

Bringing Design Innovation to Point-of-Sale

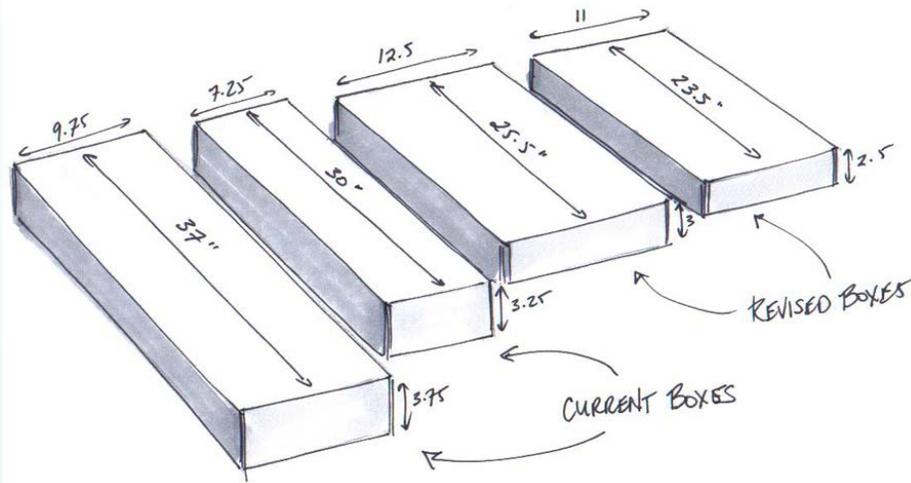
Company: Woodscape artKits
Website: www.woodscapeartkits.com
Designer: Stacey Gay, ACIDO

NICHE MANUFACTURING IS A CORNERSTONE OF CANADIAN MANUFACTURING. BUT IF OUR ENTREPRENEURIAL SMALL-SCALE PRODUCERS ARE TO SURVIVE IN THE FACE OF OFFSHORE COMPETITION THEY WILL HAVE TO INTRODUCE DESIGN INNOVATION TO PRODUCTION AND MARKETING AS WELL AS NEW PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT.

Like many small manufacturers catering to a specialized clientele, Ottawa-based Woodscape artKits has struggled to reach new customers, keep technology current and prices competitive.

Woodscape artKits has a loyal customer following and the rave reviews keep coming in for their lath art kits made from Balsa wood. The product combines puzzle features with do-it-yourself art and model making. The amateur “artists” who work with the kits produce landscape paintings on wood, which they can display or give away as gifts. Each kit contains the pre-cut slats or “lath” pieces glued to craft paper, as well as paints, a paintbrush, a frame and step-by-step instructions.

Woodscape artKits are sold online, but new customers usually make their first purchase through mass- merchandisers, craft shops and other specialty chains. The artKits concept was conceived by entrepreneurial brother and sister team, David MacDonald and Mary Chandor in 1997 and quickly became popular with seniors. Despite the fans and glowing online testimonials from repeat users, Woodscape has faced numerous challenges in manufacturing the product and in engaging new customers through retail outlets.



The appeal of the craft kits is partly due to the tactile, hands-on nature of the painting and assembly activity, and to the fact that the irregularly textured Balsam wood (imported from Maine) gives each finished landscape a unique look and feel. The challenge for Woodscape co-founder, David MacDonald, has been how to convey this product appeal to potential new customers at point-of sale. MacDonald has developed an in-store wooden merchandising unit to display the product and shipped it to preferred retailers for the all-important fourth quarter, which is when most of the artKits are sold. The merchandiser was costly to produce and distribute and impractical for retailers to store after the Christmas sales period.

Woodscape has also faced problems with the aging laths used to produce the product at the Ottawa manufacturing facility. (To keep costs down and increase productivity, MacDonald previously attempted to manufacture the kits off shore. But product quality suffered, so he resumed production in Ottawa.)

David MacDonald was contemplating these challenges when he met with the Design Advisory Service team. After they visited the production facility and completed a design audit, the team introduced MacDonald to Stacey Gay, ACIDO, an industrial designer with retail experience.

Gay observed that most of the kits were bought by women for their husbands. To attract new customers at point of sale, Woodscape would have to clearly answer the question: What is this? Giving customers the opportunity to

experience the unique appearance of the Balsa wood landscapes in finished form was also important. The challenge was how to address these issues on Woodscape's modest merchandising budget and within the constraints of the typical retail environment.

It was helpful to have a designer with both industrial design and graphic design experience to work on the project. Gay was able to see the touch points for customer engagement through a designer's eyes:

"My observations pointed to the opportunity to present these products to more people by improving the company's retail presence. Bringing a fresh set of eyes to the problem can yield valuable insights" she remarked.

Gay concluded that, while the current freestanding merchandiser had impact when fully stocked, the appeal of the display declined as boxes were sold. Moreover, the cost of producing the merchandiser far outweighed the benefits, particularly since retailers would discard it after the fourth quarter.

From the designer's perspective, engaging potential new buyers presented an opportunity to a) rethink the way the packaging told the artKits story and b)

increase manufacturing efficiencies for Woodscape. Gay observed that the kits were heavy and cumbersome to lift. The women shoppers (who were mostly seniors) would have to shift the kits around to find one they liked and then carry it home. These insights led the designer to recommend a rationalization of product kit sizes and the introduction of more demonstrative and sustainable packaging materials. Both these recommendations could minimize packaging and distribution costs (by reducing the size and weight of the boxes), allow potential customers to handle the kits more easily, and increase the options for effective display.

The designer provided Woodscape with a fully illustrated strategic report that included an in-depth discussion of her recommendations. The next step was up to David MacDonald and his team: to carry the strategy through development, testing and full implementation.

The Design Advisory Service connects innovation-focused SMEs to designers. The program is operated by the Design Industry Advisory Committee and supported by NRC-IRAP.

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