

A winning trifecta



The cam, dowel and dado construction technique Canary Custom Closets uses makes cabinets like these not only strong, but streamlined, as there are no fasteners marring the furniture-quality look.

Union, NJ's Canary Custom Closets fabricates more than just closets — it's three-fold business model keeps the shop busy during all seasons.

BY LISA WHITCOMB

When owner John Canary established Canary Custom Closets in 2001, he approached his business with the manufacturing know-how of a custom woodworker and the strategic mindset of a successful businessman.

From the start, Canary took his business by the horns and led it down a lucrative path. Taking advantage of the latest in technology, he invested in state-of-the-art machinery for every

area of manufacturing in his facility. Today, using this technology to his advantage, he sells closet systems and other cabinetry to retail and wholesale clients and to other closet companies.

Finding a muse

Canary's desire to open a custom closet and home organization company came from observing trends in the home storage and organization industry while working for a hardware company in the mid to late '90s. Canary, a one-time architectural millwork fabricator, was inspired to open Canary Custom Closets after finding out more about the newest technologies.

"I met a sales rep from CadCode at the time, and he showed me the changes happening in computer technology and machinery. I was wowed," recalls Canary.

"When I owned my architectural millwork shop in the



Canary Custom Closets does a lot of melamine cabinetry for home office and media center applications, as well as closets.

1980s, I had great equipment. I was impressed with the advancements in technology since I'd closed my company. I noticed that most closet makers were not using this state-of-the-art equipment and computer programs. It was incredible to me that they were not using these new technologies to their advantage," he says.

Canary, who was immediately excited about the prospect of getting back into the business of making things, says, "I couldn't get the idea out of my head. So I called another friend who was a general contractor and asked him to find me a closet job."

The friend hooked him up with a large job that was profitable. "I made a lot of money and thought, 'Wow, this could be a super business,'" he says. "I was hooked after this job and went out and bought a second-hand copy of Cabinetware, relicensed it and set up shop."

Taking advantage of technology

Located not far off the expressway in Union, NJ, Canary's 7,000-square-foot high-tech shop houses all-new machinery, including a Busellato Jet 2000 XL point-to-point, Busellato Jet 200 RT router, a Meyer PS9 10-foot beam saw, Fravol contour edgebander and trimmer, Tritec Gannomat index dowel inserter and Gannomat 271 drilling machine. There is also a Homag



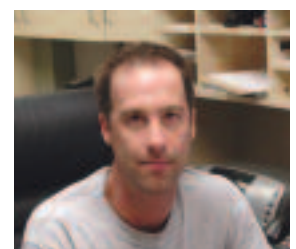
Panels are bored on this Gannomat 271 drilling machine.



The shop's newest piece of equipment is this Homag KAL 310 edgebander from Stiles Machinery.



Melamine boards are cut to size on the shops' Meyer PS9 10-foot beam saw.



Owner John Canary runs his business with a hands-on attitude, working in the office and in the shop.

KAL 310 edgebander with premill glue scraping and a cleaning station fitted with a Thomas return conveyor and two Dantherm indoor dust collection units.

Canary has been purchasing this equipment since 2001, with his edgebander being the latest purchase. "It is saving us 20 to 30 hours of labor a week," he adds. He recommends that other companies purchase new equipment because, "The efficiency the machines bring to your business is cost-justifiable. It makes your operations faster and that means doing more jobs in less time, which equates to higher profit margins. Check into accelerated appreciation schedules with your tax advisor."

Canary says the machinery is needed to compete and grow

in the closet business. "Today, I believe that the closet business is heading toward that of custom cabinetry," Canary says. "People want melamine storage systems that look nice and are furniture-grade, but more affordable than their wood counterparts."



Woodgrain melamines are the most requested color for master closets. Thermofoil doors are used in most cases, although wood doors are used as well. Islands, window seats and moulding add distinction to the space.

Since purchasing this machinery, he adds, "We have a distinct advantage over our competitors because we can produce any size melamine closet panel or cabinet — contoured or straight, with routed niches and specifically drilled holes."

Canary's cabinetry is constructed with melamine boards that are assembled with a cam, dowel and dado construction technique and are backed with a finished board. The company offers 12 colors to its clients. Canary says woodgrains are popular in office and master closet applications, while white and antique white are used in secondary closets and pantries.

Sometimes Canary Custom Closets mixes prefinished wood doors from Meridian with melamine boards from Tafisa, Flakeboard and Panolam. The company also purchases matching thermofoil crown and base mouldings, and five-piece doors and drawer fronts from Northern Contours.

Putting it all together

After the designers in the shop use Cabinetware to design a project, they transfer the design and drilling patterns into CadCode, which programs the machines for panel optimization. This program also generates bar codes and labels, making it easy to track parts during the manufacturing process, Canary says.

Cabinetry parts are nested on the router, while closet parts are cut as needed on the beam saw and then processed on the point-to-point. After that, they are edged with a 1mm-thick edgebanding material from Edgeco.

When it is time to outfit closet systems and offices with accessories, the company purchases from Rev-A-Shelf items such as acrylic shelf organizers, satin and chrome baskets with top mounts, and reverse mounting brackets for tie racks. Oval chrome and brass rods are installed in both satin and polished finishes and in light and dark colors.

Wicker baskets, shoe rails, wine bottle holders and the like are purchased from Sidelines, and hooks, valet rods and tie and belt racks are purchased from Capella. However, Canary Custom Closets also manufactures and assembles its own hook, tie and belt racks on 3-inch-wide melamine strips.

Drawers are usually metal, made on site from the Grass Zargon line. However, file drawers are made from melamine boards and outfitted with Knape & Vogt's full-extension 150-pound slides and Timberline's rails. The shop manufactures parts for closets, pantries, home offices and garages. The company designs, sells and installs systems and cabinetry within homes in a 50-mile radius that encompasses the New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania areas. Canary also sells these same parts wholesale to dealers. "I sell a lot of Murphy beds this way," he notes. Canary also takes orders from other cabinet and closet shops in the area who do not have the equipment capabilities to make their own components. "This

Canary Custom Closets has a large call for raised panel doors and drawer fronts; however, it also installs contemporary aluminum frame and glass doors on its cabinetry for customers who want that look.



works out great. Sometimes these companies will become my competitors on a bid, but this is rare," Canary says.

Growth on a solid foundation

"I like being in the closet business because I have the ability to make beautiful things. But what I really love is that closets is more about the business than it is about the craft. You are not reliant on talented woodworkers (like when I owned my architectural millwork business). Instead all I need are people who can run the machinery. And the machinery is more reliable than an employee."

Last year the company grossed close to \$2 million and this year it will exceed that in gross sales. To advertise, Canary Custom Closets exhibits at a home show twice a year. This is where the company gains most of its new retail leads, Canary says. The rest comes from repeat business and word-of-mouth.

The future looks promising for the wholesale business, he adds. Canary plans to grow the retail side of the business more.

"I want to continue to have a blend of both areas and grow them both on a solid foundation," Canary says. "I don't want to grow too fast and have a business made from a house of cards. I want to move into a bigger facility, but am conservative to a fault and will only move when the funds are in place."

Canary pays for most of his raw products and accessories COD, he adds, and prides himself on being able to do this. He says he will continue to add new equipment to the current facility if it is needed.

Plans for the near future include adding a permanent showroom and developing a comprehensive Web site and brochure for the company. ■



Storage lockers like these with varying size cubbies are growing in popularity in laundry rooms and garages.