

Maple Landmark®

Always Rolling with the Punches

Maple Landmark Woodcraft is located in Middlebury, VT and produces mainly wooden toys and games like trains, checker boards, and blocks, but also crafts custom items and gifts such as home décor, ornaments, and tap handles for breweries. Maple Landmark has been in business for 41 years and is run by founder and CEO Mike Rainville. Maple Landmark has the distinction of being a family business as 3 generations of Rainvilles work the business between Mike, his wife and two sons, and his mother.

A great deal of their products are sold wholesale to toy and gift stores, but direct to customer sales have been growing in recent years. Their direct to consumer sales base, using platforms like Amazon and Etsy, has become more of a focus with the company. This has been especially true since the pandemic started. All of their products are sold nationwide, however their custom work is focused mainly in Vermont. Maple Landmark works closely with Vermont companies as Mike said in VT, “Everyone’s local.” In a normal year, Maple Landmark’s products are featured at many tradeshow, however that is on hold for now because of the pandemic.

When the coronavirus outbreak started in March, Maple Landmark was closed for six weeks, but after weathering the shutdown Mike said the business is in, “pretty good shape.” They are caught up on orders and all operations are working. The pandemic has affected the three sales groups of their business differently. Direct to Consumer sales have skyrocketed as their website purchases have doubled this year. Their custom work has been sporadic with some customers from this group still requesting work, while others are not. For instance, last year custom tap handles for bars were a big seller, but not this year because of bar and restaurant restrictions. Wholesale sales have also been down because of shutdowns and the cancellation of trade shows.

Maple Landmark is not making any dramatic strategic changes because of the current situation. Mike explained that many of the changes they are seeing this year are an acceleration of trends that have been happening in recent years, i.e. more Direct to Customer sales. The increased focus on Direct to Consumer sales has led Maple Landmark to fine tune their website and also release a retail catalogue in the mail for the first time in many years for the upcoming holiday shopping season. Mike stated, “We are letting the business drive us.” Some new aspects of the business that have been added are drop shipping their Name Trains and also trying to develop higher-end toys. The idea is to see if consumers will spend more on a higher-end toy that can be passed down through generations in a family, much like a piece of furniture, rather than spending money on a cheaper Asian-made wood toy. They have started this idea by building replicas of real-life bridges for their train sets. So far, they have produced the Golden Gate Bridge and Brooklyn Bridge.

Since returning from their own shutdown Maple Landmark has been working according to the State Coronavirus guidelines like wearing masks, temperature checks on arrival, and working in smaller groups on their production line. An unexpected bonus from this set up is they discovered

the smaller groups on the production line are actually more efficient than what was previously in place. After being shut down for six weeks employees were happy to comeback and there have been no issues with the new rules in place. Maple Landmark is sufficiently staffed, but is looking for more experienced workers which has been difficult. Finding woodworking trained individuals is an issue throughout the industry.

When it comes to infrastructure needs, Mike said they are in “okay shape,” but would like to replace some of their older machines when able. With the increase in direct to consumer sales he is anticipating the need to improve Maple Landmark’s packing and shipping capabilities, as well as installing a better computer system to keep track of it all. However, with the uncertainty of the near future in the industry all of this is still up in the air and could change. As Mike said, “We don’t know what we don’t know yet.”

The pandemic has not led to any supply chain issues for Maple Landmark other than minor things like an extra amount of time to receive a product. Lumber has not been an issue since mills have remained open all year long. Getting the magnets for their trains from China was an issue, however they switched to a supplier in Taiwan which has proven to be more reliable and much higher quality than the previous magnets they were using.

Mike has been able to find the value of the shutdowns as he said that working for six weeks with just his family gave new insight into how his company operates and ways to improve efficiency. A return to the production floor after spending more time in his office running the business for several years gave him a new-found value in the work he and everyone in the company does. It also allowed him to see in person where production can improve. Moving forward in the pandemic and beyond Mike feels the frenzy surrounding some woodwork products will taper off and woodworkers will have to see what is real and what is not in terms of current consumer habits. He hopes more people stay in VT after many moving to the area because of the pandemic. He believes diversity in products is essential for Maple Landmark to continue to succeed. While it may not be smart business-wise to do this, it has proven to work for Maple Landmark as no other domestic company has succeeded in doing what it has done for over 40 years.

Mike and the team at Maple Landmark are very open to helping other businesses. The work Maple Landmark does is very different from other woodwork businesses, like furniture makers. However, Mike is willing to show what he does at Maple Landmark and why, or give his understanding of a fellow woodworkers needs or situation. When speaking of the VT woodwork industry overall he suggested learning about manufacturing and being well versed in business management. He stated that VT woodworkers often don’t think about manufacturing, but he insisted woodworkers, “Can still be craftsmen but have systems and process.” Business management he described as a “double-edged sword” because business owners are able to do themselves, but they are not experts in it like someone hired to do it. It is helpful to be well-rounded when it comes to running a business according to Mike. The VWWC can prove helpful in making “well-rounded” business owners in that woodworkers can share with others their strengths, but also learn from other woodworkers to improve in areas of business where they are less skilled.