

Finalist**ARTISTIC WOOD**

Grand ambitions

High-end cabinetmaker proves you don't have to be big to think big

By Jeff Crissey

Eighteen years ago, Artistic Wood was a fledgling woodworking company in a garage with \$2,500 worth in tools, later upgrading to a 400-sq. ft. room in a horse stable complex. Since those early days, Dave Halle, along with his wife Lisa, owners of the Murrieta, Calif.-based company, has brought the small company a long way. After several more moves, Artistic Wood now operates with three employees in a brand new 4,800-sq. ft. facility and makes cabinetry for reputable interior designers and high-end homeowners on the West Coast.

Even with the lucrative area surrounding his business in nearby San Diego, Los Angeles and Palm Springs, Halle isn't content catering solely to the local market. His jobs have taken him as far north as Seattle, and the company is actively pursuing business opportunities in Hawaii. Having formed a partnership with a colleague, the company is making inroads with builders on the Big Island, making cabinetry and bathroom fixtures. It is now bidding on 20 resort villas and has a number of other jobs lined up.

"It is a matter of time before everything comes together; it has worked out really well," says Halle of his company's Hawaii venture. "The cost is reasonable to ship to Hawaii, and we can usually get a job there in a week. For the installation, I can hop on a plane and be in Hawaii in a few hours and we're ready to go."

The turning point

Over the years, Artistic Wood has catered primarily to the residential market with a focus on frameless construction and paint-grade materials. The biggest factor in the company's growth is the CNC machining center it added to production in 2004 to simplify its box manufacturing and bring its MDF door business in-house. Adding a high level of automation to the three-man shop freed up Halle to manage the front office and pursue new growth opportunities.

"Woodworking can be physically demanding," says Halle. "We can cut parts on the machine that would otherwise take six people to do. It has made woodworking more fun, and it allows us to make money very quickly. It opens a lot of avenues for us."

One of those avenues is high-end jobs – including arches and radius work – for a particular interior design client. "When we first started doing work with that firm, the radius work and curved features would take us a day in the shop," says Halle. "Now we can do it on the CNC in a few minutes."

Before adding the machining center, Artistic Wood was limited in its scope of product offering. "We have been able to expand into new areas, and we will build whatever the client wants as long as it's possible – now I don't have to turn down anything design-wise," says Halle.

Artistic Wood's design capabilities have increased in the 18 years the company has been in business. Owner Dave Halle says today there isn't anything that the company will turn down from a design standpoint.

Wanting to keep the CNC machine busy throughout the day, Artistic Wood began cutting parts for other shops in the area, including parts for bank teller lines and radius work. Two years ago, it founded Cut 2 Size Parts (C2S), a sister company set up to cut, band and bore parts for other companies outsourcing their panel work.

"Eventually C2S will be very separate from Artistic Wood," says Halle. "Our main goal is that we are able to turn their order around fast when someone comes to us."

Networking pays back

When Halle first entertained the idea of incorporating CNC technology in his shop, he met the owner of an Anaheim woodworking company who had recently added a CNC machine to his own shop and was willing to share



trade secrets and begin networking with each other.

"He is one of the biggest reasons we are able to do what we're doing now," says Halle. "I didn't know anything about the software, but he sat me down and got me going. Now, when we need to troubleshoot, we can call each other and share tricks that we've learned and help each other out. Anyone that wants to get into CNC technology needs to find a similar shop with similar equipment and begin talking. We don't compete for jobs, but if I get too busy, I can run product on his machines, and he can do the same with me."

In the details

By his own admission, Halle demands a lot from his employees as he encourages them to put out a great product. "We have a great crew, and we work as a team," he says. "My quality standards are higher than most of my customers', so I don't have to struggle to make them happy. Because of the product we make and because I'm particular, working here isn't for everybody. I've hired employees with 30 years of experience that had trouble dealing with the quality standards we follow."

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The addition of a CNC machining center four and a half years ago led to a series of opportunities for Artistic Wood. The company has established Cut 2 Size Parts, a sister company dedicated to making cut-to-order parts for other area woodworking businesses.