

The logo for Shackleton Thomas is a black square with the company name in a gold, serif font. The name is split into two lines: "Shackleton" on the top line and "Thomas" on the bottom line.

Shackleton Thomas

Passion and the Need to be Creative, Flexible, and Profitable

Charlie Shackleton has been in the custom furniture business for 33 years. Along with his wife and potter Miranda Thomas, they are the owners of ShackletonThomas located in the Bridgewater Mill, in Bridgewater, VT. Their businesses complement each other and together they have built the ShackletonThomas brand for custom hand-crafted products. Charlie refers to this hand-craftsmanship as the fourth dimension - the human element that encompasses the soul of the maker. Much like every piece of hand-crafted furniture that carries the signature of the maker, this is their company signature.

It's Charlie's belief that during the current pandemic, people are searching for a human connection. Handcraftsmanship and the use of hand tools imbue the work with that human connection, bringing not only life but individuality to each piece. It's almost like inviting a new friend into one's home. ShackletonThomas customers are in the higher income bracket, generally college educated, and span the globe. They are making choices about where they will spend their money and how those choices will enrich their homes and their lives.

While the pandemic has changed the way business is conducted, the company still sells to customers one by one. Regardless of the channel, each customer is treated like royalty. Charlie and his sales staff make it a point to get to know every customer and have personally met nearly eighty percent of them. Again, building that human connection strengthens the foundation. This year has been one of the best as it has brought in large corporate customers.

Like other businesses in the sector, ShackletonThomas received PPP and a state-funded CARES grant. Charlie also took advantage of grant funded services offered through Christine McGowan's Forestry Network and VWWC. He applied for and received a marketing assessment provided by Fleck and new photography. The assessment helped to define upgrades to the website that Charlie views as his "other building." Like your physical space, it needs to stay in good shape for the customers who don't drive by. Online sales have always been good for pottery but Fleck helped Charlie rethink the furniture component that has brought in the best online sales to date.

In addition to grants and grant funded services, Charlie took advantage of downtime during the shutdown. In the course of running a business every day, it's difficult to stop, think, plan so the shutdown allowed for this luxury. For example, supply issues were averted by taking the time to research new, and better, sources of materials. The company began to refine how things were

done and what could lead to increased productivity. Everyone at the company has become more open and more humble. Charlie has even taken the time to learn more about cooking, and slow cooking in particular – feeding body and soul.

Physical infrastructure also had a facelift. A much needed roof repair has been completed. But generally, the building and grounds have been cleaned up - a coat of paint, trees planted, dumpsters moved – all with an eye toward customer impressions as they enter the building. A new internet phone system also aids the sales team in responding to calls. The ShackletonThomas staff of 15 is using the building more efficiently and productively but what seemed like too much space is suddenly feeling like too little.

When asked about HR concerns, Charlie says that making sure people are wearing masks is an ongoing necessity. “It’s awkward to constantly talk to people about that,” and he notes that “one person can change the picture for the whole company.” Times are more stressful but being able to come to work and work with others is a privilege. It’s a place of refuge and peace but everyone must follow the rules and watch carefully what they do. “Keep wearing masks. Keep social distancing. Keep following the Governor’s guidance.”

The pandemic is not the first out-of-the-ordinary challenge for the company. In 2011, Tropical Storm Irene devastated the Route 4 corridor east of Rutland and the Bridgewater Mill sustained significant damage. ShackletonThomas survived this devastation and learned valuable lessons. “You don’t know what tomorrow brings – flood or Covid – and you cannot flinch. Every decision, every action must go to the bottom line and polish your brand.” ShackletonThomas is in survival mode, driven by passion and the need to be creative, flexible, and profitable. Charlie has a clear vision of what the ShackletonThomas future holds and whatever does not fit that vision “is not us.” Make sure you know what you’re good at, do it well, and most importantly, let people know.

Personally, Charlie was not a good student and did not do well in school. Why is this worth mentioning? It’s in large part one of the reasons Charlie started his own business. He loved to make things, especially by hand and has come to recognize that he has a different kind of intelligence. The woodshop is a great place to gain confidence and realize your worth. “Don’t always do what others tell you. Be willing to make mistakes so you can learn,” says Charlie.

Charlie is a member of the Guild of Vermont Furniture Makers and the Vermont Wood Works Council. He joins and participates because there’s so much to learn from others’ points of view. He enjoys the camaraderie. Even when you need to leave the shop and travel, sharing food, drink, and conversation is a great way of networking – and he can eat, drink, and talk with the best. Council members are open and willing to talk about almost anything. It takes work to join and show up but it’s worth the effort. Opportunities may also arise. ShackletonThomas is currently collaborating with JK Adams to produce the Charlie and Miranda cutting boards. These small items bring value to a lifestyle showroom but are not economical to make by hand. Connections such as these are made by showing up.

The ShackletonThomas workshop will be open for visitors and woodshop tours, when Covid restrictions are lifted. Charlie suggests that the Council could help members even more by creating an online group for asking questions and sharing information.

WEAR A MASK. STAY SOCIALLY DISTANT. FOLLOW THE GOVERNOR'S DIRECTIVES. THEY WORK!