

## Solutions for Wood

with Roland Baumeister

### Vancouver's Upholstery Arts takes an innovative and "green" approach to gain the competitive edge. You can too



Recently, daily and trade media have highlighted the need for innovation to help Canadian manufacturers become more competitive and environmentally responsible. Currently, many companies fail in their efforts to be innovative. Often the reason is a simple one: They haven't invested enough thought into the areas where they can be the most innovative.

If you're looking for the best place in your business to become innovative, start with what your company does best. For example, if your company prides itself in its manufacturing excellence, then it makes sense to become innovative around this core strength. On the other hand, if distribution is your area of expertise, then customer-oriented innovation may be the place to start.

In many cases, innovation is forced upon companies by external factors, such as changing raw material supplies, a labour shortage and increasingly, the need to be "green." In May 2007 the SmartMarket report, *Greening of Corporate America*, coauthored by McGraw-Hill and Siemens, found that almost 60 per cent of the top U.S. corporate leaders see the value in sustainability concepts. (For more info, visit [analyticstore.construction.com](http://analyticstore.construction.com)).

Most importantly, the study found that more than half of the companies saw that sustainability activities could help them with differentiating their product in the marketplace. An impressive 57 per cent thought going "green" could foster innovation within their companies.

One Canadian company, Vancouver-based Upholstery Arts (UA), has made sustainability and innovation the cornerstone of its business strategy. An interview with company owner Len Laycock, a former marketing director with

Ikea, revealed some unique approaches to product development and company positioning 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 path to developing "the greenest upholstery company on the planet" began with a conversation Laycock had with his then 10-year-old son in 2005. While Laycock had a predisposed interest in sustainability issues, it was his son's fear of environmental degradation that caused him to put his plan into action.

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 along the way. Sourcing FSC certified wood products was initially difficult as was locating other components and products such as fabrics, adhesives, and finishes that emitted low VOCs, and could be recycled. The elimination of polyurethane foam material was another goal that has also been achieved.

"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 conscious of materials and cost. By re-thinking our products, we were forced to work smarter and become more innovative, and as a result we became more efficient," says Laycock. For example, through innovative thinking, the frame for UA's sofas are now made out of plywood, which offers 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 builds on 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 developing a sustainable product and using innovative techniques and technologies to manufacture and differentiate it in the marketplace have been substantial both personally and professionally for Len Laycock. "When I get up in the morning, I feel I have a purpose. Our staff feels good about making the product and are proud to tell their friends about it," Laycock says. "Our customers also feel good about our product. As a point of product differentiation, we are selling our products to like-minded customers." **WW**

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