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WOOD DIGEST

PRODUCTIVITY SOLUTIONS FOR MANUFACTURERS OF FURNITURE,
CABINETS, AND SPECIALTY WOOD PRODUCTS.

Richard Walz,
WalzCraft

**Stemming the
component tide**

Automation, quality, lean manufacturing stem imports tide

WalzCraft relies on broad product offerings and customer service to remain competitive

By Steve Ehle



The western Wisconsin-based, WalzCraft Industries, manufactures a broad range of custom cabinet components. Pictured, president Richard Walz with several styles of cabinet doors. Upper right, a James L. Taylor clamping machine; at right, a 200 ft. long Giardina flatline finishing system.

WalzCraft Industries

Established: 1982

Location: LaCrosse, Wis.

Employees: 340 (three shifts)

Facility: 250,000 sq. ft.

Products: Cabinet doors, dovetail drawers, drawer fronts, millwork, cabinet components

Market: North America

President: Richard Walz



What's in a name? A lot, says Richard Walz, president of WalzCraft Industries, a western Wisconsin manufacturer of a broad range of custom cabinet components.

"We were formerly known as 'Cabinet Factory,' but that name really didn't do justice to what we actually manufactured in our LaCrosse plant. In fact, it usually had potential customers thinking that we manufactured cabinets as our main stay product," says Walz. "We are not a cabinet manufacturer. We have always been a component manufacturer, building custom doors, drawer fronts and dovetail drawer boxes with doors making up the largest part of what we do."



Richard Walz, president of WalzCraft Industries, inspects cabinet doors before going through a Timesavers five-head custom-built widebelt sander.



So, about two years ago we decided to change the name of the company to WalzCraft."

Walz says a part of the name confusion involved some customers assuming the company was a cabinet manufacturer, when the



any confusion over is the broad range of quality custom components produced at the LaCrosse, Wis. facility.

"This is an extremely competitive business were in," Walz says. "That's why over the years we've done everything we can to improve upon what we do. That includes constantly adding new door styles and profile options while at the same time automating our manufacturing processes."

Nearly unlimited options

WalzCraft markets its products in all 50 states to thousands of small -



truth is he and his 340 employees are suppliers to the custom cabinet industry, not competitors.

Still, even with some misconceptions relative to the company name, one thing there never has been

to medium-sized custom cabinet manufacturers and cabinet refacers.

Known primarily for its cabinet doors, over the years this 21-year-old company has expanded to include dovetail drawers boxes,

wainscot panels, millwork, face frames and even passageway doors in its thick catalog and detailed website, www.walzcraft.com.

But it's one thing to provide such a broad mix of cabinet components. It's another to produce these products in an efficient, cost-effective manner, without sacrificing quality.

"We practiced lean manufacturing techniques before it was a buzzword in our industry. But we've never forgotten that there is always room for improvement in every step of our operations, top to bottom," says Walz. "We also learned very early on that we had to listen to our customers very closely. They are always giving us ideas as to what direction we should turn to next."

This company philosophy and best practices mind-set have helped WalzCraft stem the tide of imports that has hurt other woodworking sectors, particularly residential furniture (with the exception of upholstered furniture in most regions).

"I can't say we don't have to worry about imports because it does represent a very real threat, mainly in the area of excess capacity from high volume plants freeing up production through out North America," he says. "But on the other hand, by offering such a broad range of products in a variety of wood species, features and finishes, we secure our niche in the market. Plus, we're a custom build-to-order

operation and we don't pursue the larger order commodity market.

"It's our belief that an importer will find it very difficult to compete with this type of customer service to the custom cabinet manufacturer due to the large number of options we offer. But we have other advantages besides the broad lines we offer, including short delivery times and no minimum quantity on orders. We take orders for just one door each and every day."

'Mass-customization' manufacturer

Still, the import issue lingers.

"I've spoken to my employees about it," says Walz. "They're aware of it because there have been a number of companies in our community that have closed because they weren't able to compete with imports. They're also aware, I believe, of exactly what our niche is."

"It's not the high-volume commodity business we're after. That sector of the market can easily go across the pond to buy their doors and other components. We describe ourselves as a 'mass-customization' manufacturer of cabinet components."

At WalzCraft, manufacturing associates work three shifts. Production begins on Sunday night and ends the following Saturday at 10 a.m. Many employees are cross-trained.

As far as working under any sort of production

model with an Eastern Rim sound to it, Walz says his manufacturing scheme is based on a simple premise: first in, first out.

"We're firm believers in keeping it as simple as possible," Walz explains. "I'm very fortunate here to have a very focused and loyal workforce with a strong work ethic here in LaCrosse. I couldn't ask for a more team oriented group of people to work with if I needed to. They always go the extra mile for me when asked. On the other hand, we are constantly reinvesting major resources back into technology, people and buildings."

That technology would include: six Komo VR 1005 TT CNC routers, which produces a wide range of parts; three Grecon Optimizing chop saws; one RipMax rip saw, which incorporates five laser-guided rip blades; two Weinig moulders, numerous TigerStop chop saws; seven Timesaver widebelt sanders including two new Timesavers five-head custom-built widebelt sanders; several James L. Taylor clamping machines; a SCM/DMC widebelt sander; and a 200 ft. long Giardina flatline finishing system.

"The first router went on line in 1992, and we've added five more since

then," says Walz. "As far as capital equipment cost-justification, we use a team approach. First we identify a need, then we identify the features we require.

"The team will then do a cost-benefit analysis, comparing the various brands we're looking for, then we'll make our decision. We compare design, engineering, parts availability, service and even the salesmanship of the salesman.

"We're strong believers in making joint decisions when it comes to the more expensive and technologically advanced machines. Still, we always try to buy American when ever we can."

mated system," says Walz. "We liked the topcoat we were spraying by hand at the time, so we decided to stay with it. We do have some of the bases covered for the future because our flatline with a few changes should be able to spray a water-based UV product.

"We're working on improving every aspect of our company," says Walz. "But the main area of focus is on improving our overall throughput throughout the plant. Cutting our lead times is a major focus each and every day."

But, thanks to a firm commitment to providing an ever-expanding line of doors, drawers and other components, and by continuously focusing on quality improvement, WalzCraft is, for the most part, sheltered from the threat of overseas competition.

Still, leaders like WalzCraft don't rest on their past successes.

As Walz says, "Because we concentrate so heavily on continuously improving, we feel as if we're already doing a lot of things right to keep the importers from cutting into our market. That's the only way we know how to do things around here. Our customers are our final inspectors." **WD**

New finishing line

The addition of the flatline finishing line was somewhat of a departure for Walz. Prior to adding the Giardina line about a year ago, all finishing was done by hand. With the decision to offer more prefinished products, the only option was to go with an automated system.

Before the new finishing system, 93 percent of the doors were shipped unfinished. But that will change over time, Walz says.

"It was a big step for us to go from spraying everything by hand to an auto-

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P.O. Box 1748 • 2600 Hemstock Street • La Crosse, WI 54602
1-800-237-1326 • Fax 608-781-3667
visit us at www.walzcrafft.com

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