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Montbleau crafts millwork into success

Multiple plants boost Montbleau & Associates' production.

Sales at Montbleau & Associates are going through the roof, as the architectural woodworker's ability to create award-winning, unique and complex projects continues to attract a host of high profile clients, including Google, Facebook, Apple and Amazon.

The company's commercial success in corporate interiors, healthcare and hospitality projects is clearly evident in its exponential sales growth over the past few years, with Montbleau & Associates looking to surpass \$100 million by 2019. Founded in 1980 by Ron Montbleau, the custom woodworking firm specializes in

high-end corporate furniture, casework, paneling, ceilings, millwork and more.

"Montbleau is a highly skilled team of engineers, project managers, and craftsman," said Ron Montbleau. "Our role is to bring projects that are demanding in design, demanding in materials – projects that are high-end in nature – to completion. And the more complex the product, the better we are in the marketplace."

"What distinguishes Montbleau from all the other companies that are in the same marketplace is that we are always looking for the best value of the project," added Ana Rothman, director and vice

president, business development. "It may not be the least expensive product, but we will always be the best value."

The mix of architectural millwork projects has ranged from 1,000-room Las Vegas hotel remodels and casinos, including the MGM Grand, to research labs and healthcare facilities, such as the Lucile Packard Children's Hospital for Stanford University. The company has also done corporate interiors for banks and law offices – even the sea turtle exhibit at Sea World – as well as tenant improvements for high-tech firms in Silicon Valley, including a highly intricate, 3D suspended wood ceiling sculpture, with an undulated

bottom and intersecting, constantly changing angles, currently under construction for Amazon.

“Architectural millwork is many things,” said Ken Cook, president. “It’s not just furniture these days, it’s the casegoods that go into a job, it’s paneling. It’s not only wood, it’s glass, it’s metal, it’s plastic – everything that goes together to create a design intent that the architects and designers are looking for as well as the owners.”

A full-service company, Montbleau & Associates offers preconstruction, estimating, project management, engineering, manufacturing, finishing and installation to clients.

“The challenge is taking someone’s design or concept that’s in their head or on a 2D drawing and bringing it to life,” said Jake Nabors, director of preconstruction.

When done right, the transition from design to finished product “is something that they are always blown away at seeing,” Rothman added.

Manufacturing prowess

Technology is another key component of Montbleau & Associates’ success, and it’s the combination of technology and craftsmanship which helps separate the company from many of its competitors.

“Craftsmanship is part of our DNA,” Rothman said. “Technology enhances the craftsmanship that we work with day-to-day.”

Significant investments have been made recently in new technology and infrastructure. “In the past four years we decided that there’s going to be a significant wave of work in the marketplace, so we wanted to expand and meet



Montbleau & Associates has expanded and invested in technology, such as this 5-axis Biesse CNC.



Ron Montbleau’s passion and drive has made the company a leader in architectural woodworking.

that wave,” Montbleau said.

“Four years ago, we were doing \$20 million a year. This past year we did \$70 million and we’re looking at a goal of \$90-\$100 million this year.”

The company’s first wave of expansion was in Mexico, “where we were able to get the space we needed to pro-

duce our work,” Montbleau said. “This last expansion phase we chose to do in San Diego and bring the jobs here.”

Combined, the company has 187,000 square feet of manufacturing and storage in San Diego, San Jose, Tijuana and Las Vegas. There is also 24,000 square

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Other materials that Montbleau incorporates within its scope of work are glass, metal, and stone countertops, as seen in this Island Hotel bar in Newport Beach, California. Photo: Paul Montbleau



An overview of Montbleau & Associates' operation in Mexico shows the wide range of technology and manufacturing capabilities.

feet of office space, including locations in Los Angeles and Reno.

The manufacturing capabilities at the facilities are similar, giving the company flexibility in job creation while ensuring consistency, said Mark McDade, operations manager. Yet while production in San Diego tends to be more batch processing, the manufacturing in Mexico is designed for flow processing.

At the south facility in Tijuana, panels are cut to size on Schelling beam saws with lasers and bar code capabilities. Of the three panel saws, one is rear loading and two are front loading.

The use of technology is evident throughout the plant, which boasts a five-axis Biesse Rover CNC machining center, plus three Rover CNC routers with nesting capabilities.

“This gives us multiple ways to fabricate products, depending on their complexity,” McDade said.

Complementing the nested-based routers is a Homag Optimat CNC drilling and dowel insertion machine. The company also has in place three edgebanding systems, including a Biesse Stream B single-sided edgebander capable of PUR and hot air/Air Force System invisible seam edgebanding, as well as an IMA Advantage single-side edgebander, and SNX contour bander.

“We do everything from multi-units with a thousand rooms to a one-off reception desk,” McDade said. “It can be curved, it can be flat, it can have angles on it, it can be made out of many materials, or it can be something very simple. It makes it really fun and challenging every single day.”

In addition to its manufacturing

capabilities, what also sets Montbleau & Associates apart from its competitors is the furniture quality finish on products. Along with four Biesse Viet sanders and a Robatech sander, the company utilizes a Makor spray system and Cefla Smartcoater EVO roll coating system for environmentally friendly, UV finishing.

“The finish is the difference between an ugly piece of wood and a beautiful piece of wood,” McDade said. “If you have a really good finish department you can take some pretty simple materials and make them outstanding – and we’re really good at that.”

Additional equipment includes Homag case clamps and a Hocker dust collection system.

Investments have also been made in the recently expanded manufacturing operations in San Diego, including Hocker dust collection and briquetting systems for wood waste management.

Like the south facility, the northern operation is also highly automated. Using software from Ardis, the Biesse Winstore material inventory system can be programmed to efficiently select and transport the correct panels to the Biesse Selco WNT panel saw. Once cut to size, the parts are machined on one of two Biesse Rover CNC machining centers with 5-axis capabilities, and banded on a Biesse Stream single-sided edgebander.

“I’ve always found that machine technology and handcraftsmanship are synchronous – they blend together very well, they play off of each other. The machinery just makes producing high-quality components very simple

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The lush millwork creates a beautiful conference setting at the Pelican Hill Resort in California.



A furniture-quality finish is standard on all of Montbleau & Associates’ products.

– you can do it over and over again, without the variables,” McDade said.

“Variables in any business cost a ton of money, so when you have to stop and fiddle with every single part, even if it’s just for 10 seconds, it adds up really fast. So really good machinery is key to really good production,” he added.

Cook agreed. “With technology we’re able to produce in mass quantity, with a high-end quality,” he said, noting the difficulty a craftsman faces in reproducing parts by hand. “Technology lets us go in and be able to do projects that are 2,000 rooms, 3,000 rooms... multiples,” he added, while keeping costs down and expectations high.

From furniture to fixtures

Since the company’s start in 1980, the product mix has transitioned from custom furniture to yachts, to residential cabinetry and interiors, and from there into corporate interiors. “That’s when architectural woodworking became one of our products,” Montbleau said.

Corporate interiors remain a specialty of the company, which also makes its mark in other commercial areas, including casinos, hotels and healthcare facilities. “Clients come to us because we offer the skill set of craftsmanship and quality. The ability to be able to deliver on time is really important as well, especially in big hotel projects or casinos,” Montbleau added.

“It’s been pretty exciting to see the company grow” in both size and scope, said Laura Everds, CFO, and with very little turnover during the transition. “We have a really good team and they work really well together – that’s important.”



Architectural wood details make for a beautiful view at California’s Wilshire Grand Hotel.
Photo: Paul Montbleau

It starts with the family culture put in place by Montbleau, and it resonates with the estimated 350 people who work there. The company’s locations are rife with multiple generations and longtime employees who have been with the company 10 years or more.

Top on the list is David Zammit, Montbleau & Associates’ first employee and a senior project manager. “The difference at Montbleau is we’re a family, we’re a team. We work as a team, we look out for each other. Even though we’ve grown quite a bit, we’ve always kept that family, team spirit.”

What’s ahead

The future continues to look bright for the team at Montbleau & Associates. “Since we have expanded our facilities and machinery to produce a larger amount/volume of products, we’re looking to marketplaces where they need high-quality, repetitive work,” Montbleau said. He cited high-end

condo towers as a target market.

The company also has been able to parlay its relationships with local clients into projects in other regions.

“I believe that the essence of what we do, that has allowed us to succeed over 38 years, is our commitment to bringing value to our relationships. Our relationships are circular from our employees, our suppliers, our clients – it is a relationship that has to happen in all directions and bringing respect and integrity to those relationships is key to our success,” Montbleau said.

He added, “If I had to describe our company in one sentence, I’d say it would be the commitment to bringing value to our clients and the passion and integrity that we bring to our work every day.

“It’s not an easy job, what we do, and if you don’t have passion for it, if you don’t have heart in it, you won’t succeed. You have to love it – and we do.” **+**