

The Test of Time IMPERIA Custom Cabinetry

When someone needs new cabinets, they might find it more convenient to head over to the nearest big-box store instead of taking a drive out to West Bridgewater and going down rural Manley Street to Imperia Custom Cabinetry. Almost hidden away, the store might not immediately cross someone's mind, but it should. After all, the big chains weren't responsible for eight different spa units at New York City's world-famous Waldorf Astoria, but Imperia Custom Cabinetry was.

For years, the company (formerly Imperia Kitchens) has been known for designing, manufacturing, and installing custom cabinetry. Framed or frameless, cherry finish or pine, the possibilities are almost as endless as Imperia's 54,000-square-foot manufacturing facility.

The humble beginnings of Imperia date back to 1965 in Hanson, Massachusetts, where David Mansfield started the business. At first, Imperia just made traditional framed cabinetry. Then, in the early 1970s, according to Mansfield, they introduced European-style frameless cabinets to the United States.

In the 1980s, Imperia outgrew its Hanson surroundings and constructed an 82,000-square-foot facility in the Taunton Industrial Park in Taunton, Massachusetts. Unfortunately, things in Taunton didn't go as well as they'd hoped, and the company returned to Hanson.

Enter Imperia's current president, Ned Barton, who purchased the company in March 1995. "I looked at 55 different businesses, made offers on several, and this was the one that came through," says Barton, who, with his brother, used to run a company that made specialty tooling for the screw manufacturing industry.

In 1997, Barton purchased the space that is now

Imperia's factory showroom in West Bridgewater. Those familiar with the area might remember a time when Wood-Hu Kitchens occupied the building. "To this day, we have people almost every week coming in looking for cabinetry to add to their Wood-Hu kitchen," Barton says. In fact, one of Imperia's product lines carries the Wood-Hu name. "They had such a good name, we had to continue it."

Over the decades, Imperia grew alongside the cabinet industry. In the 1980s, the company mostly made plastic laminate until a 100-percent, flexible vinyl laminate called "Thermofoil" was introduced. Both laminates are currently used by Imperia.

A door away from their elegant showroom is Imperia's sprawling manufacturing facility, with state-of-the-art machinery and anything and everything necessary to construct the perfect cabinet. But after a quick look around, it's clear that more than cabinets are being shipped from this warehouse, like a newly constructed reception desk, the type from which one might take deposit slips at the local bank.

Dedicated to superior craftsmanship, Imperia's small group of craftsmen "has been here and done every job in the factory and can truly make anything," Barton says. Also working in the warehouse are machine operators, capable of operating mul



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President Ned Barton in the Imperia manufacturing facility

tiple pieces of equipment. “When you think about cabinetry, you think about craftsmen,” he explains. “But that really isn’t the case anymore.” It’s both a craft process and a production process.

“There are lots of things we bring to the table that craftsmen, so to speak, can’t,” Barton says. He gives an example of an average craftsman building fine custom cabinetry for a home: “It probably isn’t the best because he doesn’t have the machinery and the equipment that we have to make a precise product. We make it precise; then we make it fit your house. The guy who’s working out of his garage doesn’t have that equipment.

“We can make cabinets 6,000 different ways. Not only can you change the dimensions, you can add accessories to the cabinet or features to change the construction,” Barton adds. “The variations are absolutely mind-boggling.”

Another thing the guy working out of his garage probably doesn’t have are high-profile clients. Aside from the Waldorf Astoria, Imperia’s projects in New York City include the Morton Square condominium on the Hudson River.

Most recently, and a little closer to home, Imperia finished work on Nouvelle at Natick, 215 upscale residences attached to the Natick Collection, formerly the Natick Mall. ADD Inc., a Cambridge architectural firm, was responsible for designing the kitchens and baths. Then it was Imperia’s job to make the proper modifications over the course of about eight months.

But potential customers need not worry—a home doesn’t have to be connected to a mall to get Imperia’s attention. Private homes are a big part of its business. The company is currently working on a house on Shelter Island, Long Island, where they’ll create kitchen and bath cabinetry as well as bookcases.

Despite the number of big-city projects under its belt, Barton says he’d like the company to do regional work. “We have a number of dealers throughout New England and we really don’t compete with them,” he says. “We try to find projects that fit us, that fit our product line, and not all projects do.”

Unfortunately, even a string of high-profile jobs does little to quell Barton’s worries in these uncertain economic times. “We just want to survive right now,” he says. “Pretty much everyone I know is in survival mode. Business is horrendous, so we have to get people comfortable again and interested in buying.” Business is usually excellent from late February through June and mid-September up until December.

Barton hopes to turn the tides with an Imperia marketing blitz, which includes targeting potential clients who might be remodeling instead of building. “I check with my competition and my dealer base frequently, and we’re not unlike all of them,” he says. “Since August, some people have decided they’d better close their wallets and wait until they see something better over the horizon.”

An atmosphere of hesitancy isn’t going to stop traffic, however. There are still those on the sidelines planning to use this downturn as a launching pad to enjoy a down market’s added values. It may be tough, but Imperia has the right formula for success. ★