



Wood Working

Stillwater shutter maker taps strengths to take business in new directions

What do Julie Andrews, Wayne Gretzky, Katie Holmes and Sen. Jim Inhofe have in common? These recognizable public figures all have had Kirtz Shutters made for their home or office.

Kirtz Shutters focuses on quality, which makes it one of the leading producers of high-end plantation shutters. The company makes shutters in any size and shape imaginable and makes them out of just about any wood a customer might desire.

"We have long been recognized as a manufacturer that makes the unusual," said Chris Tietz, president and owner of Kirtz Shutters.

Kirtz Shutters was founded in January 1987, originally called The Shutter Mill. To set themselves apart from other "shutter mills" founders Greg Kirby and Chris Tietz combined their last names to create "Kirtz Shutters", which was trademarked as the product name in 1991. Beginning as a two-man operation, Tietz and Kirby manufactured a couple of shutter panels a day. Now, 20 years later, Kirtz has grown to more than 60 employees at its 35,000 square-foot facility—producing many shutter panels each day. Throughout the years

the shutter-making process has been adjusted and refined several times. The result is a product that is arguably the finest crafted shutter available today.

Kirtz Shutters have been made out of over 45 different species of wood. The most popular woods used are maple, oak, cherry, mahogany, walnut and alder. Although maple and oak make up 80 percent of production, rare woods such as teak, bubinga and reclaimed wormy chestnut are not uncommon. They order three semi-truck loads of wood a month. If all the shutter components were lined up it would be 25 miles long. Ninety-nine percent of their production is exclusive hardwoods; the other 1 percent of production is softwoods that are usually ordered for log homes.

Kirtz Shutters can be found in more than 40 states in the U.S. and various countries abroad.

Kirtz focuses on quality and diversity. Every shutter it makes is custom built to the purchaser's specifications.

"We build these shutters for a specific place in a specific home,"

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Kirtz Shutters
in Stillwater.



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Tietz knows that in order to satisfy customers and focus on quality, all shutters must be made out of premium wood and attention must be paid to even the most minute details.

“The shutters that are going to be painted are still made of maple, unlike the basswoods and poplars used by other companies,” Tietz said. “We don’t compromise quality, regardless of price.”

About two and a half years ago, Tietz took over sole control of Kirtz Shutters when he bought out his long time business partner Kirby. Tietz realized he needed to make changes in the business. He contacted the Department of Commerce, which put him in contact with the Oklahoma Manufacturing Alliance. Joe Genet, manufacturing extension agent for the Oklahoma Manufacturing Alliance, helped Tietz apply for the Southwest Trade Adjustment Assistance Center grant and received a matching \$150,000 award.

“Joe Genet, of the Oklahoma Manufacturing Alliance, has been vital to the ongoing improvements of our entire business,” Tietz said. “He first told me about the grant possible through SWTAAC and then arranged for me to talk to someone who assured me it was time well spent to pursue the grant.”

Genet is sponsored locally by Meridian Technology Center in Stillwater and OSU. He is one of 20 manufacturing extension agents in communities across Oklahoma.

Kirtz Shutters used SWTAAC funds to implement Web site develop-

ment and to update marketing literature. Kirtz also used money from the grant to contract with Giant Partners in Oklahoma City to conduct three strategic planning sessions.

In October, Giant Partners conducted an off-site strategic mapping session and helped Kirtz articulate their key decision-making filters and future strategic vision for the organization.

“With the help Giant Partners provided, we have been able to lay the groundwork for our forward movement,” Tietz said. “In an environment away from the daily concerns, we worked together to remind ourselves who we are, where we were, where we wanted to go and how we were going to get there.”

Tietz was pleased with the strategic mapping session and worked with Giant Partners in conducting a competitive mapping session, which helped Kirtz Shutters understand what its competitors do and how they think.

“The competitive mapping session helped them to see clearly their own unique strengths in comparison to their competitors,” said Andrew Ranson, Giant Partners executive team member.

Later, Giant Partners worked with Kirtz to develop a specific action plan built around targeted and measurable growth initiatives.

“In the conversations I’ve had with Chris since they have been implementing the plan and executing the growth initiatives, I have sensed a greater focus and momentum,” Ranson said. “The focus has allowed them to be able to see the big deals that are out there, and

the momentum is making an impact on the morale of the entire company.”

Genet assists Tietz in executing growth initiatives by sitting in on bi-weekly staff meetings and coaching Tietz to ensure he, and his staff, stays focused on growth initiatives.

“Joe helps me focus on the big picture,” Tietz said. “Since I am here everyday it is hard for me not to focus on the day-to-day things. He has proven to be a sounding board who has provided ongoing counsel and direction, which I need and appreciate.”

Kirtz Shutters realizes that in order for them to rise above the market they must continue to search for the decision maker in the buying process. A key strategic initiative that came out of the Giant Partner sessions was for Kirtz to shift from being a dealer-focused distribution to an internally-focused retail distribution.

“It is imperative that anyone selling Kirtz Shutters must believe everyone wants top quality and it is their desire to bring it to the customer,” Tietz said. “We have a number of resellers around the country, but we see the greatest results from our own retail sales people.”

Most recently Genet has assisted Kirtz to renew its use of services from its local CareerTech Meridian Technology Center which is now providing Safety Training Support. Another project Kirtz has going is with Oklahoma State University’s New Product Development Center

(NPDC). Kirtz was approved for a level 3 project in which the NPDC works with faculty on these projects to provide partial funding for research and design of a new product prototype. These projects require extensive technical and market research that limits the risk to Kirtz and the NPDC.

Following advice from Genet, Tietz has plans to look at Lean manufacturing practices across the company’s processes—from the taking of orders through installation—to compliment the growth initiatives. Tietz and 17 key staff members have already participated in a Lean closed course at Meridian Technology Center. “It is our objective that through Lean the product can go from raw wood to finished shutter in 30 days,” Tietz said. In addition Kirtz has also started projects with Application Engineer Doug Enns to analyze improvements in his production processing.

Kirtz Shutters has come a long way from the two-man operation that started in 1987 and Tietz has big plans for the future. “I don’t think enough people know we are as talented and diverse as we are,” Tietz said. “We would like to be widely recognized as the leader in quality and innovation. It is

time we stepped to the next level and asserted ourselves as more than a mom and pop shop south of Stillwater.”

