Distributor Perspective
Robust Resurgence for Remodeling in 2013
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2013 Member Directory
Distributor Perspective

Don Schalk  President and COO of C.H. Briggs

BY SUZANNE VAN GILDER

The benefits of distribution are tangible to both manufacturer and end user. From facilitating the most basic transactions efficiently, to creating and maintaining extremely personalized relationships, distribution brings undeniable value to the channel. The nuance of how distribution navigates in an ever-changing marketplace, however, is a little more amorphous. Part of the role of the NBMDA and CIDA is to bring together manufacturers and distributors in a setting where they can share best practices and discuss the key issues that everyone in the industry faces. In-coming President-elect of the NBMDA, Don Schalk, recently took time to share his insights, garnered from 24 years in the distribution industry, with Distribution Matters. Mr. Schalk is also the President and COO of C.H. Briggs, one of the largest independently owned distributors of specialty building materials on the east coast.

“The future of distribution is bright. Is it changing? Yes, it is changing as a result of how customers get information and the use of technology.”

D.M. What makes a good distributor?

MR. SCHALK: We recently did a lot of research with Texas A&M University in one of their consortiums about customer satisfaction and the customer experience. What customers say they really value from a distributor is consistency, reliability and knowledge. Customers also depend on quick access to information that allows them to make good business decisions, enhance their profitability and give them a leg up on the competition.

D.M. What role do manufacturer partnerships play?

MR. SCHALK: Distribution typically partners with manufacturers to determine how best to efficiently move the product through the supply chain in their market served. That is important because when the supply chain is not efficient it ties up capital and minimizes the return on investment for the distributor, and in the long term it also minimizes the return on investment for the manufacturer.

So we are in constant communication with manufacturers. We tell them what products are selling, which helps them from a production standpoint. Likewise we try to tell them which products are coming to the end of their product lifecycle. With our key vendors we spend a lot of time developing comprehensive business plans for their products, as well as working with them to make sure that we are serving the market cost effectively.

D.M. What are some benefits that distribution brings to end-users?
**MR. SCHALK:** One of the things that our company does is try to understand our customers’ business so that, in effect, we can help them be more profitable. For those customers that are willing to sit down and share their business plans with us, we are willing to work with them to find the best solutions for moving product to them. That includes sharing product knowledge and bringing various solutions to help them make the right choices for their operation and their customers. Extending credit is also key to assisting them in securing projects.

**D.M.** What is the future of distribution?

**MR. SCHALK:** The future of distribution is bright. Is it changing? Yes, it is changing as a result of how customers get information and the use of technology. I think the distributors that have the vision to see how best to use those tools to serve customers, and get information to them quickly, are going to be very successful. I think the ones that don’t do that will struggle.

**D.M.** What is the advancing role of technology?

**MR. SCHALK:** I strongly believe that the way in which distributors will serve customers and communicate with customers is changing very rapidly. If you think about our society from a technology standpoint, it is becoming social, mobile and integrated. With the Internet a lot of customers come to us after they have researched products, and they know as much about the product as we do. So one’s ability to deal with them and communicate with them the way they choose to get information is important.

Many of the tools that are available to us now allow for processes to be automated that have traditionally been manual, allow us to get to customers new product information much quicker than ever before, and allow customers to buy products online whenever they want. For example, at C.H. Briggs our ERP provider INFOR collaborated with Salesforce.com to develop an integrated system. When our sales team visits customers today they use iPads, and through that tool they can see the customer’s history, as well as get real time inventory information and provide accurate quotes. The sales rep also inputs information into the system. So the entire organization is up to date on the customers’ needs and can be responsive, even if that particular rep is not available. It is a part of our overarching customer intimacy strategy.

**D.M.** What issues keep distributors up at night?

**MR. SCHALK:** In this economy the biggest challenge is volatility and uncertainty. In the last several years it has been very difficult to see a consistent trend in the marketplace. And as a result of that I think that makes manpower planning a challenge. Also rising costs related to logistics and delivery. Finding quality truck drivers is a major challenge, as is attracting talented people to the industry.

Another threat to distribution are non-traditional competitors like Amazon.com that are starting to sell some of our products. Those online storefronts are a general marketing arm for product; they partner with manufacturers and even in some cases distributors. If that market continues to evolve or change in this fashion, the business model for distribution will have to change.

**D.M.** How do you begin to address those challenges?

**MR. SCHALK:** How all this plays out over time forces the distributor today to think about what the business model is going to be tomorrow. Being part of the NBMDA, the premier organization for building materials distributors, is important. The association helps distributors to work closely with manufacturers on key issues and learning from each other and sharing ideas helps each of us become better channel partners.
According to the Leading Indicator of Remodeling Activity (LIRA) released by the Remodeling Futures Program at the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University on January 23, 2013*, remodeling in the United States accounts for $275 billion in spending annually. Yet the nature of the trade, with many small projects completed by professionals of varying size across every region, can make it difficult to see what is happening in the segment. The latest LIRA, along with recent reports from The National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI) and the Kitchen Cabinet Manufacturers Association (KCMA) all indicate a significant upswing in remodeling expected for 2013. “It’s encouraging to see the residential sector finally contribute to growth in our economy,” says Eric S. Belsky, managing director of the Joint Center. “Through the first three quarters of 2012, investment in the residential sector was responsible for one out of every six dollars added to our GDP. Moving forward, home improvement spending is expected to make an even larger contribution to GDP growth.”

This trend appears to be true even outside of predictably affluent areas of the country because the driving factors behind it are ubiquitous nationwide. “After limited spending during the housing bust, renovating the more than one million distressed properties that were sold in 2011 contributed nearly $10 billion to home improvement spending,” says Eric S. Belsky, managing director of the Joint Center. “With about three million more foreclosures and short sales in the pipeline, there is even more such spending ahead of us.” The number of homeowners moving into retirement is also increasing, and with it the demand for retrofitting homes to accommodate aging. “A decade ago, homeowners over 55 accounted for less than one third of all home improvement spending. By 2011, this share had already grown to over 45 percent. And generations behind the baby boomers will help fuel future spending growth since echo boomers are projected to outnumber baby boomers by

* Download the full LIRA report from the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University here: www.jchs.harvard.edu/research/publications/us-housing-stock-ready-renewal
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NARI reports the following growth indicators in the last quarter of 2012:

- Current business conditions up 2.1% since last quarter
- Number of inquiries up 3.9% since last quarter
- Requests for bids up 3.7% since last quarter
- Conversion of bids to jobs up 3.5% since last quarter
- Value of jobs sold is up 4.3% since last quarter
- Two-thirds of remodelers forecasted the next three months positively, and the rating jumped 13.1% from last quarter.

Located in Campbell, CA, Rehder Construction is an exemplary remodeling operation in practice, receiving a CotY (Contractor of the Year) Regional Award and META Platinum Award in 2012. The company is also a good representation of what remodeling companies typically look like: relatively small (in Rehder’s case there are six employees), regionally specific, and with the majority of the company’s business coming from repeats or referrals. Because of that, Rehder relies on trusted partnerships, both with subcontractors and suppliers, to help him stay competitive in an ever-changing residential marketplace. “I have found through the years that creating relationships with suppliers is key. I am faithful to them, and they are faithful to me,” says Rehder. “If I need something urgently, I can get it without having to put down a deposit. If there is a defect or something goes wrong, my distribution partners take care of it immediately. I make a phone call and it is done. I don’t have to track it, which is important to me.”

According to NARI, homeowners are still concerned about spending money, and there is a small segment of remodelers that are predicting decline, citing the uncertainty of the future with commentary focused largely on tax increases and political issues. But over all, the near future of the remodeling segment looks bright. “There are many external economic and political risks that could derail this remodeling recovery,” says Kermit Baker, director of the Remodeling Futures Program at the Joint Center. “However, the solid momentum behind home building activity, existing home sales, low financing costs, and remodeling contractor sentiment all point to a solid start to the new year for home improvement spending.”

more than twelve million as they begin to enter their peak remodeling years over the next decade.”

The big picture reports are corroborated by individual remodelers and contractors. Business is increasing. And while the traditional virtues of quality, reliability and honesty are still at the heart of successful operations, homeowners’ expectations for remodeling contractors are evolving. “Recently our business has been good,” says Steve Rehder President of Rehder Construction, Inc. “Of course, everyone struggled through the recession, but we were able to adapt and survived. It was the fifth one we’ve been through in 32 years of business, and it was the worst. Now it seems that folks have more confidence and are willing to spend money on larger projects. But a lot has changed. Businesses that have not kept up with what is happening in the economy and the remodeling industry have failed.” One of the changes that Rehder notes is that his clients have unprecedented access to information. Nearly all of them research materials and finishes on the Internet prior to meeting with him. “It is a positive to have well-informed clients, but there is a downside too. For example, someone might find a product available for a lower price on the Internet, and that is when it becomes tricky. Yes, it might cost less, but who is going to stand behind it? I take full responsibility for my work. When things go well, great. But the buck stops here. I need to trust my sources.” Another trend in the remodeling up-tick, is homeowners renovating for increased energy efficiency or environmental friendliness. “A lot of our clients are interested in LEED certification and other ecological standards,” says Rehder. “I depend on consultation from my suppliers to stay on top of new products and materials.”

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The Art OF CUSTOM STORAGE

BY SUZANNE VAN GILDER

When one of the showrooms of your custom storage business is written up as an art gallery in the arts section of the New York Times, you know you’re doing something right (www.transformgallery.com). More precisely in the case of transFORM (www.transformhome.com), Co-Founders Andreas Messis and Stuart Reisch are doing several things right. First and foremost, they have elevated the concept of custom storage to an art, including a palette of irresistible materials. Underlying that is a solid foundation in business and production. And tying these two worlds together are vendor relationships.

AESTHETICS

“We’re a one stop shop. We design, engineer, manufacture and install custom storage solutions in the New York metropolitan area,” says Reisch, whose background is in finance and real estate development. “But one of the things that makes us a unique company is that Andreas (Messis) has a BFA in set design. So we took something that was pragmatic, a practical application, and we looked at how we could make it beautiful.” transFORM’s 30,000 square foot manufacturing facility is located in New Rochelle, within New York’s desirable Westchester County. The company has showrooms in both New Rochelle and Manhattan, and caters to the upper echelons of the tri-state metro areas of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. Clients from these upcoming, progressive and affluent communities are typically well traveled and view themselves as trendsetters. They rely on transFORM’s staff of 23 trained designers to help them integrate what they see in the wider world into their homes.
In essence, they have accomplished what marketing professionals in the industry strive to do: transFORM has made panel processing sexy, both in product and perception.

The simplified dictionary definition of art as being “the conscious use of skill and creative imagination in the production of aesthetic objects,” does an adequate job of describing the driving force behind transFORM’s approach. In essence, they have accomplished what marketing professionals in the industry strive to do: transFORM has made panel processing sexy, both in product and perception. “We’re a design firm,” says Messis, “so that is why we always look for the best products available. Sometimes materials look great, but don’t perform. Other times materials are durable, but they don’t look good.”

transFORM composes custom storage solutions from a carefully chosen palette of TFL, HPL, thermofoil, veneer, wood stains and lacquers. Despite the fact that the company has, by their account, the most comprehensive catalogue in the storage industry, part of the art is reduction. Yes, there are essentially limitless options for décor designs, door styles, finishes, lighting, accents and embellishments, but present them all to a layperson and there is a high likelihood of design paralysis or stylistic train wreck.

Messis chooses all of transFORM’s materials based in part on leading edge trends. “From a design standpoint we are seeing a reverse back to a bit more traditional style. People still favor clean lines and shaker style, but it is not the ultra contemporary that it was four years ago. There is a homey feel to design with a hint of earth and nature, walnuts and oaks, wood tones with a twist. Metals, white and off white are still popular.” People also like the look of exotics, but don’t necessarily want to use rare species. “We exclusively use Tafisa for our TFL because they understand our business and bring these new looks to our industry,” says Messis. “The urbania and alto textures especially appeal to our clientele.” When the application
calls for HPL, Wilsonart is the specification because it matches the Tafisa designs. Decorative Specialties Inc. supplies matching RTF components. “In terms of woodgrain laminate, the industry has continually improved the product,” says Reisch. “It has gotten to the point where it is very difficult for consumers to tell the difference between real wood and laminate. In Europe, laminate is generally accepted as wood, they consider it engineered wood. And I think Americans are becoming more comfortable with that idea.”

LOGISTICS

Over the past 12 years of business, transFORM has developed a successful operational model, as well as the necessary vendor relationships to support it. The process starts with an in-home design consultation. Once a project has been designed and approved it falls into the realm of Operations Manager Russ Conn, who oversees the company’s engineering, manufacturing and installation. Every project is unique, and with roughly 100 jobs being installed monthly, transFORM relies on distributor relationships. “I look at the futures, anywhere from 2-4 weeks out to make sure I have the materials I am going to need,” says Conn. “Our vendors typically have a 48-hour delivery window, and they monitor their inventory so that they can supply our current workflow.”

According to Reisch, that monitoring is a crucial part of a distributor relationship. “Take Hafele for example,” says Reisch. “We use a lot of their products. In fact, we were one of the first companies to start using the LOOX drivers and LED lamps. We try to work as lean as possible, so we don’t hold a lot of stock, and a lot of their products are not made in the USA. We not only depend on them communicate with us so they can anticipate our needs, but also to be honest with us about the availability of product.”

transFORM looks for vendors that offer competitive pricing, convenience and an understanding of its business. The company uses Rugby Architectural Building Products to supply their TFL and panel goods. “Our primary hardware supplier is Hafele but we also use another great distributor, Richie DeMarco of Everready Hardware,” says Reisch. “Aka “The Mayor of Hardware.” Richie not only represents Rev-A-Shelf, but is extremely knowledgeable about the closet and home storage industry.” In all cases, being able to order, track orders and pay online is helpful. “I am not JIT, but I am as close to it as I can possibly get and stay comfortable,” says Conn. “My goal everyday in production is harmony. When things run smoothly and our team feels good about what they are doing, that translates to the product that we are delivering and installing.”

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Steve Johnson, President of Denver-based General Casework/kabi, knows how to make a lot from a little. In fact, when the economy contracted in 2010 he downsized his space and increased his business. He has few employees, minimal square footage and no outside sales force. Up until the launch of kabi, a custom kitchen brand born out of popular demand in 2013, he didn’t even have consumer name. What Johnson does have is a good understanding of how to serve the cabinet market without actually competing with it, machinery that makes his operation quick and agile and access to a vast array of the hottest decorative surfacing materials available.

“A lot of people tour the operation. We’ve had the Stiles Executive Briefing Conference, the AWI national conference, and the CMA regional conferences come through.” says Johnson. “And they all scratch their heads at the amount of capital investment for the square footage. I have sales volume ratios that don’t work in the traditional sense, so there is disbelief. Being a small, but very flexible company, we are very agile and sensitive to changes. Not just changes by the customer, but in the market and material preferences.”

A little background. Steve Johnson is sort of a ringer. He’s worked in lumberyards and manufacturing; and he also spent 11 years working for Stiles Machinery prior to opening General Casework as an OEM that produces green cabinets in 2003. Those experiences provided Johnson with a comprehensive understanding of machinery technology, as well as the opportunity to look at myriad different business models and applications. “I always professed that if people invested in all the pieces, it would come back full fold and reward them with less people and more flexibility,” says Johnson. “No company has 100 percent of all the solutions, but the things I have seen visiting other facilities and studying markets in Europe were very influential and gave me a lot of opportunities.”

CABINETS FOR EVERYBODY

As an OEM, General Caseworks offers a huge variety of frameless cabinets to other companies that manufacture for residential, commercial, education and healthcare markets nationwide with a slim three-week lead-time. “We don’t do any face frames, solid lumber or any kind of finishing,” says Johnson. The whole facility is based around producing green products, so a majority of our board is NAUF, and we work with premium grade and FSC particleboard, MDF or plywood, depending on the project. We primarily use HPL and TFL, and when we use veneer it is always reconstituted veneer with a water-based UV finish.” Everything produced by General Caseworks is made to order, and the design possibilities are essentially limitless, drawing from the collections of the major domestic laminate producers, Wilsonart, Formica, Nevamar, Pionite and Lab Designs, as well as the European houses including Abet Laminati, Arpa, and Liri. Textured TFL from Roseberg, KML or Stevens is also an option. “Laminate companies, here is the neat thing, they all make beautiful laminate with different finishes,” says Johnson. “That is what makes it the most exciting for the end users. The wood actually looks like it is real wood with texture added to it. Whether it is HPL or TFL it becomes more realistic and more acceptable as a finished product.”

In fact, customers and end-users were so impressed with General Caseworks that word got around, even without an outside sales force. “We’ve always received a lot of interest in putting our product into individual
kitchens, whether it be new construction or remodel,” says Johnson. “When the economy hit hard, that part of the business kept growing while the other parts kept shrinking. Now it makes up more than 60 percent of what we do.” It got to the point where the facet of the business that made custom kitchens deserved its own identity, complete with a name and an eye-candy filled showroom. As a result, kabi is officially launched this year.

Yet even the kabi concept is executed slightly differently than a normal dealership. The business model behind kabi includes a showroom developed for the use of kitchen designers, interior designers and architects with a residential background. The relatively open-ended product line affords as much control over the project (and the margins) to the designer as he or she wants. Prior to bringing clients to the showroom, designers meet with the kabi sales coordinator to establish how involved kabi will be with the project.

Part of kabi’s appeal is that the products are available in literally thousands of surface designs, which begs the question, how does one showcase such flexibility? “It is kind of an ever changing thing,” says Johnson. “We say to people, ‘Come and experience the kabi experience.’ It is all about fun colors and options. Some customers even end up with multiple sets of doors so they can change their look.” Sample kitchens reminiscent of the 1960s appeal to people reconstructing mid-century modern homes. Unique materials with acrylic fronts and acrylic edgebanding, or high-gloss laminates gently encourage current day trends that are happening in Europe. There is even a super matte model kitchen, a look that is just beginning to make its way into North America. “The cool thing about it is if the customer or the designer can dream it, or has seen it, they just have to tell us which laminate company they think carries the design or texture, and we can research it and make it happen,” says Johnson.

General Caseworks/kabi depends on the following vendor relationships:

- **Darant Distributing:** Wilsonart HPL, hardware from Accuride, Amerock, Blum and woodTape
- **National Wood Products:** board, TFL sheet goods and laid up sheet goods
- **Würth Louis and Company:** Formica HPL, hardware from Blum, Grass, Rev-A-Shelf
- **Larson Distributing:** Nevamar HPL, hardware from Grass
- **ESI:** Pionite HPL and edgebanding
- **Sierra Forest Products:** board and TFL sheet goods, hardware from Hettich
- **Hafele:** hardware
- **Hardwoods:** sheet goods
EXPANDING WHILE CONTRACTING
To be flexible and fast, General Caseworks is set up so that a single operator can perform each process. This includes a comprehensive system of transfer cars, conveyers, vacuum assists and return conveyors. Johnson just hired an employee to help with a large upcoming project, bringing the total number of production workers to seven. “The ratio of people to sales dollars doesn’t make sense to a lot of people,” says Johnson, “but we can do it because of the processes, systems and machinery.” Projects are described with Planit’s Cabnetware and produced with Cut Rite optimization and production software. The entire operation is paperless, using bar-codes to keep track of each unique job. “We also have two of everything,” says Johnson... “two means of cutting panels, two point to points, two horizontal machines, two edge-banders and two case clamps. In order to maintain that short 3-week lead-time, even if we are doing good preventative maintenance and planning what is going on in the facility, there is always a day or time when something breaks. I can’t use that as an excuse, particularly when making for other people. We have to get product out on time.”

About the same time the residential portion of the business was really taking off, the economic forecast in general turned pretty dreary. Based on projections, Johnson made the decision in 2010 to downsize and combine two facilities, one for machining and one for assembly and shipping, into one 21,000 square foot shop. “What we gave up was a lot of storage space,” says Johnson, who tightened up the layout but kept all the equipment. “We keep no stock,” says Johnson. “in fact, with good distribution like Denver has, we can get what we need in pretty short order. A number of our suppliers are sensitive that we want green materials, and there are certain TFL colors we need to have on those substrates. We typically have contracts with our vendors for those basic materials, and as we use them up, they put them on order.”

The nature of Johnson’s business means that he regularly travels to Europe and reads trade publications to stay ahead of the latest technology and fashion, but he also gets information from distributor reps. “The good vendors take a more pro-active approach to knowing my business and our needs.” Other distributor characteristics that are important to Johnson include competitive pricing and reliability. “You have to look at the effect that relationship has on your overall business,” says Johnson. “Our business originated on word of mouth. One happy customer might tell somebody. But an unhappy customer will tell lots of people. People buy from us because of relationships.”
DISTRIBUTORS

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<td>McKillican International, Inc.</td>
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<td>Rugby Architectural Building Products</td>
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<td>United Plywoods &amp; Lumber</td>
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