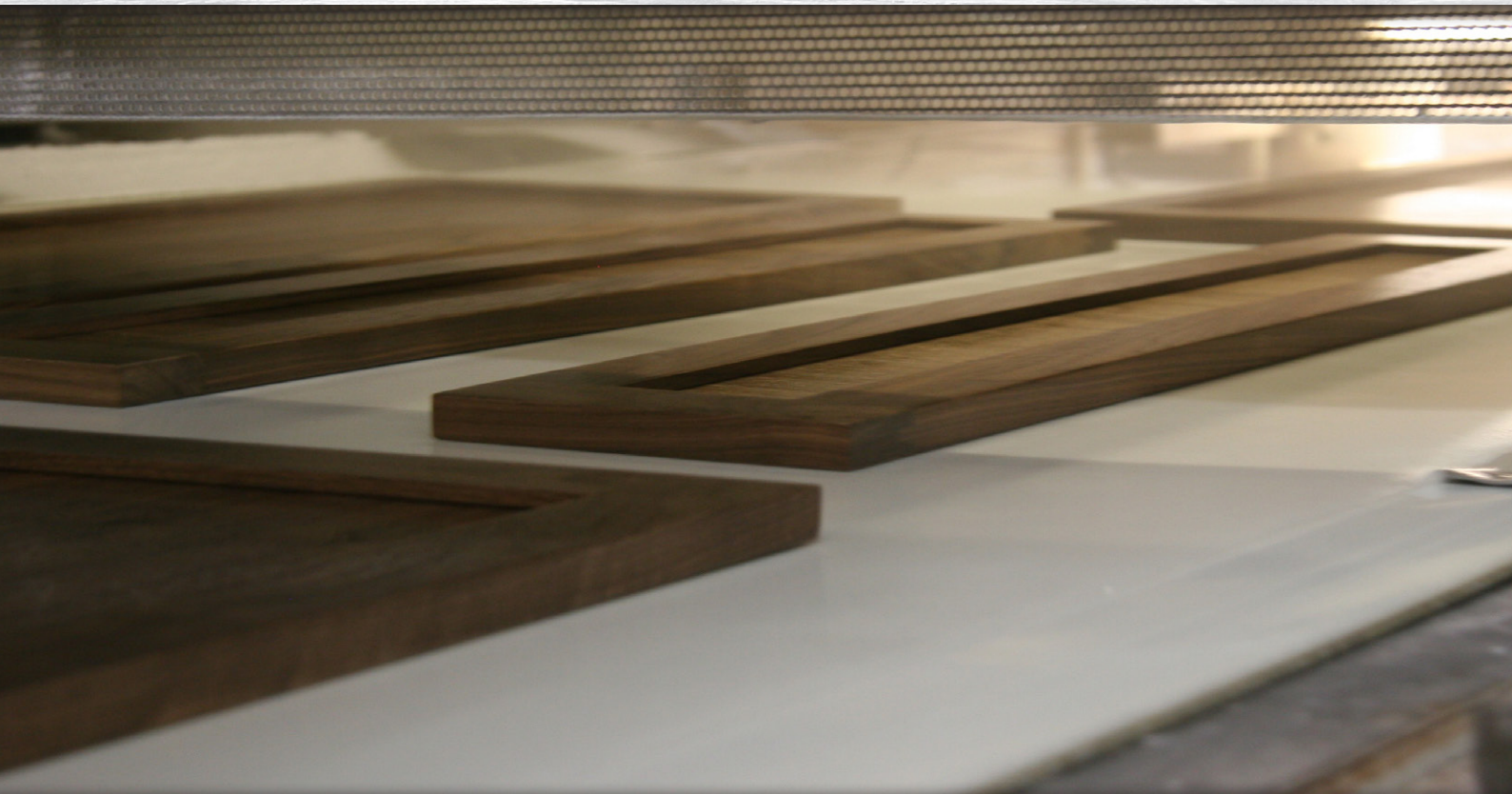




A Thriving Business in the Geographical Centre of North America



*When **Business in Focus** profiled Elias Woodwork in 2016, the custom manufacturer of wood products in Winkler, Manitoba was rapidly expanding. At the time, the company expressed a sense of confidence about its products, people and growth strategy. This hasn't changed – only today Elias is even larger, with a new facility, new production lines and new opportunities.*

Written by Nate Hendley

The main focus of the company also remains the same.

"Wood products related to the kitchen, millwork, and automotive industries have been our core products. However we do work with a variety of other materials as well," says Sales and Marketing Manager, Jeremy Funk.

In-house specialties include cabinet doors, moldings, curved doors, dovetail drawer boxes, cabinet posts, re-facing material, decorative laminate veneer doors, wood kitchen accessories, AOS (assemble on site) cabinets, and more.



"Since 2016, our rigid thermofoil and decorative laminate veneer products have seen significant growth along with our solid color painted wood products," says Funk. "We have noticed a strong market shift away from traditional stained and natural wood products, with more projects going to painted wood or non-wood materials. Our ability to adapt to market demands has served us well over the last two years. Expanded production capabilities in our wood drawer box and AOS cabinet departments have also had a major impact on our company."

The company is proud of its production capabilities and continues to do almost all of its own manufacturing in-house.

"Ninety-nine percent of the products we sell are manufactured in our facilities. There are a few specialty products such as cabinet hardware and a line of certain range hoods and carved corbels and posts that we buy from a partner company. However, even those are usually sanded and coated by us for final shipment... Our business is structured to do wholesale B2B (business to business) sales only. We don't do any direct to consumer sales," says Funk.

Elias' main clientele includes contractors and companies that perform cabinet re-facing, cabinet construction and millwork. The firm has also done business with vehicle manufacturers. ►



“We look for employees with a ‘can do’ attitude and an eye for quality... people who embrace change and keeping up with what’s new.”

▶ This market focus has continued to produce strong revenues. “We have broken our own growth records for sales and production in the last two years. We have cultivated important partnerships with large and small companies and have grown together. Also, our diversity of product offerings, along with our ability to adapt to industry trends, has been key for us. [Our people have] unbelievable talent, ingenuity and drive. We anticipate further growth this year,” says Funk.

The company recently added a new facility and now operates out of three properties – two in Winkler and one in Morden, Manitoba. Along with the new building, there have been lots of new hires.

“We currently employ 355 people in our three facilities. Last year we were at about the 300 employee mark... We look for employees with a ‘can do’ attitude and an eye for quality... people who embrace change and keeping up with what’s new.

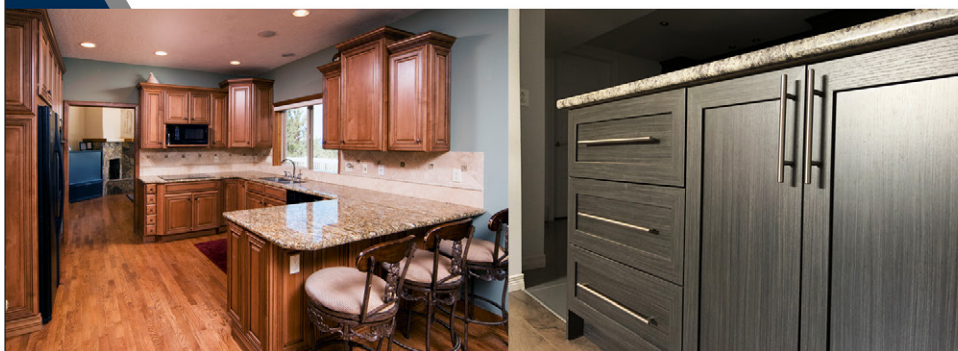
We ensure our employees are well trained on all processes and machinery. This training is especially vital because we utilize some leading edge Italian/German machinery that requires specialized operators who are hard to find since there are only a handful of these machines in North America,” explains Human Resources Manager, Eugen Klassen.

Among other benefits, employees receive Blue Cross coverage, RRSP contributions, two paid non-statutory holidays and referral bonuses. “The biggest benefit we try to offer is a friendly, family-like environment. We try to be very flexible with our employees when it comes to time off and ensure our shifts are non-rotational so employees [have more scheduling options],” says Klassen.

Elias Woodwork’s size and success is remarkable given its humble origins. The firm was founded by Peter Elias, working



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from a small garage on his farm. From this inauspicious locale, he built cabinet doors for shops around southern Manitoba. The company was acquired in the early 1980s by brothers John Fehr and Ralph Fehr, who moved it to larger facilities in Winkler.

“Our business has grown nearly every year since 1983. This can only be due to God’s provision of the amazing staff we have been blessed with. Of course, it all starts with the vision of our co-founder, Ralph Fehr. His engineering expertise, hard work, ability to build a solid team around him and willingness to share the profits with them has stood the test of time,” states Funk.

There are no plans to move from Winkler, a strategically located base of operations in what the company refers to as the geographical centre of the continent.

Being in Winkler has proven “a natural benefit for us... We are just an hour’s drive from Winnipeg, also known as ‘CentrePort Canada’ – Canada’s centre for global trade. We can ship anywhere on the continent in a very timely manner, which is critical. The industries we work in require quick turnaround times for our custom made products, so not only do we need to manufacture them efficiently, we need to get it to their door quickly,” says Funk.

Unsurprisingly, given Elias Woodwork’s well-positioned locale, the company has customers across North America. “We have a good mix of clients between Canada and the United States... Our products have ended up in celebrity homes, government buildings, sports stadiums, concert halls and famous golf and tennis clubs, to name a few,” says Funk.

In terms of what sets Elias Woodwork apart from its competition, Funk offers the following: “The surface answer is our vast product selection and ability to produce custom products at a high quality level in a quick turnaround time. There are not many companies who manufacture products from different materials such as wood, rigid thermofoil, acrylic and decorative laminate veneer. Our diversity gives more selection to customers and [lets them] use a single source. For the root answer to our uniqueness, I will use what seems to be my favourite word of the day – the ingenuity of our people.”

To meet its clients’ needs, Elias has embraced workplace practices such as lean manufacturing and Just-in-Time delivery. “As mentioned, our customer partners require quick delivery, which can be a challenge considering all of our products are custom made. Systems enabling small batch size transfers between departments, for example, are critical to maximize production flow in our facilities to have complete kitchens ready to ship ➤



► as quickly as possible. Inventory management is key as well. We want to maximize space without experiencing delays waiting for materials,” says Funk.

Of course, safety and quality remain top priorities. “We have excellent safety procedures and training in multiple languages in order to keep our staff safe and productive. As a result we have one of the lowest WCB (Workers’ Compensation Board) rates in our industry,” shares Klassen.

“We have an ISO designation we keep up to date for one of our product lines. The concept of quality assurance has seeped into our entire workplace psychology to the point where it’s a culture by now – a culture of safety and quality first. We have a very extensive and meaningful profit share program that rewards attention to about 40 metrics. We never have to worry about our employees taking short cuts,” says President and Operations Manager, Ralph Fehr.

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Elias Woodwork also believes in giving back to the community and actively participates in community-based charity work. “We are involved with a local immigration settlement organization that our HR manager has volunteered at for many years. Some years ago, we spearheaded a project at a children’s summer camp to build a ‘lake’, beach, and meditation garden. More recently we helped with the construction of a heritage park that celebrates the diverse heritage and many nationalities [in the area]. We often provide in kind help to senior housing projects, hospitals, respite homes and the like. Right now we anticipate starting a few Habitat for Humanity homes,” says Fehr.

The company likes to work with suppliers “who can grow with us, share our vision for quality output and responsibility to the customer, and be at the forefront of innovation in the supply chain. Timely delivery of top quality raw materials and components makes it easier for us to do what we need to for today’s demanding market place,” says Fehr.

The way Elias promotes itself has evolved over the decades, and “marketing is obviously an important part of our business and has been absolutely key in our growth over the years. We started with just trade magazine ads, which are still a part of our marketing campaign, but the advance of marketing innovation and tools has given us many more opportunities to reach our target audience. Our website has been the core of





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our online marketing efforts, but we also utilize various social media and targeted marketing tools. Our marketing efforts also include advertising with a variety of industry related websites and newsletters, including our own monthly e-newsletter. We continue to produce a catalogue of our products in print and digital formats that offers specification and technical information to industry professionals. Additionally we produce full color catalogues and marketing materials designed to promote our products and assist our customers with their own sales process. Trade shows also remain a core ingredient to our marketing efforts," says Funk.

As for the future, he says, "Some of our existing product lines are still growing quite rapidly with industry demand, so our current focus is on maintaining quality assurance and timely delivery of those product lines. That being said, we have never shied away from offering new products or services and in fact have seen quite a few additions to our product lines in the last few years." ■

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