

Fast and square — A key part of the move to automation at the James Cabinet Shop is this Bonacin Closer 30-inch case clamp, left, which speeds box assembly and glue-up.

Efficiency happens

Automated production, rightsizing and low debt protect shop in down economy

By Peter Hildebrandt

Shop Snapshot



Company name: James Cabinet Shop Inc.

Location: Matthews, Ga.

Proprietor: Raymond James

Primary products: Custom commercial

cabinetry

Number of employees: 6

Shop size: 6,500 square feet

Key equipment:

- Busellato Jet Optima CI CNC machining center
- Omal HBD 1300 boring, gluing and dowel machine
- Bonacin Closer N2500 FMC 30-inch case clamp
- Mayer PS9Z 105 3800 panel saw
- Planit Cabinet Vision software

When the economy soured, the James Cabinet Shop in Matthews, Ga., felt the pinch like everyone else. But owner Raymond James had already put in place three important business strategies that helped him stay ahead of competitors. He has long-term dedication to improving efficiency that has led to automated production. He has been careful to keep the shop from growing too fast or too large to manage well. And he has fastidiously kept the shop's debt as low as possible.

James feels that a lot of times businesses grow real big, get a lot of people on board, end up getting into too much debt, and then have to bail-out. In the long run too much debt can make it tough to survive.

"When you put your money back into your shop, then you have it for the tough times," he says. "I feel like that's the best formula for this economy." James has watched some of his younger competitors spend a lot of money buying new trucks. He drives old trucks and invests in new equipment that makes it possible to do more work, but with the same number of employees.

March to automation

The James shop was already on the road to more efficiency before the economy tanked. They began buying new equipment, including a CNC router, when things were going well. Key equipment includes a Busellato Jet Optima CI CNC machining center,



Investment in the future — James started buying automated equipment like the Busellato Jet Optima CNC machining center before the economy tanked. He says that has helped him compete in tough times.

From humble beginnings to modern shop

When you first pull up to the James Cabinet Shop in Matthews, Ga., you see a tidy, well-kept yard and attractive brick home with an inviting pond out back that fits well with several buildings, hinting at the fact that not everything here is about manufacturing.

Owner Raymond James grew up in the house across the road and now lives in a house he built next to his shop. Originally his family farmed 1,200 acres, but James' father also did home construction. Early on James helped with remodeling work. "I told my father that if he would buy me a nail gun and a Tech Saw I would start building cabinets for him," says James. "That's basically how

I started."

James' first shop was 24 feet by 40 feet in a space formerly used for mechanical supplies. James started to hire men to work in the cabinet shop, and eventually ended up with six employees. James built all the buildings he uses for his work, and has dealt with the challenges arising from his business for over 30 years.

The shop went from residential to commercial some 15-18 years ago and recently added CNC automation to the 6,500-square-foot operation. James says they've had the opportunity to go a lot bigger, but they decided instead to stay the same size and simply do what they could do and still be satisfied.

Father and son — Raymond James and his son Brandon go over project plans. They use Cabinet Vision software to create designs after getting basic layouts.

an Omal HBD 1300 boring, gluing and dowel machine, a Bonacin Closer N2500 FMC 30-inch case clamp and a Mayer PS9Z 105 3800 beam saw.

To learn how to use their CNC equipment they went to North Carolina for a week of training. When their beam saw was installed, trainers came to the shop. "This equipment is easy to use once it's all programmed," says James' son, Brandon, who has taken a lead role in the new technology. They bought all their equipment from Delmac Machinery Group. They were introduced to them by Marco Canducci, a consultant headquartered in Atlanta, Ga. James gives credit for his efficient, organized shop to Canducci.

"He's never sold us any equip-

ment we didn't need and has really helped our company to get where we are," says James. "I don't care how good a piece of equipment you might have, it is no better than the support and tech support or service you are receiving," adds James. "That's the thing with Marco Canducci and Delmac: their support is a critical link in completing the package."

Managing resources

Brandon recently graduated from Georgia Southern University in Statesville, Ga., with a degree in construction management. What he found most useful in his course work was learning how contractors deal with subcontractors. But one of the most valuable lessons he's learned from his dad, is that when you come into money it's important not to just blow it: you must be very careful and be ready. The recent economic downturn hit the construction industry especially hard — and fast.

"The old saying, 'make hay while the sun's shining and then save it for a rainy day' has turned out to be good advice in these tough times," says Brandon.

When the economy went down they were still able to hold their own. "We have some good contractors who know us, and we've done work for them in the past. We keep our quality consistent and keep our price down as much as we can," says James. "We're Christian people and don't cheat anybody out of anything and we'd rather give than take from anybody. I give people their money's worth and always do something extra for my customers, whatever that might be. It's a small way of saying 'thank you' and is something we've always tried to do."

Despite the economic slowdown, they've been able to avoid laying anyone off, although they have cut back on the usual 40 hours per week.

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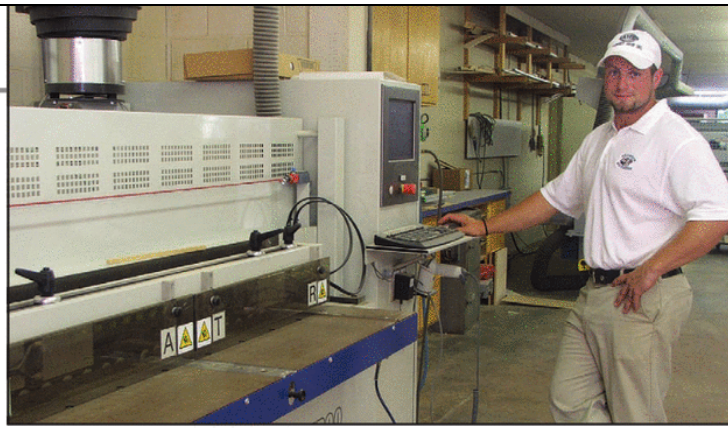
Know your niche

Much of the James' shop's commercial cabinet work is office cabinetry for the medical industry. James works from a layout to design the cabinets. Their Cabinet Vision software helps the professionals they deal with to visualize in 3-D what the finished product will look like.

They face the challenge of competing with larger cabinet manufacturers. One job they've just started involves 132 apartments. Mass-produced cabinets could just as easily be used on this project, but those involved also want the "look" that James Cabinet Shop produces.

"We make our cabinets fit your job," says James. "You may pay some more money for our product, but we still hand-finish all our cabinets, spraying them in our finishing area."

The shop also insists on installing all their cabinets. James says that no



New technology — Brandon James stands at the controls of the shop's new Omal boring, gluing and dowel machine. Brandon has taken the lead role in automation efforts at the shop.

matter how good your finished product is, if the cabinets are not installed right, the effort can end up wasted.

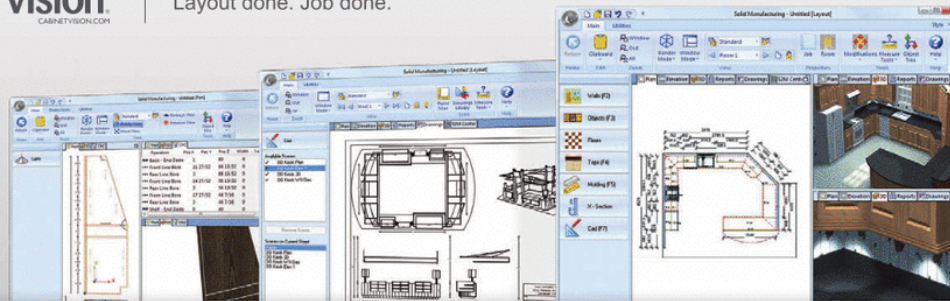
Most of their installation work takes place within drivable distances of their shop, including Augusta and Atlanta. Business comes chiefly by word of mouth. There are signs that building is picking up a bit in the region, as they bidding more jobs now.

Advice for other shops

The James shop takes up just 6,500 square feet, all of it clean and organized. When you walk into a successful shop like that, it's hard not to ask for advice for others in the industry. James is humble and helpful in his answers: "We keep things clean, we don't use a lot of space — our shop is very small — but we get the job done.



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Finishing touch — *Attention to detail and hand finishing set James cabinets apart and allow the company to compete with mass manufacturers, says Raymond James. The shop also installs its cabinets itself.*

Clean means an organized, efficient and well-run business. We time our jobs so we do them, load them, install them and finish them in a well-organized manner."

Knowing your limits is also important to James. He knows what jobs he's got coming up and keeps a realistic view of what his shop can produce. "I'm not going to take a \$400,000 job if I won't be able to complete it," says James. "I know what I can do. I don't overwork the guys."

James also is not about to bid low to just get work. "We do what we can do, but we don't give it away," he says. "We make a fair profit. Over the years I've seen that just because you make a lot of quantity doesn't mean you are going to make more money. My advice is, when you get paid for a big job, pay your bills: don't act like you're rolling in money. We have no one knocking on our doors to be paid something we owe them."

James does not go out and bid on everything he can. "It's important to know how many jobs you are able to handle at one time. You need to be under some amount of pressure, but there is a stress point where there is too much for you to handle, a point you do not need to reach. It's not good; the quality drops and the quality of your thought pattern suffers."

Miriam, James' wife, takes care of all the paperwork for the business. James admits to earlier days of be-

ing a workaholic. In those times he typically got only five or six hours of sleep a night.

"Despite all the work, I still have to tell anyone who will listen, don't try to kill yourself in your work, and please, enjoy your life. Life is short — even at its longest." □

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