

Versatility breeds success

Comprehensive production abilities are keys to continuous growth for custom commercial project manufacturer

By Brooke Baldwin Wisdom

Brewer Woodwork Mfg. Co. has completed custom projects for some of the nation's most recognized names in retailing, restaurants, health care and numerous other commercial clients. Today, the Cleves, Ohio-based company's 165,000 sq. ft. of production space is equipped to take on the production of wood and plastic laminate cases, cabinets, moldings, furniture, wall trims, doors, industrial parts, custom millwork and more. That's light years away from its beginnings in 1963 when August Brewer first started building cabinets and furniture in the basement of his home after he arrived in the U.S. from his native land of West Germany.

What has been the secret to Brewer Woodwork's successful growth throughout the years? "Not putting all our eggs in one basket," says August Brewer's son, Ralph Brewer, now president of the company. "We do not just do architectural millwork, we do

not just do hospitality, we do not just do retail, we do not just do components – we do all of them. Retail has played the biggest part in the growth of our company, and we're actually doing more retail than we do architectural work now. Despite the economy, we still think retail will be fairly strong in 2008, but we may see it fall off in 2009. However, we see a very strong commercial market as a whole. Hospital architectural work is very busy right now, for example. We have the versatility to respond to those changing demands."

A never ending cycle

Brewer Woodwork prides itself in Old World craftsmanship, yet it is highly automated. "To be competitive in this day, you just can't function with the old style equipment that we had 40 years ago," says Brewer. "We're much larger than we were 40 years ago, and in order to do this kind

The retail market has played the biggest part in the growth of Cleves, Ohio-based Brewer Woodwork.

of volume, we have to automate more and more. That's where the big panel saws and the CNC point-to-points all come into play. If robotics enters the equation and we can run machines with lights out without any man labor there, that's even better."

Brewer says there are lots of formulas out there when it comes to determining returns on investments when purchasing equipment, but for him it boils down to two factors. If a machine has simply worn out and can't hold tolerances, it's a matter of replacing it. The other factor gets more complicated. "Often, we need to buy a piece of equipment to relieve the bottleneck we created when we bought a piece of equipment the year before," he explains. "It's kind of a never ending cycle. You see a bottleneck and buy another CNC machine to relieve that

bottleneck. Now if you're doing wood parts, you may have created a problem in finishing because now finishing can't keep up with production. You get that fixed and all of a sudden you go down to the dock and you see shipping can't keep up with shipping the product so then you're looking at adding a dock or adding on to the building. It's a revolving circle when you look at it like that, and one that we went through about two or three years ago. For us, we have always had the demand and then bought the equipment to meet that demand, however. That's the way we have always seen it happen, and that's another way our company has grown to where it is."

Constant unknown territory

Bruewer says the biggest challenge his company faces is that it has no product line. "We're not building a widget 100,000 times a year to where we know every single time it's going down the line what it is costing us to make," he says. "In retail or architectural work, it's more often than not a one-of or two-of type of deal. We're estimating materials and hours, but from the time we estimate the project to the time we buy materials we don't have a lot of control over the costs going up or down. And labor is your best guess because you haven't built that product before, and the only way you know what to put to it is shop experience."

Bruewer Woodwork bids on almost all the projects it takes on. "We help clients go through prototypes," says Bruewer. "We'll build prototypes of fixtures over and over and make changes to suit. That's pretty much done on a time and material basis. Or sometimes a client has a budget and tells us to stay within that budget and let them know when we get there. Other clients may be doing a ten store roll-out but need to go ahead and do the prototyping within their budget. In those cases, they may amortize it through the cost



Bruewer Woodwork's demand is established first, and then equipment such as this Busellato Jet machining center is implemented to meet that demand.

of the fixtures over the 10 stores.

Turnaround time varies from client to client. "There are some clients who have a very good sense of what they want a fixture, for example, to look like and we can get through that very quickly," says Bruewer. "Then you have clients that come in with too many decision makers and they can't get anywhere. We've done prototypes that have taken three to four months with changes, and we've done some that are finished and into production within a week. There is a huge time difference there, and again it just depends on how many people are involved for the most part."

Bruewer Woodwork's 65 employees are divided into six manufacturing areas – a millwork department for moldings and solid lumber parts, a machining department that includes all the functions of cutting, CNC machining and edgbanding, a custom department where custom projects such as a nursing station would be built without going through its modular line, a finishing department, a modular assembly department where everything is conveyerized and a solid surface and countertop department.

Finding skilled labor is a trouble spot for Bruewer. "It's our number one problem and another reason to

automate," he says. "Also, right now the software on the front end in our industry is getting so specific that even engineers are hard to find. We do all our estimating and shop floor control with software from TradeSoft. ProjectPak is the estimating software and ShopPak is the shop floor control. We use AutoCAD 2008 with Microvellum, which sits on top. We've got a Weinig moulder in the millwork shop along with shapers, planers, a high frequency gluer, Timesavers wide belt sanders and two veneer presses. We have two huge conventional spraying booths in our finishing area which are about 30' by 40'. Then we have two automated lines. We have a Cefla flat panel line and a molding finish line from Falcone with a CNC stacker.

"We have CNC equipment from Delmac Machinery Group and have worked with them for so many years. We actually had one of the first CNC point-to-points they brought into the U.S. We have a Fravol edgbander and three CNC point-to-point machines – a Busellato Jet 6000 rail and pod machining center, a Busellato Jet 400 RT nesting machine and a Busellato Jet Concept XL four-axis rail and pod machining center. We are one of the first in the U.S. to put robotics on one of their machines. We have a Motoman robot on the JET 6000

machine that we could run pretty much lights out 24/7 if we wanted to.”

When asked where he'd like to see his business in five years, Bruewer says he'd like to see growth at three to 10 percent a year. “We're not out to look at breaking a lot of records,” he says. “I think there are a lot of big companies out there that push to get to 10 and 15 percent growth yet don't have a handle on profitability. I participate in the AWI (Architectural Woodwork Institute) and ARE (Association of Retail Environments) cost analysis surveys, and we always remain very high on the profitability side in their year-end comparisons. We're not just pushing numbers. You can do \$20 million a year and make less than what you do when you're doing \$15 million. I've been there, done that, and it's not worth the headaches.



Bruewer Woodwork attributes its continuous growth to having the production versatility to respond to changing market demands.

It's better to grow gradually into that than to just jump into it. That's our philosophy. Right now we need to keep our people happy. We need to make sure we're making money, we're participating in 401K and profit sharing and making sure our employees know what they are getting and try to keep pace with a fair increase every year as the economy allows.” **MW**

For more information, circle #352 for TradeSoft; #353 for AutoCAD; circle #354 for Microvellum; circle #355 for Weinig; circle #356 for Timesavers; circle #357 for Cefla; circle #358 for Falcone; circle #359 for Delmac and #360 for Motoman on the Reader Service Card.

MORE Time ◀ ▶ Less Space



Our Multilevel Dryer will give you more time
A longer Flash-off means higher quality in less space

Makor Multilevel Oven
Longer Dry Times
Higher Production
Higher Quality
Small footprint (25 feet)
Lower Capital Cost

Makor Q-One Sprayer
Paper belt or recovery system
1200 doors/shift (stain + 2 coats)
Multiple circuits
Pressurized Cabin
Quick change gun system
Lower Capital Cost



www.makorusa.com

Call 770-368-0047 to schedule your Demo in Atlanta!

Circle 215 on Reader Service Card