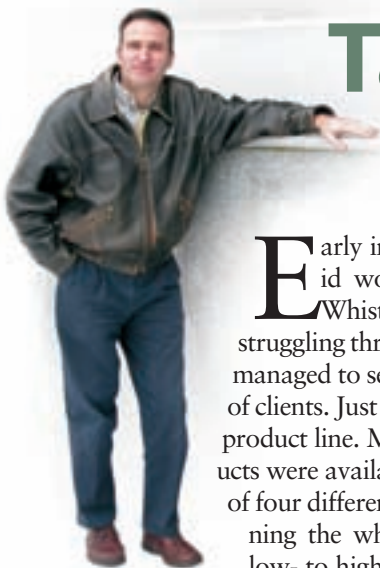


# Solutions for Wood

with Roland Baumeister

## Take back control... from your product line.



**E**arly in 2004, Vancouver area solid wood furniture manufacturer Whistler Creek Furniture was a struggling three-year-old start-up that had managed to secure quite an impressive list of clients. Just as impressive though was its product line. More than 450 distinct products were available in 12 colours, made out of four different species of wood and spanning the whole market spectrum from low- to high-end. The company had everything for everyone, a salesperson's delight and a production manager's nightmare.

Imagine the following scenarios:

- You develop a new product, just like the salesperson asked you for, but you need a new drawer size. Before long you discover that you're making 40 different sizes of drawers. Some are mere fractions different from one another.
- Just before an important order is set to be shipped, you discover that the doors are too big for the frames. The next time around, the doors come in a smaller size and then you realize that it was the frame that was wrong in the first place.
- An item comes back because there is a flaw in its construction. The easiest way to repair the problem is to add a brace here and a nailing strip there. Now, this model has become clunky. Imagine what it will look like in six months when more mending is needed.
- When you first started making a certain product, the length of the top was 36". Before long it becomes 36-1/2". In a year your clients complain that the order they have just received doesn't look at all like their floor model.

Multiply these problems by a few hundred products and you've got a typical medium-size wood furniture manufacturing plant. Sound familiar?

For Whistler Creek, there were so many SKUs, keeping up with product costing was nearly impossible. And with most items, only a few sold in a year so it didn't make sense to invest the time to document them properly. As a result, scheduling became difficult, forecasting near to impossible and purchasing was always running trying to keep the right mix of raw materials at the ready.

That's when the owners decided they needed outside help and hired a veteran industrial designer.

"There was not a proper drawing in the shop," recounts one of the owners. "We thought an industrial designer was someone who made beautiful little drawings that could never be built or that no one would want to buy."

When they discovered that industrial design explored not only the outward appearance of the product but also how it gets manufactured, and how it interacts with the end user, they jumped in with both feet.

The company and their newly hired designer went to work re-engineering the whole product line. The process was a long and arduous task since Whistler Creek had more than 400 SKUs in its lineup. The number of parts was trimmed and other parts were standardized with the intention of simplifying construction and making better use of a recently purchased CNC machine. New hardware and materials were explored and a library of technical drawings was created, new procedures specified and a complete bill of materials was built.

Whistler Creek's corporate culture did an about face. It moved away from making a me-too product towards having its own distinctive style while progressively improving its manufacturing capacity and becoming more competitive.

According to Whistler Creek's general manager, "We realize now that we were just putting sticks together. By going through the industrial design process, we went from being amateurs to becoming serious professional furniture manufacturers."

The product mix also changed. The company could afford to say no to unprofitable lines because the new ones that were created specifically to satisfy client's needs were doing so well. Before long, some of Whistler Creek's competitors started imitating their new style. A sure sign of success, some would say.

The result was a measurable increase in quality, ease of production and efficiency. Labour rates dropped drastically while making better use of the equipment in place. Levels of raw material inventory were drained away from the plant floor and so were the investments in work in progress.

Purchasing had a much easier job ordering what they needed. In fact, on some items, the company was able to move to a vendor managed inventory system. Whistler Creek is now looking towards implementing lean manufacturing, a luxury that the company was not ready for in the past.

Industrial design was not the only factor in this success story. A team of dedicated people, starting with the owners of the company, decided that the time was right to take back control and end the tyranny of a product line gone wild. **ww**

*Roland Baumeister is the manager of value-added manufacturing at Forintek Canada, a company with 25 years of experience providing technical support to the wood products industry in Canada. He can be reached at 604-222-5672, or roland@van.forintek.ca.*