

Newsworthy

Making his stand: Expansions, new hires and a marketing plan bode well for Katahdin Studio Furniture

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John Stass is on the verge of his best year ever.

For the first time in his company's 12-year history, Stass believes Katahdin Studio Furniture will break \$100,000 in sales in 2009.

The high-end woodworker with a shop and showroom on the sixth floor of an old Lewiston mill is already halfway there.

In a tour of the space where textile workers once assembled shoes, Stass points to equipment added since January. A shop that's doubled in floor space. A retail room where, finally, he can show off merchandise to the occasional visitor. He's even made plans for a second employee. Stass has enough orders to keep himself and head cabinetmaker, James Roy, busy until July.

Photo/David A. Rodgers



John Stass, owner of Katahdin Studio Furniture in Lewiston, is preparing for growth through 2009 and beyond

Stass says he's managed all this with a few fortuitous trade show contacts and by largely letting work come to him. That's going to change in 2009, too.

"We've survived without paying attention," he says. "Now I'm paying attention."

Stass started the business in a potting shed outside his Lewiston home in 1997. He moved into the Hill Mill in 2000 and added Roy, an experienced woodworker, last year. Katahdin Studio Furniture has built a name around sturdy, sometimes whimsical, handmade wood pieces for the music room. Stass offers more than 50 pieces online — guitar stands, piano benches, display cabinets — that range from \$45 to \$6,000. One-third of sales are to repeat customers who are most often serious, amateur musicians. With some exceptions.

"James did seven ukulele stands for Andy Griffith," Stass says. "Of the celebrities we've talked to over the years, he's been the most fun." Just like the good-guy sheriff he played on TV, Stass says.

Together, he and Roy craft 100 to 125 pieces annually. "Almost everything is shipped out of state," he says. "Last year, I don't believe more than four pieces stayed in Maine."

That's why he's especially glad that his largest undertaking to date — a good part of this year's early sales — is staying in town. Katahdin has the contract to outfit part of St. Mary's renovated Maison Marcotte chapel. Stass says the job came through a conversation with St. Mary's Health System CEO Jim Cassidy at the Androscoggin business-to-business trade show last year.

The chapel project and several sheet-music cabinet orders will keep them busy until summer, but Stass said he's been inspired to reach out and grow the business. This economic cycle will thin out competition, as he's seen firsthand: As other woodshops have folded, "We've been able to acquire a lot of the equipment at a fraction of the cost it would have been new."

For nine of the 12 years he's been in business, Stass has had better sales than the year before. 2008 wasn't one of those years. To sustain the momentum of early 2009, and even grow beyond — he's projected 25% to 35% growth in 2010 — it'll mean doing more than running the same two ads in the same two music magazines that he's done for a decade. His plan: Advertise in other magazines, such as home furnishings, get more prototype pieces online, hire a consultant to rework his website and partner with one or two high-end boutiques to set up Katahdin kiosks in their stores by year's end. He'll also introduce a line of home office and bedroom furniture by fall.

"With one employee, soon two, I can't depend upon the luck of the draw," he said. "I have to see myself as a marketer as well as a craftsman."

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