



Customer Service and Custom Work

Van Ness Woodcrafts in Jonesville, Vermont is a maker of wood products done in medieval, Celtic, renaissance, and historical styles and designs. Owner and craftsman Andy Van Ness hand crafts tankards, lathe-turned goblets, clocks, one-of-kind boxes and games such as the medieval classic 9-Man Morris, cribbage sets and recently started on chess sets. Everything features his hand-wood burned designs inspired by the art and architecture of the medieval world. Andy also has experience making cabinetry, furniture like dining tables and gaming tables, and custom work, some of which included many personalized boxes, 3-dimensional business signs and a full built-in bar. Andy began the business and doing woodwork more or less full-time in 2014. He targets a niche market of attendees of medieval and renaissance faires and other craft shows always having a gallery-like booth at these kinds of events to sell his work. He offers photo postcards with some of his offerings to people who visit his booth at events so they can purchase things later on. Until this year he marketed almost exclusively through these events, but now has had to embrace social media and other online sources as a way to market his work.

Andy stated that his business has been “surviving” through the Coronavirus pandemic and its effects. Like other large events, all of the renaissance faires and craft shows that Andy would attend were cancelled this year which has hurt his business. Coming on the heels of some major personal setbacks in 2019. Andy has been in the process of moving his business to a new location this year, so a great deal of time has been spent moving and building his new shop. This has taken away time that he would normally spend crafting items. In July, Van Ness Woodcrafts moved into a 900 sq. ft. space in the former Bergeron Design-Build’s campus in Jonesville. With a lack of steady income, the business was greatly helped by grants such as the Forest Economy Stabilization grant. This has helped Andy get set up in his new location and an Artist Relief grant which has helped pay for personal expenses.

Since Andy is the only employee of his business, apart from family and friends who help run the booth at shows, he has not had to make great changes to adhere to State mandated Coronavirus guidelines. He also has not had difficulty getting materials, although he feels the pandemic could possibly be the reason for an increase in the cost of lumber presently. He has had to adjust his business tremendously to market his work online. Van Ness Woodcrafts does have a website, and recently got an outside assessment done. With the help of his daughter Anna, a junior at the Rhode Island School of Design, she has helped in the redevelopment to improve its functionality. He has had to rely on social media exclusively for advertising. He uses Facebook and Instagram accounts to highlight his work and spread the word on his business more. Andy said he has had to “learn things suddenly” and much of his online presence is still a work in progress. He would

like to hire someone to handle the online portions of his business, but for now he continues to learn and do it himself.

Learning the “new language” of online marketing and the time commitment to make it work effectively has been a challenge for Andy through the pandemic so far, in addition to the financial difficulty the pandemic has caused for him and others. He shared that it has been a difficult year personally and professionally. He has needed and still needs encouragement in the midst of the hardship as he is anxious about the future of the business. However, he did say that the pandemic has shown him that he is more resilient than he gives himself credit for. “I’ve always been determined to succeed with what I know I am meant to do in life, and this year has been quite a test of that.” He continues to build on what works and reinvent other parts of the business to keep it going. He added, “I know it’s good work and I’m not giving up.” Looking ahead, Andy has been contacted to be a part of a large eight-weekend long renaissance faire near Cape Cod next year which he is working toward and hoping can take place.

Andy feels that customer service and custom work are the two main strengths of his business. He likes the in-person connection he gets working at renaissance faires. He is responsive to peoples requests and needs, and is able to help them receive exactly what, if not more than, they are looking for. He often tells customers “tell me what you wish for.” He then comes up with ways to make that wish a reality. An example of this happened last year when he had someone approach him at a faire to make a medieval gaming table. Entirely in black walnut, Andy chose to make it octagonal, and also included electric outlets and USB ports for each player at the table. He was able to craft the table with these and other specific directions much to the customer’s delight, while working in a friend’s horse barn on one circuit of electric power. Andy is willing to help brainstorm with other woodworkers that approach him. As a self-taught woodworker he is not well-versed in engineering, but he is a good problem solver and can help fellow woodworkers solve their own.

Andy originally joined the VWWC to help get his business more exposure. Since joining he has found the VWWC to be helpful in securing the FES grant for woodworkers and in offering a recent webinar on “cash management”. He would enjoy the meet-ups also and looks forward to when those can happen again.