

Customer Relations is the Key to a Good Business

TableLegs.com is an e-commerce business located in St. Johnsbury, Vermont that produces wooden turned furniture parts such as table legs, bun feet, bases, tops, tables, and architectural components as well as tabletops and complete tables. They also do some custom work and sell metal table legs and cabinet hardware. TableLegs AKA Classic Designs by Matthew Burak began in 1995. Growing out of the business Matthew Burak Furniture, which made and sold reproduction furniture. Matthew Burak is the owner, and his daughter, Kate Davis serves as general manager overseeing daily operations.

TableLegs originally began as a mail order business, but changed with the times and switched to online sales. TableLegs has products that suit a wide variety of customers from the novice woodworker or DIYer to professional commercial woodworkers. Most all of their wood products are turned in-house before being shipped to the customer.

Since businesses have opened after the Coronavirus shutdowns in the spring, TableLegs sales have been great according to Kate, keeping the company very busy. Kate said, "With so many people at home shopping online and working from home our sales have increased." Orders continued through the shutdown and having items made and on the shelf as part of the quick ship program were a real boom the company since they were unable to produce. Since the company was already built for online commerce, they have not had to make any changes to keep up with pandemic produced consumer habits. They are just doing more of what they were previously doing.

One thing they would like to change though is their website. Already serving a wide variety of customers, the pandemic has brought more business to TableLegs from customers with no woodworking experience. Kate feels the current website could be more user friendly. The desire is to have the website be a teaching tool for customers in addition to a selling platform. She stated, "If you can teach the consumer about the product offerings and different aspects of wood, it enables them to make an informed decision which results in fewer returns and happier customers and staff." Another change in the company is the succession of the business as the owner, Matthew Burak, is set to retire soon. Kate would be appreciative of help in forming a succession plan from other businesses that have gone through it.

The pandemic has not caused many supply chain issues. Getting wood is not a problem, but there have been some minor issues getting metal legs that come from overseas. The company is working to source all their products from in the U.S. There have been more problems on the distribution side of the business as shipping companies have seen Holiday-level demand for months now. This means that customers and TableLegs are unfortunately having to deal with lost or damaged items more often.

TableLegs has 22 fulltime and 3 part time employees and recently hired three new employees. Workers have been comfortable and cooperative with the pandemic work conditions. The increase in business has created the need for a larger workforce in their business, however it has been difficult to find workers. The leadership at TableLegs took their time to make sure they found the right people for their business considering everything down to the prospective employee's personality. As Kate said, "You can teach a skill, but you can't teach a personality." The new employees will be trained in all aspects of the job at TableLegs and their duties will depend on their skills. They want to make sure each employee is in a position where they can thrive, grow, and perform best. TableLegs would still like to hire more programmers with training in CNC and CAD as well as someone to handle HR. In terms of infrastructure TableLegs, "Has more space than we know what do with" said Kate. The company purchased a 60,000 sq. ft. building in 2018 and is still finding ways to expand within the space. They would also like to update some machinery.

Apart from upgrading the website the COVID-related shutdowns taught Kate and the staff at TableLegs the importance having items in inventory ready for shipping as there is a bigger market for quick shipping. The other big lesson was to treat customers right and they will be more likely to stand by you through the good and bad times.

Customer relations is one of TableLegs' strengths according to Kate as they have a team that work phones, answer emails, and process orders to help customers get the items they need. She also mentioned product design saying, "design matters." It's importance in the items they sell makes it a focus of their business. Kate and her father are welcome to sharing their experiences and teaching what they know with other woodworking businesses. As a new board member for the Vermont Wood Works Council, Kate said this is one of the biggest values of the council. The ability to meet other woodworkers, ask questions, and talk about their businesses helps not only those business owners, but the industry overall.