



Five decades and several generations of the Lange family have seen Best Home Furnishings build its global reputation as a custom furniture manufacturer.

Best in Show(room) Ferdinand Furniture Maker Celebrates 50 Years

By Matt L. Ottinger

Company: Best Home Furnishings
Address: One Best Drive, Ferdinand
Telephone: (812) 367-1761
Web site: www.besthf.com
Management: Brian Lange, president and Glenn Lange, CEO
Employees: More than 850

History:

Eric Vollmer, sales and marketing specialist, tells the story of the company's founding like a legend that's been passed down through generations. He explains how Clem Lange started the business 50 years ago after pooling money with several fellow workers who believed they had the prospects of a successful chair-making operation. That group eventually dwindled down to two eager fellows.

"It was rough starting out, so they resorted to reupholstering seats, old chairs – basically anything they could do to find some work," Vollmer regales. "But they decided if they could develop a high quality product with a large selection of fabrics, they could develop a niche of custom orders. From there, they started growing and growing and really haven't had a down year since."

The company remains in the Lange family, three generations deep, with family members comprising the executive team. President Brian Lange says the family bought out the other founder's share in 1987.

What they do:

Best Home Furnishings manufactures custom furniture. Take a tour of the production facility, and a visitor is informed that just about every piece being crafted has already been sold. The company sells its products in around 30 countries and does about \$230 million in sales annually.

"When I started in 1985, it was relatively easy," Brian Lange recalls. "Everything was domestically done and you bought everything in the United States. Now it's definitely a global market, so we're buying fabric, leather and wood components from all over the world. It makes it more challenging, but it's interesting because you have imports coming in. That's why we wanted to get quicker on delivery – to compete with what Asia has to offer."



BEST HOME FURNISHINGS

Process:

While speed of delivery and production are critical factors at Best, quality remains just as important. Production is streamlined so any flaws in fabric are quickly pinpointed and any error gets the piece sent directly back to the line it came from. And although each of its 50 sewers prepare fabric for 40 chairs per shift, two samples of each sewer’s work are audited daily.

Vollmer asserts that quality is what separates Best from cheaper imports. He expresses that efforts are constantly underway to develop best practices.

“You might have heard of ISO 9000 quality management,” he says. “Well, we created ‘Best 9000’ standards to document work. ... Why we came up with our own standards is because we’re a little different than a lot of companies that do this. We’re constantly evolving to become more efficient, and we’re constantly looking at our manufacturing processes.”

The company also has Southern Indiana operations in Paoli, Jasper and Cannelton. Additionally, Best has acquired a facility in Leland, Mississippi that primarily produces office and health care-related furniture – although it currently does business under a different brand.

A material world:

Walking through the production facility could leave an interior designer speechless with the seemingly limitless options for redecoration. Best has about 27,000 rolls of fabric on hand. Fitting, as the company offers more than 100,000 products and has over 700 fabrics available. Additionally, its leather cutting capacity is about 2,000 hides per week.

“The leather is imported,” offers Keith Waninger, fabric and cutting operations manager. “It’s not that we don’t like American cows, but here in the United States we have barbed wire and bugs. But overseas and in Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay they have free range; there’s no scarring of the hide or bug bites, which is all bad for furniture building.”

Sales:

Best sells its products via dealers and retailers, and does not sell directly online. The company has salespeople throughout the world.

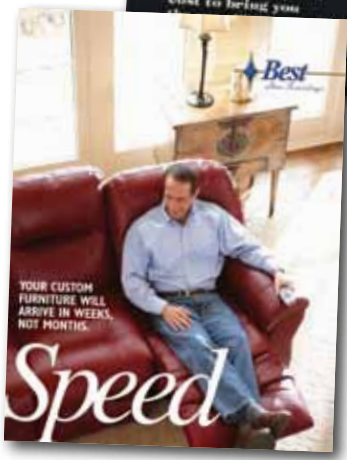
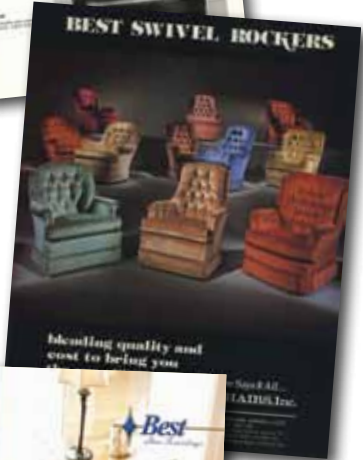
“We started selling online a little when it first started, but we’ve found that people like to feel, touch and see the product,” Brian Lange qualifies. “It’s kind of hard to buy a sofa online because you don’t know how comfortable it is or the feel of the fabric. But there is some furniture being sold online, and we’re investigating that for the future.”

Innovation:

A stroll through the company’s on-site showroom puts one in the mood to nap, with a bevy of comfortable chairs in view. Case in point: An unsuspecting football viewer could be engulfed in comfort by the company’s unique chair known as The Beast™.



Like the pieces of an intricate puzzle, workers at Best’s Ferdinand production facility build chairs for customers around the world.



Created in 2003, it's heralded as the largest recliner in the industry and can accommodate up to 400 pounds.

Best's Storytime Series™ holds the leading market share in nursery seating, providing new parents with furniture most suitable in look and feel. The company also produces a chair that reclines to a full horizontal position.



President Brian Lange explains how the business has thrived by focusing on quality and speed of delivery.

Furthermore, Best has a commitment to the environment. The company constantly searches for ways to reuse its waste materials. For example, Waninger illustrates how a bow hunting target maker located across the street from its headquarters now uses Best's leftover padding in its targets. Additionally, the business' web site actually boasts 35 unique ways it uses environmentally-conscious procedures in its manufacturing.

Challenges:

When asked about challenges that are prevalent in the industry, Brian Lange declares that Best Home Furnishings hasn't been plagued with too many hardships.

"We've always been successful in keeping overhead and costs low," he informs. "We did have a downturn (during the recession of 2009), but didn't have to lay off our associates or employees here. We've lost some but it was through attrition, but that comes with any manufacturing facility. The main challenge is competing with what imports have to offer."

All told, he feels fortunate to call Ferdinand home and believes it benefits the business because of its central location, wood availability and access to a skilled workforce.

Additional facts:

- Best's 50 sewers have over 500 years of combined experience
- Upholsterers average about 17 years of experience
- Its machines run about 22 hours per day
- Best is one of the few furniture makers left that still uses hardwoods, with poplar and soft maple being the most popular choices