

# Resourcefulness Can Conquer Size

How smaller window and door makers can approach production and information challenges

By Ron Crowl, Fenetech, Inc.

Any major business investment creates issues and challenges for businesses of all sizes. For smaller window and door makers looking to automate production and improve the flow of information throughout their business, here are three:

- > Do smaller window and door makers have it tougher than their larger competitors do?
- > Is choosing and implementing an integrated fenestration system more difficult?
- > Do smaller companies have advantages that can pay big dividends sooner and later, provided they do the right things now?

The answers, in my experience, are yes, yes, and yes. What are the right things to do now to improve production and communication within your business and with your customers? We will get to those. But first, let's address each of the three questions above.

## IT'S NOT EASY BEING SMALL

No business has a guaranteed future. More than 90 percent of all businesses fail within five years. Nor is growth guaranteed. According to Dun & Bradstreet, only 11 percent of all companies in the United States have more than \$5 million in sales.

Manufacturing companies tend to have higher revenues across all categories than non-manufacturing businesses. But the bottom line is the same: Business can be tough, even when times are good. And the smaller your window and door business, the scarier each day can be. With cash tight and people and equipment worked to the max, any stress, including a sudden surge in orders, can be fatal. So yes, it is tougher and scarier to be small. Especially when doing nothing can be more dangerous than doing something.

The good news about fear is that it motivates smaller companies to put all their thoughts and energy into getting and delivering the next order. The bad news is that focusing exclusively on the day-to-day exposes your business to

much more devastating surprises. Miss one sale or disappoint a customer on one order, and you can go try to win a new account or offer a refund. Wake one morning to find that you are no longer competitive on quality, features, service, or price, and you face a much more challenging and long-term recovery.

Sometimes, there are gaps in the road ahead much too wide to simply jump. To get to the other side, you have to build a bridge. And if you haven't forced yourself to look up lately, you'll be falling before you realize it's time to order the girders and bolts. The need or desire to implement an



After being in business for about five years, Sunrise Windows went looking for a manufacturing system with a well-defined list of goals, reports Gary Delman. "We're looking to it to help us get to the next level."

integrated window and door production and information system presents such a gap. Why? Because while installing such a system can be done successfully in a few months, most companies spend one to three years on evaluation, selection, and implementation.



Kevin Knotts, left, and Mike Rosa of ViWinTech report that bringing in a manufacturing system has a real impact on the way the company is able to service its customers. "When a customer calls, we can answer right away," Rosa notes. "That gives the customer more confidence in your company."

### RESOURCES VERSUS RESOURCEFULNESS

Anyone who's run even a very small business for long recognizes the need for organization and systems, not just to survive, but also if you wish to thrive. This creates a particular challenge for small manufacturers like window and door makers. You can develop manual systems. You can create some spreadsheets and databases. You can hire a local programmer to do some things for you. And these systems can work when you're small enough that you can easily get answers from the person at the next desk or with a brief trip to the plant floor.

But coordinated control of the overall production process remains elusive. Eventually, your business outgrows your systems. At the same time, the benefits of existing and proven integrated solutions—reduced errors and waste and improved efficiency, plus far more accurate order status information—become increasingly attractive.

But not free. This type of software typically cost tens of thousands of dollars. Then there are hardware upgrades, machine and accounting interface costs, and training and support—plus the time you and your employees will spend during the whole process. That can be discouraging, and many small fenestration companies feel they lack the resources to make this or any improvement that requires substantial time, money, and commitment to implement.

If you're wavering, perhaps the benefits seem unclear or inapplicable to your particular situation. Or it could be that the system you're evaluating isn't right for your needs. And certainly, you can find companies that have suffered unre-

warding experiences with software. But you will also find others who have found the right integrated process automation and information system for their businesses, systems that allow them to make products, serve customers, and maneuver their business the way they want. In these situations, it is likely they received a return on their investment within an acceptable period. Limited resources are an obstacle, not just in paying for a fenestration manufacturing system, but also in freeing up the time and resources not only to implement it right, but also to learn how to get the most from it.

### GROWTH IS COMPETITIVE

If you're convinced that an integrated fenestration system will benefit your business, then how you think about and use your current resources—your resourcefulness—matters more than how much and many you have. Why? Because most of your growth is going to come at someone else's expense. Unless you're different or better, why would buyers risk switching?

That was Gary Delman's approach with Sunrise Windows in Temperance, MI. After being in business for about five years, he went looking for a new fenestration production control system. "Selling to specialty remodelers, we knew we had to be more efficient to grow," he states. "We outgrew our existing software and realized we had to upgrade our information systems to accelerate the growth of our business."

Through the selection process, his team was "able to really define how we wanted things to operate and flow to make sure we were going to be doing things the best way possible." But they didn't stop with efficiency: "We're looking to it to help us get to the next level, as something that helps us improve what we already knew we needed to improve," Delman explains.

### PRODUCTION CHALLENGES FOR WINDOW MAKERS

Every window and door maker faces basic manufacturing and operational issues: errors, inflexibility, inefficiency, and waste, plus the inability to view key business measures or provide immediate and accurate order information to customers. But typically, you can't price, schedule, or make the windows you want how or when you want; it takes too long and costs too much to make each unit; miscues happen everywhere from pricing to scheduling to cutting to assembly to shipping; your staff has to re-enter the same data throughout the process; and the only way to determine order status is to physically go and find it. And you can't tell how much all this is costing you.

## Common Fenestration Manufacturing and Business Challenges

- > High employee turnover and training costs
- > Time-consuming and inflexible pricing, order entry, scheduling, and production
- > Production and shipping errors from miscommunications
- > High material waste rates
- > Customer information system is non-real time with “bi-pedal” updates
- > Inflexible manufacturing process
- > Multiple re-entry of the same data into non-integrated systems
- > Inaccurate inventory status, over stocking, out of critical materials
- > Cash tied up in high work-in-process inventory
- > Multiple non-integrated systems
- > Isolated work cells
- > Lengthy order to delivery cycles
- > Lack of material routing system
- > Too many fixture changes
- > Losing production expertise when employees leave
- > Machines requiring constant manual reset
- > Estimating, inventory, and invoicing information does not flow between front office and plant systems, must be manually reentered.

Do smaller fenestration customers suffer more from these than their larger competitors do? As noted before, not necessarily when you're very small. But as you grow or try to grow, the lack of organized and efficient systems can become painfully apparent.

That was something that the people at Vinyl Window Technologies in Paducah, KY, made plans to avoid. “Five years ago, we set out to grow,” says Mike Rosa, plant manager. “We had been a contract manufacturer, but dropped that relationship and launched our own line. From the beginning, our customers loved the special features in our windows,” he states. “We had a vision, a plan, and a market. But as demand went up, we knew we had to have a better production system, one that would enable us to maintain quality and delivery standards as we grew. We needed to be able to track shipments, to be mostly paperless, to have less waste and fewer mix-ups.”

With an integrated system now installed, ViWinTech sees the impact in servicing customers. “We're more efficient. Orders are more predictable and faster. We get real-time information and status, even whether a unit has been wrapped. When a customer calls,” Rosa states, “we can answer right away. That gives the customer more confidence in your company. It lets them know you have a solid company and can handle their business.”

With this type of infrastructure, the vinyl window manufacturer is prepared to move forward. “We feel like we can compete head-to-head with bigger companies,” Rosa adds. “And our sales are nearly doubling each year.”

### THE GOOD NEWS FOR SMALLER MANUFACTURERS

If the list of challenges seems monumental, there is plenty of good news here for smaller companies. Any company addressing their production and information problems also has opportunities to create competitive advantages, to increase their possibilities. Feeling as if it has less to lose, a smaller company can aggressively pursue possibilities and come out farther ahead. Also, a smaller company typically begins with a cleaner slate. Most often, it's looking

to replace inexpensive systems it has clearly outgrown. On the other hand, larger companies sometimes are replacing an expensive system with irreconcilable shortcomings, a more painful prospect.

In addition, smaller companies sometimes, but not

always, can make decisions and implement a new system much quicker. There are fewer people to persuade. For example, when a group of industry veterans opened the doors at Vista Window Co. in Warren, OH, everyone was on the same page. “Our plan was to create from the ground up the ultimate close-to-the-customer window company,” explains Ron Mascarella, general manager. “We wanted to have the shortest lead times, the cleanest product, and the most fantastic customer service.”

It placed a high priority on its systems from the beginning. “Your



Formed in 2001 by a team of industry veterans, Vista Window looked for a completely integrated system from the start, reports Ron Mascarella. “Your manufacturing software is as important as your equipment, because it does as much or more for you.”

manufacturing software is as important as your equipment, because it does as much or more for you,” Mascarella continues. “We needed a system that could take all our knowledge and build it in, one that would adapt to our way of making windows—not us to it.”

## Implementation Success

Changing something as fundamental as how you make product takes time and varying amounts of suffering, depending on your situation. You want to get it right.

So how should a smaller window and door maker proceed?

- Have a clear understanding of your business.
- Know the problems you want to fix.
- Have an idea of the advantages you'd like to create.
- Talk to lots of others who've been through the process.
- Learn as much as you can about the available applications.
- Ask for a clear written explanation of the availability and cost of implementation assistance and post-sales support and service.  
The provider should utilize repeatable and documented practices.
- Make sure you know in advance who will take care of integration with your works cells, equipment, and existing accounting and inventory systems.
- Be sure the system you choose can grow with you.
- Expect bumps. You're changing how you do business.
- Have an open mind to the possibilities.
- Implement in phases.
- Don't turn off your old system until the new one is working.

Assuming you've chosen the right software, the most important issues are implementation assistance and ongoing support and training. All your time and money is wasted if your system is installed improperly or you never grasp how to make it work effectively.

Vista demanded that its new system be “totally integrated from order entry to shipping,” he adds. “Without that, we'd be putting the wrong window on the wrong truck like everybody else.” He advises other companies to avoid compromises. “When your software starts limiting what you can do, it's time to get rid of that software. If you start out with the wrong choice, you will pay for it later.”

Are the benefits real? The right system gives even the smallest company choices in how to compete, profit, and grow—on delivery, quality, options, price, or whatever works for you in your market. And it lets you see how you're doing even on an hourly basis, so you can respond to new developments and make the adjustments that can make all the difference in the success of your business.

What's the biggest limitation for smaller window and door manufacturers? Lack of resources. What's the best way to get past that limitation? Grow profitably. What's the biggest obstacle to growth? Lack of systems. What's the obstacle to having good systems? Resourcefulness: The motivation to identify and implement assets and systems that move your business forward.

There is no one right way to run a business. But if success is a matter of percentages, and the game often won by a small margin, you want the percentages on your side. The right integrated fenestration system can do that for you.

What's the biggest advantage for a smaller business? The unlimited capability to be resourceful. ☐

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