

# WOODdigest

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## Solving the Custom Cabinetry Jigsaw Puzzle

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Building high-end custom cabinetry can be a challenge. Building high-end custom cabinetry in Manhattan can be an even bigger challenge. But it is a challenge husband and wife business partners Felix and Lisa Hendrickson were willing to take on, and a challenge they have taken on in full force.

Building custom cabinetry was not always the career Felix had planned on. He has a background in the fine arts, and in college he majored in sculpture, often working with wood. He learned the cabinet trade while living in Texas working as a musician. "When things were slow, I would go to work for the cabinet shops, and eventually the cabinet shops just sort of took over," Felix says. "It was a happy accident.

"I was temporary and was brought into help sweep the shop, and it just took off very quickly from there. I had an eye for it and the skill sets to use the machines."

After 10 years of living in Texas, Felix decided to return to New York, where much of his family still lived.

"When the urge strikes to move back to New York, there's not a whole lot you can do. You've just got to move," he says.

Upon returning, Felix worked as a project manager in a cabinet shop. In 2003, the owner of the shop in which he was working decided to move out of state, after 10 years of working in the New York market. Felix bought the machines from the owner and opened Hendrickson Custom Cabinetry (HCC). In the beginning the shop had five employees and Felix, but in 2004 Felix's wife Lisa joined the team.

Lisa added a new aspect to the business, having a background in marketing and business strategy. Adding Lisa to the mix has allowed for HCC to grow.

"She's added a whole additional dimension to the business, one that has allowed us to grow very quickly," Felix says. "She's put business systems in place, whether it's accounting systems or HR systems or an employee handbook, building a really nice website, things that larger companies have at their disposal."



*Photo By Photo by Martha Granger Photography*

**Felix Hendrickson opened Hendrickson Custom Cabinetry in 2003 as a high-end custom cabinet shop. His wife Lisa joined the company in 2004.**



*Photo By Photo by Martha Granger Photography*

**Hendrickson Custom Cabinets does much of its work in Manhattan, which puts a multitude of restrictions on installation, most notably the time allowed to complete the project.**



*Photo By Photo by Martha Granger Photography*

**Hendrickson Custom Cabinetry uses a five step methodology to ensure**

Today, HCC has 14 employees and three times the business they had three years ago. The Hendricksons attribute much of their growth to their investment in Microvellum software and machinery.

“We’ve been making a lot of improvements and investments in software and investments in machinery to reduce our lead time and improve our quality,” Felix says. “In the mean time, every decision we make about adding a piece of machinery or an investment in the business has to bring improved quality with reduced lead times and vice versa. If you really make the right choices, those two things go hand in hand.”

### **Five-step methodology**

For each job, HCC follows a five-step methodology. The methodology takes the project from choosing raw material through installation. The steps are used to help define the process HCC uses to gather its information and how it disseminates the information, Felix says.

“Everything we make is custom. So much of what we do is just processing information in verbal form, in written form and in graphic form on the drawings,” Felix says. “We find that really defining our process and clearly delineating what goes into those steps in our methodology — what goes into each bucket if you will — helps us organize and helps us keep things from falling through the cracks, so to speak.”

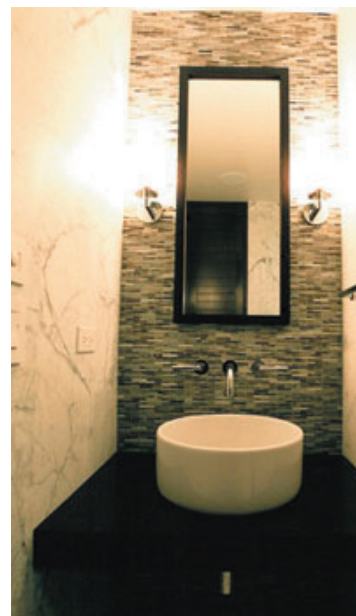
The first step of the process is drafting. The information gathering that takes place in this step is critical. “Because we are a custom one off, we never make the same product twice, so the information gathering is critical to our process — whether that is physical dimensions and verifying or working with a contractor if the walls aren’t up,” Lisa says. “What information can we get that we can pass along into our blueprints, so that our guys — once we release this to the floor — have something they can really chew on. So much time gets lost if we don’t have the appropriate information.”

The second step, and essentially the heart of the process, is raw material selection. Currently, Felix personally picks out the materials for every job HCC takes on. A large portion of the jobs the shop gets uses exotic veneers, which require extra care in choosing the raw materials. “Really, the success of those projects — the success of any project — really begins in the raw material selection and how we lay out the room,” Felix says.

One reason Felix personally takes on the selection task himself is because HCC’s customers are a picky bunch, with high expectations. “We really work with the crème de le crème of Manhattan,” Lisa says.

“Really, talk about high expectation people. These people don’t want to see defect. These people will not pay for defect. So, it’s part of our own survival strategy in a way; besides that, it is a nice service. We just

installation goes smoothly.



*Photo By Photo by Martha Granger Photography*

**HCC will often have hardware delivered to the jobsite to avoid the hassle of leaving its own truck on the busy streets of New York City.**

can't have someone else pick stuff up and deliver it and say 'oh, OK this is totally fine for you guys, and you should take this,' because it doesn't work that way."

The job makes it to the shop floor in the third step. HCC uses a SCM Sandya widebelt sander, two Alterndorf F-45 sliding table saws, an Ott edgebander, a SAC planer and a SAC jointer in the shop.

The company is currently in the process of implementing and furthering lean principles into their production process. Most projects are worked on by a team of HCC employees. "What we tell people is, this stuff is really made by a team of people before the installation happens," Lisa says. "You can see their name on the back of the pieces. You know exactly who made each item, each product. There's a lot of love and affection that goes in there."

The jobs then make their way to the finishing department for the fourth step, where Kremlin finishing equipment is used. HCC custom mixes all of its finishes and will match to anything the customer can imagine, Lisa explains. "We consult with our clients because we've done the hard work of hand-picking the veneer," she says. "We want to make sure the finish is completely appropriate for the wood they have picked. Why go and pick this really beautiful veneer if you're going to go and do a totally black stain on it; that doesn't make sense."

Once the finishing is done, it is time to bring the product to the customer for installation. Installation is the most challenging of the steps for HCC, the Hendricksons say. The importance of the first four steps really comes into play when it is time to install, especially the information gathering.

"So much time gets lost if we don't have the appropriate information," Lisa says. "The more times the guys have to come back to the office and say 'can you explain this, can you explain this,' we lose critical time."

Installation is the point in the process when the Hendricksons' job starts to look like a jigsaw puzzle. "New York is a unique environment to not only manufacture in, but to have your customers in and deliver to," Lisa says. "You have a very compressed time you can install; buildings are open from 9:00 in the morning to 4:30. There is no overtime. Even if your guys wanted to work overtime, you can't go overtime. Any type of mistake that happens in the shop and is not caught before it goes into the field is a major problem."

### **The puzzle**

Daily time constraints are only the tip of the iceberg. Buildings are beginning to put time constraints on renovations because the real estate market in New York has been so hot. "So many people have been renovating that they have what I would call renovation fatigue in these buildings," Felix says. "The tenants in some of these buildings have lived through three or four renovations in the last 10 years. So now many of the buildings limit it to summer months — Memorial Day to Labor Day. You're talking about doing a several thousand square foot apartment, gutting it completely and redoing it in a full custom environment."

The Hendricksons see the market continuing to go this way, which is why everything they are investing in is focused around shortening HCC's lead times.

The challenge of delivering materials to the jobsite was one that Lisa was not prepared for. "I came from a business software and technology background, so we never had to deal with delivering a product, but in Manhattan you can't park your delivery truck. People are unloading and you're double parked and there's traffic; it's stuff that you never think of," she says.

### **Fitting the pieces together**

How have the Hendricksons solved the problem? HCC has a policy that its delivery trucks always have to keep moving, Lisa explains. "You have to think, there's a stop, there's a stop, drop this off, move this thing, have the people come," she says. "If our truck is not moving, we know we are in trouble. That's just one of the things we know, that our truck has to be in constant motion."

Felix says they make a lot of small deliveries, which alleviates the need to leave the truck parked. "The less time the truck spends on the streets of New York, the better, the more money you save," he says. "We rely on deliveries for just about everything. When we're out installing, often times we call the deli and have them deliver food to us. That way we don't have to wait in the service elevator because the service elevator guys take their breaks. They go to lunch and you can't get out of the building. It's like taking manageable bites. We never deliver more than two days' worth of work for our installers."

Setting up an appointment with the building super to make deliveries is another challenge HCC faces.

Felix and Lisa's dedication to implementing a lean process into their shop has really helped them tackle many of these challenges. They have been able to cut lead times down considerably, which leaves them more time for the installation process.

Before, HCC used to quote lead times of eight to 12 weeks. However, the times are now down to four to six weeks; the goal is three-weeks. "We've gotten this far, there's no reason we can't do a three week kitchen," Felix says.

All of these challenges have helped HCC to become more efficient and sets it apart for other cabinet shops.

"Part of what I think is interesting about what kind of shop we are is most people spend time really thinking about their production methodology, and we do too, but we have the extra added bonus of our delivery methodology, our logistics and how to get our vendors to show up with hardware at the jobsite so we don't have to," Lisa says. "It's a whole different layer and business complexity that you don't see in other cabinet shops. We really are a different animal."