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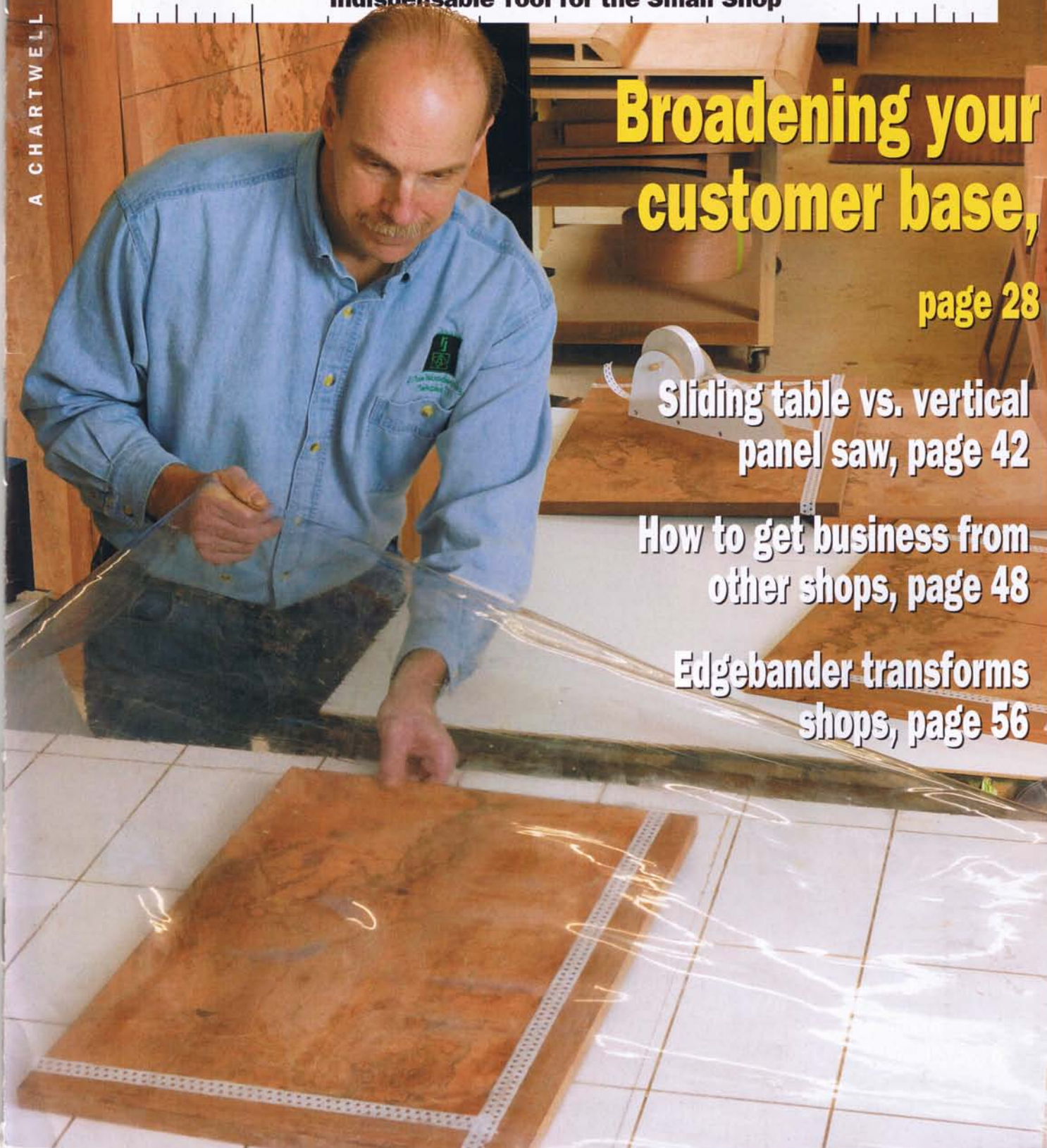
**Broadening your
customer base,**

page 28

**Sliding table vs. vertical
panel saw, page 42**

**How to get business from
other shops, page 48**

**Edgebander transforms
shops, page 56**



Broadening your customer base

Finding many different types of customers helps this Memphis shop owner stay busy — even during an economic downturn

by **Stephanie Steenbergen**
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Six years ago, R.J. Spomer quit a lucrative career as project manager of construction for the Ruby Tuesday restaurant chain to open his one-man custom furniture shop, RJ Fine Woodworking.

Shop Snapshot

Company: RJ Fine Woodworking

Location: Memphis, Tenn.

Founded: 1997

Proprietor: R.J. Spomer

Number of employees: 1 full-time

Annual sales: \$100,000

Web site: www.rjfinewood.com

Primary product: custom residential casework and home furnishings

Key equipment: Powermatic table saw, DeWalt radial-arm saw, Grizzly 20-inch planer, Delta 8-inch jointer, Crescent 16-inch jointer, a Delta bandsaw and Delta drill press, 36-inch American band saw, The Original Saw Co. radial-arm saw, DeWalt 12-inch miter saw, Vacuum Pressing Systems vacuum press, 3-hp Boice and Crane shaper, Boice and Crane orbital spindle sander, Newton edge sander, Delta sanding center, Delta 24-inch scroll saw.

Soon after Spomer entered his new venture, he realized a few questions needed to be answered: Who would his customers be? How would he get them in the door? What would he charge his customers for his work? And, how would he get everything done?

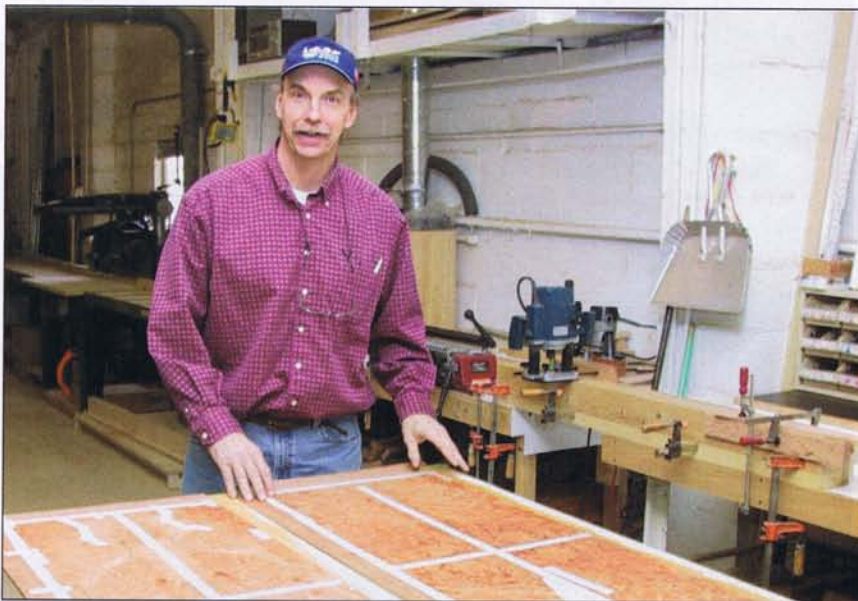
Wide customer base

Spomer determined that he needed a wide customer base. He had a healthy stream of wealthy individuals who wanted custom pieces, but Spomer knew the stream

could dry up at a moment's notice.

Spomer's first move was to begin working with designers. One designer, in particular, had large amounts of work that helped him gain a solid start in the custom furniture business. She has remained a loyal customer; Spomer will soon build a cash register station for her business.

Spomer also began to do work for a large architectural design group in downtown Memphis. He recently completed a large installation in the clubhouse of an upscale condo complex located in the downtown area.



One particularly difficult thing R.J. Spomer mastered is use of his vacuum press for veneer work. Here he has taped up veneer for the front of an entertainment center.



Most of Spomer's jobs begin by cutting large sheets of MDF or Baltic birch plywood on his Powermatic table saw.

The Embassy Suites hotel chain also became Spomer's customer. He occasionally makes custom pieces for the entry areas of the hotels.

That's entertainment!

In the search for customers, Spomer also began to work with three local companies that sell high-end large-screen TVs and stereo systems. Customers who purchase the high-end equipment are directed to Spomer when they inquire about where to buy entertainment centers.

A current project is a burlled-front entertainment center that will house a 65-inch TV and stereo equipment.

Surprised by the Internet

The Internet, says Spomer, has become an unanticipated source of customers.

Three years ago, Spomer created a Web site, www.rjfinewood.com. "It started out as a challenge and a place to put pictures of my work," he says. "Then it started being a sales tool."

A couple from Virginia e-mailed him after viewing his work online. They wanted an octagon-shaped table 6 feet in diameter that could fit a leaf. "I did a couple different designs and e-mailed them to the couple. I never spoke to them. It was all communicated by e-mail."

After the transaction was com-

plete, Spomer finally received a call from the couple. "It was the first time they talked to me. The man was so excited. He said the table was beautiful. That opened my eyes to the Internet," he says.

Now, says Spomer, roughly 20 percent of his business comes from the Internet. He says most of the Internet customers have been far from Memphis, but now locals are starting to e-mail with requests for furniture.

All the opportunities Spomer tapped into have provided a broad customer base. Roughly 50 percent

of his business comes from designers who design one-of-a-kind pieces that he creates. Repeat customers, word-of-mouth customers and inquiries from the Yellow Pages make up the rest of his clientele.

What to charge?

Spomer charges customers a design fee, which is 10 percent of the total cost of the piece of furniture. "I'll do a couple designs for them and they'll pick the one they like, and then, at that stage, I'll get a 50 percent deposit. I'll get the materials and get started." Full payment is required upon completion. Spomer outsources crating and delivery of his furniture.

The furniture Spomer produces is expensive, but not too expensive. It's finely built, but it's also highly functional. "I don't make art furniture," he says. It's important to Spomer that people can use what he builds.

Spomer makes a wide range of custom furniture, including dining tables and chairs, beds, desks,

continued



High-end veneer work like this fireplace surround is a regular feature of the projects handled by RJ Fine Woodworking, Memphis, Tenn. Owner R.J. Spomer emphasizes variety in his customers and his work.

Broadening your base

armoires and nightstands. People often come to him for custom work because their houses are so large. Regular furniture from the store often looks too small in the sizeable rooms. So he ends up building extra-long dining tables and oversize entertainment centers for rooms and walls that need larger furniture.

Mastering new techniques

Spomer's knowledge of woodworking is almost innate. He grew up learning the basics of woodworking beside his father who was a contractor and a woodworker. But being in business as a custom furniture maker has forced him to learn a few techniques that his dad didn't teach him.

Two particularly difficult things Spomer mastered include finishing and use of his vacuum press for veneer work. "The vacuum pressing was a big hurdle," he says.

Spomer acquired his veneering skills by talking to professionals and practicing. "You talk to people and ask questions. Some people won't give you all of their secrets, but they'll give you enough that you can try to figure it out," he says.

Finishing, Spomer learned, is an art form. Here, too, he bent the ears



To give uniformity to the veneer he's using, Spomer takes a router to the edge of the veneer to make all the pieces even.

of many people who have been finishing wood for years. He used the Internet and made use of the forums available to those who want to learn more about woodworking. He learned a lot, he says, from Internet conversations with a man who had been finishing furniture for 30 years.

Staying small

Spomer plans to keep his business small because he has dealt with the hassles of running a larger com-

pany, and he prefers the simplicity of a small business. He's looking for one employee. He says he'd like to hire one other person for part-time work.

Because he plans to stay small, Spomer sees no reason to adopt CNC technology into his shop. He says a CNC router is not conducive to the type of custom work he does. "I could be wrong, but I don't see where I would really use a CNC router. Most of my stuff is really built on the bench ... I don't see where CNC would be a real money-maker for me."

"Right now," says Spomer, "I have as much equipment as I need to produce what I can." His equipment includes a Powermatic table saw, an AM widebelt sander, a DeWalt radial-arm saw, a Grizzly 20-inch planer, a Delta 8-inch jointer, a Crescent 16-inch jointer, a Delta bandsaw, a Delta drill press, a 36 inch Yates American band saw, The Original radial-arm saw, a 12-inch DeWalt miter saw, a Vacuum Pressing Systems vacuum press, a 3-hp Boice and Crane shaper, a Boice and Crane orbital spindle sander, a Newton Edge Sander, a Delta sanding center,

continued



Spomer's Newton edge sander comes in handy here as he sands the leg of a side table that will resemble a Stickley piece when finished.

Broadening your base

and a Delta 24-inch scroll saw.

"I like to give new life to old tools," says Spomer. He says he enjoys rebuilding and using tools that were dormant for years.

Spomer says there's one piece of

equipment he can't imagine being without. "What's really saved the most time is the widebelt sander," he says. "You can't run a shop without a widebelt sander." The quality of his sanding jobs greatly improved when

he added a widebelt sander to his shop, Spomer says.

One man, many jobs

The most difficult part of being a one-man shop, says Spomer, is finding the time to produce work. He does his own bookkeeping, PR work and marketing. He also meets with clients and designers and schedules deliveries. It's difficult to find time for all these activities when there's furniture to be built.

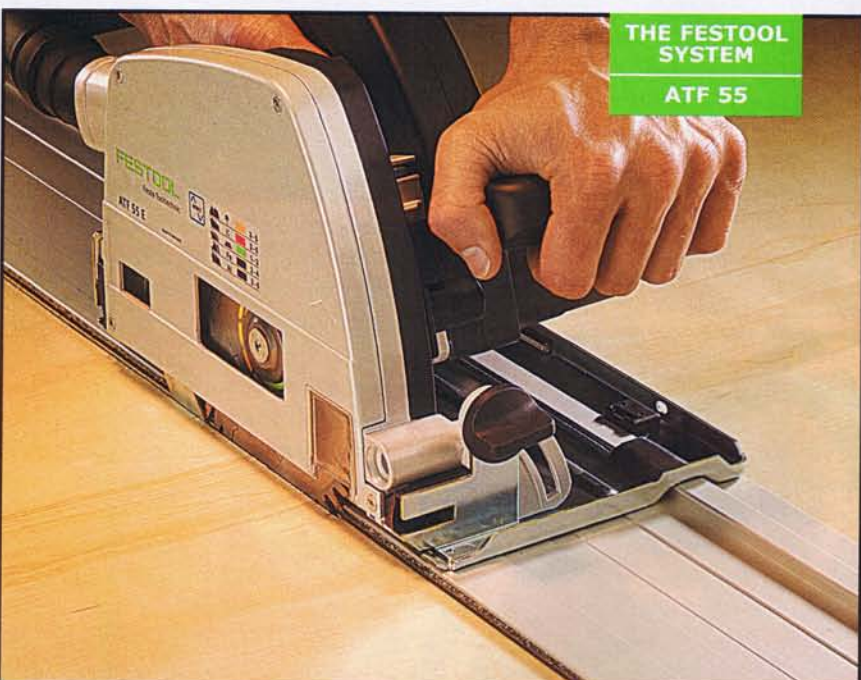
"The biggest hassle is managing your time," Spomer says. "You've got to be a self-starter. The other thing is you can be a self-starter and not be producing like you're supposed to be."

The solution for Spomer is that he's in the shop seven days per week. The weekends are usually spent catching up or doing projects for his own house.

Sweet success

Success has come, says Spomer, because he's open to doing different things and he's unabashed about asking knowledgeable people for help when he needs it.

Spomer thinks being trustworthy is also important. "I come across as honest. I think a lot of people see that, and they'll take that. When you come to a custom furniture shop, you don't have anything to see. Hopefully it will look like the pictures that this guy did, but you've got to be able to trust the person. I think a lot of it is that they trust me." □



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