



Business Lessons: Variety, Local, Customer Relations, and Product Development

Rockledge Farm Woodworks found in Weathersfield, Vermont has been producing custom, one-of-a-kind furniture for 30 years. What started as a hobby for owner Scott Duffy and grew into a full-time business that also makes smaller accessories such as utensils, bowls, cutting boards, jewelry boxes, clocks and much more in addition to the furniture. At their workshop location they also operate a retail Gallery where they always have a number of furniture pieces available, as well as their woodenware. Furniture is often made-to-order. Their work is also sold in stores and gift shops around the Northeast and US, and at a co-op craft gallery in Woodstock, Vermont that includes products from 12 other artisans. The Woodstock gallery has been in business for 12 years and has been a strong retail outlet for this work due to its location according to Scott.

The Coronavirus pandemic has affected Rockledge's business in different ways. It greatly affected the retail aspect of their business. The galleries both closed for 3 months and then reopened gradually. They are now back to pre-COVID schedule and have seen more business in the busy foliage months, however retail sales are about 25-30% lower than what they were at this time last year. On the other hand, Scott said the custom work side of the business has "held its own." Prior to the virus Scott wanted to add more wholesale relationships to the business to lower his dependence on the retail side of sales. The pandemic hastened this change and the shift was a good move as it has brought an increase in business, notably a big jump in the production of their smaller accessory items. Scott recently hired three staff members to aid with the jump in production of these items. Meanwhile, furniture orders are still coming in. Scott and his son, Ian, handle the furniture making and typically have one or two projects in process at a time. Normally, they have a backlog of 2-3 months on projects, but now its 3-4 months. The business is "churning along" as Scott said which he is very thankful for.

Rockledge Farm has instituted suggested Coronavirus practices like distancing, masks, and regular hand washing. Employees have all willingly accepted and practice the changes. Ian is a paramedic so he has served as a guide on how to operate for Scott and the other workers. Scott is the only full-time employee of Rockledge Farm. The most employees they will have on any given day is six. Between the different barns and workspaces on the property employees have enough room to space out and still operate. Three new employees were recently hired and are in the training process learning how to craft each item one at a time. Scott is a big proponent of developing employees and woodworkers through things like internships or training programs. He feels this is a good way to train new woodworkers and create a source of skilled workers for woodworking businesses to hire. He recently mentored high school students from Springfield Technical Center at his workshop teaching them different facets of woodwork.

Supply chain has not been an issue for Rockledge Farm. Scott said that as a small business he sources smaller quantities of wood. Sticking to their mantra of “locally made, locally sourced,” Rockledge sources wood nearby from smaller lumber mills, loggers and landowners. Scott also has neighbors that saw wood and they will come by, sometimes out of the blue, to offer some of their woods. Lumber storage has become an issue at Rockledge and they are working on developing more storage space.

Rockledge Farm does have a website but Scott said they need to more fully use this as a sales outlet. It is currently more of a catalogue that shows the items they offer. Scott admitted they have not done much with it, but they have put some focus on it lately. The COVID-19 situation has led to an increase in hits for the website, and Scott would like it to be a good platform to sell their smaller items. Scott said, “We can and should do more” with the website and he has already started this by signing up for a marketing assessment and TA through Restart Vermont.

For Scott the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the lesson that a business must always keep its options open. For Rockledge Farm that is looking at different products and making items that are outside of their niche. Scott stated, “Businesses can’t be static. You can’t find your niche and stay there.” Keeping their options open and broadening their work into different areas has been a useful approach for Scott and Rockledge Farm throughout his career and the pandemic has forced them to continue to practice this to stay viable.

Scott listed four main strengths of Rockledge Farm. The first is Variety. He said it may not be good from a business or efficiency perspective, however it is personally rewarding for him as a woodworker and exciting for a customer to have many options to choose from. For instance, on the day of the interview Scott said he was working on rolling pins, and a table on the previous day. The second is the Local aspect of the business. It is good marketing to say a business sources wood from local locations and it helps other local businesses by “keeping your dollar close to home.” The third is Customer Relations as Scott and the team are very “hands on” with customers explaining clearly what they do even if they do not purchase anything. Finally, Product Development is a strength of the business. Scott enjoys the crafting process and throughout his career has grown to learn how to develop and build a wide variety of wood products.

Scott is open and willing to share his expertise with fellow Council members. Scott and Rockledge Farm are a part Vermont Wood Works Council because it provides marketing opportunities and information to wood businesses, much of which Scott has applied to his own. He also enjoys how it provides the ability for woodworkers to interact through workshops, meet-ups, and other events. The opportunity to talk wood, process, marketing, and other details of their businesses has added great value to Scott and his business. He highly encourages other woodwork businesses to join saying, “Until you join us you won’t fully know the importance and benefit of [the VWWC].”