mapped out on a white board. This helps to visualize implementation, and how to overcome possible challenges.

Nickels Cabinets also actively cross-trains all staff on the job. Every worker is able to execute two additional job functions besides their main one. This enables the company to shift employees to where they are needed.

Have the right technology

Installing an optimizing program and a CAD program resulted in a big leap ahead for Nickels Cabinets' manufacturing processes. "We felt we needed to invest in this technology because switching from batch to lean forces you to cut everything from scratch," says Federau. To get prepared, he attended a number of workshops on lean manufacturing.

"The workshops opened my eyes to the reality of our competitive situation here in Canada, as well as the global pressure from off-shore manufacturers when it comes to the custom market. Competition is more about global than local competition. We need to be prepared through constant product innovation and optimization of our manufacturing processes." ■

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