

Now accepting nominations for the 2010 Small Shop of the Year...see page 24 for details.

# MODERN WOODWORKING

ADVANCED PROCESSING TECHNOLOGY AND MANAGEMENT

June 2009 / \$3.95

## 2009 Small Shop of the Year

Doors of Distinction puts  
product quality and customers  
first on its path to success

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# Small Shop of the Year finalists share common threads



## Passion, integrity drive businesses to succeed

By Jeff Crissey  
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Getting out of the office and visiting each of *Modern Woodworking's* six Small Shop of the Year finalists is truly one of the highlights of my job. During my travels — in addition to learning that an airline gate agent can be your best friend or your worst enemy and that sometimes the supplemental insurance offered by rental car companies *isn't* a waste of money — this year I realized over and over that even the smallest companies are capable of producing the finest wood products.

The 2009 crop of Small Shop of the Year finalists included two cabinet companies, an architectural mill-work firm, a yacht furniture maker, a polyester finishing specialist and a solid wood door manufacturer. As different as all of these businesses are from one another, two common threads tie them all together — each is willing to invest in the machinery and production techniques required to succeed and each has a passion for their work and a vision for the future.

This year's winner, Doors of Distinction, Amery, Wis., epitomizes these traits that have no doubt played a big part in getting the company where it is today. It was obvious to our staff early on in the vetting pro-

cess that Doors of Distinction would be a standout. In calling and interviewing references, we heard feedback like, "They produce the best doors I've seen in 32 years," and, "I wish they were a little bit faster but they are well worth the wait." But it wasn't until I had a chance to visit that I got a real sense of the effort and dedication that goes into producing each door and the integrity of the people making them. Doors of Distinction's devotion to its product led the company to double its sales in 2008 during one of the worst years the housing construction industry has ever seen.

It is our pleasure to bring you their story this month as we've done over the past five issues with each of the program finalists. As this month's cover story marks the end of the 2009 Small Shop of the Year program, we are ready to kick off the 2010 program. If you think your company deserves recognition, we invite you to go to [www.modernwoodworking.com](http://www.modernwoodworking.com) and fill out the online application form. We look forward to hearing from you and bringing you more examples of companies that make the wood products industry great. **MW**



# **Building a solid foundation**

**Doors of Distinction thrives despite depressed housing market with quality control and customer focus**

**By Jeff Crissey**

Tucked away in the quiet western Wisconsin town of Amery is a small farm where Ed and Joyce Gullickson have lived for 44 years. There the Gullicksons raised Hereford cattle on the side as an investment to put their four children through college. Today, a hand-painted “Gullickson Farms” sign and an empty pasture are all that remain of the Gullicksons’ former cattle venture. In its place is Doors of Distinction, a thriving custom solid wood door company catering to the high-end home markets in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Despite the downturn in the housing market, the company was able to double its sales volume in 2008 by focusing on product quality and customers.

After selling his electrical contracting business in 1991, Gullickson went to work for a small cabinet shop where he built kitchen cabinets and fell in love with woodworking.

“At that point I knew I had 12 to 15 years left to work and I wanted to do something that I enjoyed,” says Gullickson. “The owner said he could hire me for a few hours a day and asked how much did I want, and I told him that I didn’t care.” After two years, Gullickson left to set up a millwork division for a glass company.

In 1995, the Gullicksons converted one of two old hay sheds on the farm into a shop where Ed built custom solid wood interior and exterior doors on the side. “I built a few doors after graduating college and it had been in the back of my mind that I always wanted to get into high-end craftsman-style doors,” he says. In 2000, the Gullicksons realized they were spending 40 hours a week building doors on nights and weekends and decided to go full-time and founded Doors of Distinction.

In the nine years since the company started, the family-owned business has built more than 10,000 interior and exterior doors in 26 states and has seen its annual volume grow 10 times over. Ed and Joyce’s son Dan left his job building fire trucks and joined the company full-time in 2002. The couple’s other two sons also play a part in the business. Jim, an IT specialist for a medical records transfer company, does custom door panel carvings on request. Brian, a software developer for Microsoft, built and manages the company’s Web site.

Doors of Distinction’s market consists mainly of high-end, multi-million-dollar residences in the nearby Minneapolis/St. Paul area and homes in northern Minnesota and Wisconsin. Eighty percent of the company’s customers are architects and designers who specify wood species and designs. For its homeowner clients, the company has developed a flagship interior door available in 20 different styles – curved midrail, curved top, eyebrow top, etc. – available in 30 different species.

One market shift the Gullicksons have seen is a growth in the number of projects in smaller homes. “Baby boomers who have been living in 5,000-sq.-ft. homes are building new homes that are half that size but they still want the best of everything in it,” says Joyce.

## A step above

What separates Doors of Distinction from its competition is Gullickson’s deliberate production approach and steadfast commitment to quality above all else. To maintain tight tolerances, the company saws all of its own skins and core material and glues up its own panels.

“We do it all,” says Gullickson. “It takes a little more time and is more labor intensive, but we have control from beginning to end. One of the things I’ve found over the years is people still want the best quality they can possibly buy, and they are willing to wait for it. We are a low-volume producer and we never set out to produce doors for everyone in the country.”



*In order to maintain full control over product quality, Doors of Distinction does its entire production in-house. “It takes a little more time and is more labor intensive, but we have control from beginning to end,” says Ed Gullickson.*

Those founding principles have paid off. Of the 10,000 doors that Doors of Distinction has built, it has only had to replace four, including one that a contractor left in the rain before it was finished.

“When we first started, it took a year to determine how we were going to build doors,” says Gullickson. “The first thing I did was buy five commercial-made doors and then cut them in half with a circular saw. It was discouraging at first because I didn’t want to build a door like that – I didn’t want to use engineered board or particleboard.”

Doors of Distinction’s construction methods began to take shape when an 88-year-old retired door craftsman from Minneapolis heard that Gullickson wanted to build solid wood doors and spent three days with him to teach him. “He brought some books that dated back to the 1870s and he showed me how to build them. That is from where I picked it up, and that is what sets our doors apart,” he says.

Doors of Distinction’s doors are 100-percent solid wood. Rails and stiles have a laminated poplar core, with 3/8” or 1/2” skins on exterior doors and 3/16” or 1/4” skins on interior doors. All door panels are double-layered and have a minimum of 1/2” tongues for increased strength and stability.

“A laminated product is much stronger and more stable than a single piece of wood or particleboard,” says Gullickson. “We have considerably more material in our doors, and we have more labor in them, but we’re not making \$400 doors.”

## A tight fit

Gullickson cites how tight his doors fit together as one feature that sets Doors of Distinction apart from larger door manufacturers. The company worked with tooling suppliers for a year to get the precision on the inserts to meet Gullickson’s expectations. “A lot of door manufacturers have a looser fit because they put their doors together with air pressure,” he says. “They want the door to go together and not be extremely tight. Ours are all put together by hand and if there is a problem with the fit, we know it immediately.”

Another small measure that pays big rewards for Doors of Distinction is making sure all parts – no matter how small – are sanded and ready for staining on-site. “After we run our jambs and tongue-and-groove paneling on the moulder we will put them straight into the sander,” says Gullickson. “The stain and finish take beautifully, and that is why we get repeat business. If our customers buy from a lumber yard or molding manufacturer, the parts are full of knife marks when they go to stain it.”



*Since going full-time with their door business in 2000, the Gullicksons have expanded Doors of Distinction’s business to more than 10,000 doors in 26 states.*

# Inside & out:

A closer look at how Doors of Distinction builds its doors

## Exterior door construction:

Edge laid core material in both stiles and rails  
3/8" to 1/2" outer skin (depending on wood species used)  
100-percent solid wood  
Minimum thickness of 2 -1/4"  
Thresholds are 1-1/2" to 2" thick white oak or mahogany  
Adjustble threshold weatherstrip is recessed into the bottom of the door  
Ball bearing hinges  
1" insulated glass units are used when the design allows  
Doors are manufactured under AIA (Architectural Institute of America) design standards and meet architectural grade specifications



## Interior passage door construction:

Edge laid core material in both stiles and rails  
3/16" to 1/4" skin (depending on wood species used)  
100-percent solid wood  
Minimum thickness of 1-3/4"  
Ball bearing hinges  
Doors are manufactured under AIA (Architectural Institute of America) design standards and meet architectural grade specifications



## A turning point

Four years ago, Doors of Distinction's demand had increased to the point that it couldn't continue to operate without improving facilities and equipment. The Gullicksons converted the second hay shed up the hill into a new production area. Today, production is divided between the "upper" and "lower" shops. All door parts are milled, machined and assembled in the upper shop. Exterior door production then moves to the lower shop where employees apply moldings and craftsman detail to the finished product.

"We didn't have the luxury of a 30,000-sq.-ft. building and moving all our equipment into one location," says Gullickson. "We did it the economical way by starting with a building we already had, converting it and then repeating that with the second building." Doors of Distinction is

adding on to its upper shop and increasing the size of the assembly area and raw material storage.

During the renovation of the second building, the company also began investing heavily in new machinery. It purchased a moulder to eliminate outsourcing altogether. In addition to running its own moldings, it now provides moldings and wall paneling for its professional clients on request.

"We're currently in the process of finishing a house with 16 exterior doors, 40 interior doors and 23,000 feet of wall paneling and trim casing," says Gullickson. "When we get into specific wood species, it's easier for our clients to just come to us rather than having multiple suppliers. The moulder has allowed us to develop another portion of our business."

Last year, a new widebelt sander, shaper and computerized sliding table saw were added to production to improve quality standards and finished product.

Gullickson's goal is to increase production capacity from 1,400 doors to 2,000 doors a year without moving into a new facility. "We can increase as we become more efficient. I've had several people tell me that I need to switch to an engineered core and use thinner veneers, but I'm not interested in doing that because we have built our reputation on our quality, and we are going to hold to that."

As for future machinery investments, Gullickson says the company will add as it grows. "We are going to improve our production, but we are going to do it one step at a time. One of the mistakes I made when I first started was not going with quality machinery from the start. I would advise anyone starting out to buy the best piece of machinery they can possibly buy.

"We are not going to change the way we manufacture our doors. We'll keep improving our machinery, but we know we can't build doors for everyone in the country, but we want to build the best doors in the country."



The Gullicksons (left to right), Jim, Joyce, Ed, Dan and Brian.

# ENTER TODAY!

## Have your shop considered for the 2010 Small Shop of the Year!

### THIS PROGRAM HONORS WOODWORKING COMPANY OWNERS WHO HAVE ...

successfully managed their companies through the ups and downs of the woodworking industry. These owners exemplify the highest standards of woodworking professionals, including business acumen, marketing and production management expertise, attention to safety and community involvement.

### AS RECOGNITION FOR THESE QUALITIES ...

each 2010 Small Shop of the Year finalist company will be featured in a two-page article in Modern Woodworking.

### TO BE CONSIDERED ...

you will need to fill out the application form available at [www.modernwoodworking.com](http://www.modernwoodworking.com) and submit it by August 31, 2009. Return the completed form to Small Shop of the Year, c/o Jeff Crissey, 3200 Rice Mine Road NE, Tuscaloosa, AL 35406; or fax it to (205) 248-1018.

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