

Pressing on toward success

by Ken Jennison

How one Georgia cabinet shop discovered that its real calling was membrane pressing

The early 1990s brought with them a meteoric surge in the popularity of white cabinets. Employees at Piedmont Woodworking in Rutledge, Ga., were successfully producing residential cabinets, but there was a problem. Because of the high demand for white cabinets, they were spray painting the cabinets with lacquer, a difficult process at best. So they tried another approach to finishing membrane pressing.

"The headaches inherent with spray painting cabinet doors disappeared when we began membrane pressing with white vinyl," general manager John Colby says.

Now, Piedmont produces not only membrane-pressed residential cabinet components, but also does membrane pressing of damage-resistant components for kiosks and retail displays. Currently, sales are at \$900,000 and the company is poised to hit the \$1 million mark in the near future.

Early challenges

Piedmont was the first shop in Georgia to have a membrane press, and producing quality components at first was a challenge. Because the industry was in its infancy, quality MDF, adhesives and vinyls were hard to find. Nonetheless, it was clear that the process was far better than spraying MDF or solid wood with lacquer to produce a high quality white finish, says Colby.

"We saw a future in membrane pressing and thoroughly concentrated on reselling cabinet doors to other cabinet makers in the area. In short order, our competitors became our customers, and the side of our business that built complete kitchen cabinets dropped to nothing," Colby says.

Currently, half of Piedmont's business is made up of membrane-pressed residential cabinet components. It offers more than 200 door styles in standard and custom sizes for kitchen cabinets, bathroom vanities and closet systems. According to Colby, this is a niche that has experienced considerable growth over the last several years.

The membranes

Piedmont uses American Renolit's Vacuren film for its membranes. The film comes in several shades of white, in solid colors and in printed patterns. The thickness of the films ranges from 0.2 to 0.5mm.

"Woodgrains have experienced significant growth over the last two years and now account for 40 percent of our rigid thermofoil sales," Colby says. He adds that wood grain patterns have become far more realistic, and are now available in patterns that match those of popular melamine boards and high pressure laminates.

Later challenges

In the mid- to late 1990s, the market for membrane pressed residential cabinet doors began to increase significantly. The number of competitors to Piedmont increased as well, which caused Piedmont to begin looking for new markets for membrane pressed components. Piedmont found that market in manufacturers of hotel and motel furniture, and the shop began to use membrane pressing on bed headboards, entertainment centers and mirror frames.

"The ability to conform to virtually any shape routed into MDF board allowed three-dimensional, seamless designs that improved aesthetics and allowed safer, rounded corners while eliminating edgebanding, visible seams and de-lamination associated with high pressure laminates and wood veneers," Colby says.

Moving to fixtures

Piedmont did not stop with just hotel and motel furniture. By using a thicker membrane, it found its work was very attractive to makers of kiosks and retail displays as well. "For components intended for high-traffic environments, we specify Kydex thermoplastic alloy in gauges from 0.7 to 1.0mm almost exclusively," Colby says.

Kydex is produced by Kleerdex Company and demonstrates high impact resistance and resists concentrated cleansers, which allows for repeated cleaning of dirt and graffiti with no staining or fading. Kydex is offered in a number of solid colors, textures and graphic patterns, as well as several woodgrains that match offerings by American Renolit, Georgia Pacific, Uniboard, Tafisa, Pionite and Roseburg.

Current operations

Piedmont operates two Italpresse membrane presses, a Panhans CNC panel saw and an SCM CNC router. While there was a brief point in time when Piedmont used the CNC router for machining pieces for other shops, those days are over, Colby says. Piedmont now keeps the CNC router running at its maximum with the shop's own work, and most likely will add another CNC router to the shop in the near future.

Sales continue to increase for Piedmont, and already they have an impressive commercial client list that includes such companies as NCR, Verizon, Sprint, Fatura, Dell, Waste Management, AMC Movie Theater, Coca-Cola, Continental Airlines and UPS Store. According to Colby, "This market just continues to grow."

