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Sitting Pretty

Employees try out products at Beaufurn

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Each employee in the office at Beaufurn LLC tries out every new product design to make sure that the company's chairs will fit nearly everyone.

(Journal Photo by David Rolfe)

All employees at Beaufurn LLC are involved in product development in some way.

Bill Bongaerts, the president of the furniture manufacturer in Winston-Salem, often asks warehouse workers what they think of a chair.

"That's how you come up with a product that goes on the market," he said.

Linnea Johnson, a graphic designer for the company, said that whenever a new chair is developed everyone in the office sits in it and gives an opinion.

The goal is to make sure that Beaufurn's products fit most everybody.

Bongaerts wasn't always in the furniture-manufacturing industry. His first business venture was an import and export company called Bongaerts Forest Products, which he started in 1976 in Toronto, selling lumber to European countries.

He sold the business in 1985 and moved to the United States, where he formed Beaufurn Corp., a wholesaler in Connecticut that sold residential furniture to retailers and mail-order companies.

Bongaerts moved his company to Lexington in 1996. That same year in April, an electrical fire destroyed his wholesale business.

The company was in crisis mode, but Bongaerts saw the disaster as an opportunity to start over, refocus and see where he should go next.

So he directed his efforts on creating Beaufurn LLC, a manufacturer that specializes in commercial furniture. Beaufurn comes from the words "Beautiful Furniture."

"It's a very exciting business, a very creative business," Bongaerts said. "That's what I enjoy the most."

He said that three key factors need to be met in the design and making of Beaufurn furniture - an innovative design, comfort and durability.

Beaufurn moved to its current headquarters in West Point Business Park on WestPoint Boulevard from Clemmons in May.

"We're still in the process of laying out and designing our offices," Bongaerts said.

The company also has a small upholstery division in High Point. The two operations have a combined 16 employees. Nine independent contractors also work for the company.

Components for most of Beaufurn's wooden furniture are shipped from overseas, then sent to its warehouse in Winston-Salem for assembly, packing, shipping and delivery. All of the company's completely upholstered furniture is made in the United States.



Beaufurn president Bill Bongaerts

In a business environment where a lot of furniture businesses are moving their production overseas, Beaufurn has found a niche making custom furniture domestically.

The company makes moderate to upscale furniture and offers a variety of tables, chairs and lounge seating. The company sells to several markets worldwide, including the restaurant, hospitality, airport, leisure and institutional markets. National customers include The Cheesecake Factory, Mrs. Fields/TCBY Stores, Whole Foods, Disney Cruise Line and McDonald's.

The company's furniture has been installed in universities, schools, restaurants, attractions and theaters throughout North Carolina, including East Carolina University in Greenville, Jujube Restaurant in Chapel Hill, Maximillian's in Cary and the Greensboro Grasshoppers baseball stadium.

The company's products can be found in Verizon Wireless stores throughout the southeastern United States. It is installing furniture in Winston's Eatery, a new restaurant scheduled to open in late March in downtown Winston-Salem.

Michael Johnson, who owns Winston's Eatery with Chad Williams, said he likes to do business with local companies like Beaufurn.

"It was very easy to take a look at their catalog and their products," Johnson said. "They have a real eye for detail, and there's a certain modern appeal to it. We were looking for something with kind of a modern look but nothing that was too industrial. They just seemed to fill the bill because they had a wide range of really interesting products."

The bulk of Beaufurn's business comes from the hospitality and restaurant industries.

"A lot of restaurants today are adding lounge seating in their environments," Bongaerts said. "They want a different look, so we do custom work for those people."

Years ago, fast-food outlets wouldn't think twice about the design of a chair, he said, but that is changing, partly because of such companies as Starbucks.

Bongaerts sees the rapidly changing food industry as an opportunity for Beaufurn to do more business. When Beaufurn makes products for national chains, it typically provides furniture for 10 to 105 restaurants.

Bongaerts declined to give sales figures but said that Beaufurn is a multimillion-dollar company. He said that the company's 2006 sales were up 45 percent over the previous year and are expected to be the same this year.

Beaufurn already has growing pains.

The company's warehouse, which is in the same building as its offices in West Point Business Park, is almost out of space, and the company wants to move its division in High Point to the business park. Plans are to expand from 26,000 square feet to about 38,000 square feet in the business park.

Since its conception, Beaufurn has sold most of its products out of state, but Bongaerts wants to do more commercial business locally.

"I think Winston-Salem is changing for the better," he said. "There are a lot of things going on and we hope to be able to contribute."

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