

It's never too hot in this kitchen

Family-run Fabritec has grown from a one-man basement operation to an \$80-million enterprise with 400 employees

BY PAUL DELEAN, THE GAZETTE JUNE 30, 2009



Clovis Bourgeois (second from left) has built a successful kitchen cabinet business based in St. Jean sur Richelieu with his wife Yvette (in white) and children (from left) Patrick, Nadia and Jonathan that supplies Réno Dépot, Rona and Home Depot.

Photograph by: Marie-France Coallier, The Gazette

Deliver it when you said you would.

That's been the cardinal rule of business for Clovis Bourgeois and his family, one that's helped propel his kitchen-cabinet business, Fabritec, from a one-man operation in his basement to a four-plant, 400-employee enterprise with annual sales of almost \$80 million.

"If you told the client 'two weeks,' respect that. Service is a big part of our story," said Bourgeois, 63.

"We're often the last ones in during a renovation. The clients are waiting; they're fed up at that point. It's important to be there on time so (the contractor) can finish up," adds son Jonathan, 32, now a vice-president in the family business that also employs his mother, Yvette, sister Nadia, 26, and brother Patrick, 37.

Fabritec is Quebec's largest kitchen-cabinet maker with a long list of clients that includes big-box stores like Réno-Dépot, Rona and Home Depot Canada (for whom it was "supplier of the year" in 2008).

But Clovis Bourgeois did not initially intend to become a manufacturer. The Napier-ville native was content selling other people's cabinets, doors and windows from his home as a freelance distributor in the early '80s. Then the recession hit, and within a year, all three Quebec companies he represented had collapsed.

With his suppliers gone, Bourgeois decided to start manufacturing himself, renting a small space and starting Centre de Cuisine St. Jean with five employees. Wife Yvette took charge of the books and appointments.

"I'm primarily a salesman," Bourgeois said, "but I know how to surround myself with competent people."

Centre de Cuisine St. Jean soon hatched similar centres in Granby and Brossard, subsequently sold to Bourgeois's brother and brother-in-law, respectively.

The company's first bold move came in the 1990s when it took over a Granby company, Armoires Ranger, that already was supplying Réno-Dépot. Fabritec subsequently bought a couple of its suppliers, Canboard in Mont Joli, and doormaker Nova Thermofusion in Longueuil, as a way of ensuring timely delivery of components and quality control.

The company's biggest coup was buying Cuisine Expert, the kitchen-cabinet division of bath products manufacturer MAAX Inc., in 2006, transferring production to St. Jean from Laval and acquiring its Boiseries Imperial door-making plant in Cookshire.

The purchase doubled Fabritec's annual sales and provided a strong book of Canadian business in the mid-to-high end of the market, at a time when the rising loonie and U.S. recession were taking a significant bite out of U.S. sales and Chinese imports had taken over the budget segment of the market.

Canadian sales have since shifted from 40 per cent of total revenues to 90 per cent, with eight trucks a day departing St. Jean for points as far as Halifax and Vancouver.

The company actually made a profit in 2008, despite the economic headwinds, and this year hasn't been bad, either, in part because of the home-renovation incentives offered by both the federal and provincial governments.

But Bourgeois hasn't given up on the U.S., and is looking at different ways of increasing business there. Fabritec recently signed on as supplier of a ready-to-assemble line for Home Depot in the U.S.

"Our growth in the next few years will be in the U.S.," he said. "We'll be solidly set up when the U.S. recovers."

After 37 years at the helm, Bourgeois admits he's starting to tire of the day-to-day grind and is poised to start transferring responsibility. But he couldn't be prouder of the company he built.

"I did what I wanted to do," he said. "If I died tomorrow, I'd have succeeded at my job."

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