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CUSTOM SHOP

On the heels of
SUCCESS**Retail casework manufacturer expands its horizons with residential semi-custom closet manufacturing.***By Jeff Crissey***DEPARTMENTS**

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Although Ace Woodworking, New Bedford, Mass., has been in business for 40 years, the company has experienced a metamorphosis in the last decade. Ten years ago, Roy Bertalotto, father of current Ace Woodworking owner Ryan Bertalotto, was executive vice president for Tweeter Home Entertainment Group and used Ace Woodworking to design and build the retailer's store fixtures.



"At the time, Ace Woodworking was owned by two older gentlemen working out of a garage," says Roy. "We were only building two or three stores per year, so they had plenty of lead time. Soon after, Tweeter goes public and we decide that we want to roll out 30 or 40 retail locations per year. I was faced with a problem – I needed a new casework company that could handle the capacity, or Ace had to expand."

Ryan, along with a business partner, decided to purchase Ace Woodworking and immediately bought a small CNC router and moved the production from a 2,000-sq.-ft. shop into a 6,000-sq.-ft. facility. Production demands continued to increase, and two years later, the company moved into a 16,000-sq.-ft building and purchased a panel saw, Brandt edgebander and Northwood CNC router. In that time, Ace Woodworking had built store fixtures for more than 200 Tweeter locations nationwide.

"Ace specializes in store fixtures for consumer electronics," says Roy. "When building casework for electronics, it is much more involved than building a piece that will hold a few sweaters. It has to hold something heavy and fragile and has to conceal all the wires between the electronic components."

As the company's production capabilities

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grew, so did its client base. As Tweeter's rate of expansion slowed, Ace added retail clients such as Vision Care Centers, Au bon pain and Pampered Pets, as well as local banks.

"We can produce casework quickly," says Roy. "In a 16,000-sq.-ft. building, we were using more than 1,000 sq. ft. as a staging area for the casework prior to shipping. It took up a lot of room."

Ace Woodworking soon realized another move was necessary, but wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to enter a new market. In late 2004, the company moved again, this time into a 22,000-sq.-ft.

building. During the move it purchased several new machines, including a Holzma HPP 250 panel saw from Stiles Machinery, and started Cozy Closets in December, a new division aimed at the closet cabinetry and garage storage market. Ryan coaxed his father out of retirement to head up sales and marketing for the new division.

"Cozy Closets didn't really get going until about a month ago, and now it's on fire," says Roy. "There's nothing better than having a product that customers really want. It's another thing to have to convince them they need to buy what you're selling. Instead, they call us up and say, 'Help me, please! I'm a mess.' Once we install the cabinets in the home, the gratification is amazing. It's almost like we removed a bad tooth for them."

"Because our closet product is modular, it can be made very quickly and is easy to install," adds Roy. "The best thing about the CNC equipment is we can have the shop producing custom retail casework at full speed, and with just a couple keystrokes, we can shift to cutting and machining an order of closets to be installed the next day."

Because closet manufacturing integrates well with Ace Woodworking's existing products, it has allowed the company to quickly become competitive in the market.

"Anyone wanting to enter the closet business has one of two ways to go," says Roy. "Either they make a sizable investment in machinery and tooling and manufacture closets themselves, or they have to buy from somebody else and mark up the prices. Either way, it's hard for them to compete with us on price."

We already own the equipment, and we already pay for the lights. Ace is a self-sufficient company, and Cozy Closets is incremental business for us. We're competitive because we've made it simple."

A look at production

Ace Woodworking's production starts on the Holzma panel saw, where it receives a cut list from the front office using Stiles' CutRite software. The saw is equipped with a UPC labeler that applies a label to each piece with the customer's name, room identification and barcode. Parts that require machining go to the Northwood router, where the operator scans the barcode and calls up the corresponding program for each part. Parts then proceed to the Brandt edgebander for banding prior to packaging and shipping.

"We've worked hard to have our production organized and create a good flow of materials," says Roy. "We have the CNC router and boring machine behind the panel saw, followed by the edgebander and finishing department. Behind that is the assembly area and

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Ace Woodworking specializes in the design and manufacture of store fixtures for consumer electronics.

shipping department. The building is 330 feet long and 50 feet wide, and it works well for an assembly line setup."

When Ace Woodworking began its closet production, the panel saw was cutting parts so fast that a bottleneck occurred in front of the router. To alleviate the problem, the company purchased a 20-year-old boring machine and reconfigured it to suit its needs.

"We completely rebuilt the boring machine to bore the pockets for the attachment points on the fixed shelves," says Roy. "It increased production capability because the router doesn't have to machine the fixed shelf parts. Setup is non-existent: The operator simply sticks the shelf into the boring machine, steps on the pedal, turns the part around and does it again."

On the horizon

Ace Woodworking's ambitions don't end with the residential closets. It is looking to other markets to generate additional revenues, and is currently in negotiations with boat companies in the Cape Cod area to manufacture complete boat interiors.

"Most boatbuilding companies have their own woodworking shops, and they are having a hard time remaining competitive," says Roy. "They want to spend their money and time on electronics, fiberglass technology and propulsion. We hooked up with a couple of boat builders who want us to build the entire interior of a boat in one piece so it can be set inside the hull, then have the fiberglass deck laid on top of it. We have the equipment, expertise and technology to do the wood components of the boat. It frees up floor space for the boat builders and helps make them more competitive."

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