



FILLING A NICHE IN ALUMINUM CABINETS

BY PATRICK LAPINSKI

The Aluminum Cabinet Company is fast becoming one of the nation's premier manufacturers of custom aluminum cabinetry. "I found a niche," says owner and founder Kelly O'Toole, whose business has evolved from outfitting dirt bike and racing trailers to partnerships with companies like renowned fire truck manufacturer Rosenbauer America, in Wyoming, Minnesota. His sleek, smartly designed cabinets have earned his company a solid reputation for quality and craftsmanship.

As word spread and requests for more work kept coming in, O'Toole sub-leased shop space from a local manufacturer and became employee number one; designing, engineering, building, making the parts, doing the powder coating on all his cabinets. Without a big budget or a team of sales representatives, O'Toole did the next best thing, he turned to the internet. He discovered, somewhat

to his surprise, that there were not many companies building the types of cabinets he was creating. He saw an opening and went for it.

"I basically started outsourcing material and prototyping a couple of cabinets before getting together with a friend of mine who builds websites." Two years later, O'Toole incorporated his young enterprise as the Aluminum Cabinet Company.

"I worked with the economic development people located at UMD to write a business plan," explained O'Toole, who says guidance and funding from the Northeast Entrepreneur Fund, the Northland Foundation and Members Cooperative Credit Union, helped him get started. "They took a chance and believed in me, for the niche products that we have, the niche business, and really saw a good need." Since then, the business has seen steady growth.

Translating his designs into something a machine could read and cut out was a bit out of O'Toole's skill

set, so the next logical step was to hire a part-time CAD (computer-aided design) technician. "I was not really computer savvy when it came to the design part because it's a pretty complex design software that is needed for this. That was my weakness," admits O'Toole. Even though he was basically making simple boxes, the dimensions all had slight variations, making the work labor intensive. The transition to computer-aided design moved the business from a hand-built product to a customizable, replicable and machinable output on the factory floor. In the evolution of Aluminum Cabinet, it was a huge step forward.

The Aluminum Cabinet Company still makes cabinets for race and utility trailers. The expanded product line includes custom drawer units, cabinets and countertops for use in shops and garages. "We basically outfit a lot of the customers for whatever application they have," explains O'Toole, vehicles ranging



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- KELLY O'TOOLE, ALUMINUM CABINET COMPANY OWNER AND FOUNDER



Photo courtesy of Aluminum Cabinet Co



from emergency response vehicles to customized outfitting of vans for plumbers, electricians and locksmiths. "Rosenbauer is a big fire truck manufacturer worldwide, and they contacted us about a year and a half ago and now we supply all the drawer units that go on all their fire trucks. It's a product that we kind of designed with them – it's tailor-made for every truck, so each order is a little different."

In 2018, Aluminum Cabinet Company expanded into their own manufacturing facility erected at 4930 Lightning Drive in Hermantown. Once again, O'Toole partnered with the Members Cooperative Credit Union and the Small Business Administration to finance the construction and is grateful for the continued support they have received to grow the business.

"We've been in here for about three years and it's been instrumental in our workflow producing cabinets. We put a new fabrication machine in here that has really helped us get to the next level," says O'Toole. ACC also invested in CNC equipment for milling their cabinet frames and toolbox handles in house, work that was previously outsourced.

"I'm impressed by what he's been able to do over the years by himself, as a privately held company," says business partner and – breaking news – soon to be wife, Andrea

Altmann. "He's done all of this on his own and has invested a lot in this new building, machinery and growing a team of people," says the former Vice President of Telecare and Virtual Care at Essentia Health. "We've created some really good jobs for people. We offer full benefits, good wages and care; dental, vision, retirement with some matching." The Aluminum Cabinet Company currently has 10 full-time employees.

At the end of the day our most valuable resource isn't necessarily all the very expensive equipment, it's the people, says Altmann. "The people are our most valuable resource. We want to provide a work environment that is efficient and satisfying for the team that's putting things together."

Altmann's track record in managing people, marketing and growing programs has added a new dimension to Aluminum Cabinet when she partnered with O'Toole to grow his business, and the web is part of her workplace toolbox.

Since its inception, the Aluminum Cabinet Company have been savvy users of the internet. "I think one of the things is that our website has matured quite a bit now. We've got different segments within the website for the different use cases," says partner Altmann, who believes in having a good web presence.

"Our marketing team does a lot of work with social media. We have a presence on, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn. She says that, although they are Duluth-based, 90 percent of their work comes from outside the Duluth region. "There was a fire helicopter response

company (KIT Helicopter Operations) that we made cabinets for, and we blogged a nice story about that. Our website content has really evolved so that we have a lot of pictures on there so that people can say 'I've got a garage I want to do, let's go look and see what Aluminum Cabinet Company has.'"

"What gets me excited is the new customers that we seem to have every week," says Altmann. "Just seeing what the specific needs that they have is exciting for us; is it a mobile medical van? Is it a locksmith van? Is it some other unique use case and of course, how did they find us?"

The sky is the limit says O'Toole as the company forges ahead. "We just received some feedback from a dealer in Florida who is going to start selling our cabinetry for race trailers and custom garages," says O'Toole. "When he opened up the crate of display cabinets we sent him he was blown away by everything that we sent. It well exceeded his expectations. We're really proud of everything that goes out the door, and it shows because our customers are very happy with what they get and we stand behind all of our products."

The Aluminum Cabinet Company was recently honored as the "2023 Rookie of the Year," at the Minneapolis Home and Garden Show, as they expand into another potential market, the home consumer, as this small company continues making big strides forward. **D**

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- ANDREA ALTMANN, BUSINESS PARTNER