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“Shed builder manufactures opportunity”

What happens when an Amish craftsman and entrepreneur adds “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition”-like touches to ordinary sheds and playhouses? The result is Steve Stoltzfus’ Homestead Structures, an enterprise that has successfully carved out a niche in a crowded market.

The company, based in New Holland, PA, designs and handcrafts structures, such as storage sheds, potting sheds, pool houses and garages. Clients can choose to customize their order by adding everything from potting benches and ceiling fans to cupolas and weathervanes.

They also offer a variety of playhouses, including one model designed to look like a general store. The Homestead craftsmen can also create playhouses that replicate a client’s home or office building. For those seeking a top-of-the-line reproduction, the playhouses can be wired for electricity and Internet access.

Homestead Structures was launched in 2003 when Steve began to look for a venture that would supplement his family’s dairy farm income. He decided shed construction would be a good match—even though he had no prior experience—because it was an activity in which his children could become involved as they grew older.

Despite the advantages, one challenge for the entrepreneur has been the number of competitors. With dozens of shed builders in the company’s home base of Lancaster County, Steve says the biggest challenge is staying ahead of the competition. “They’re always right behind us, especially in this economy. Other [companies] are becoming more willing to customize product.”

Brainstorming is one way the entrepreneur produces the ideas that help differentiate Homestead Structures from the competition. During one session, a unique idea was proposed: invite clients who ordered a structure to stay overnight in a guest room on the family farm.

Known as the Homestead Guesthouse, it’s an authentic Amish bed and breakfast, where clients can milk cows alongside family members, take a buggy ride, or watch as craftsmen build their shed. Steve says the bed and breakfast offer turns the act of ordering a shed into a memorable experience.

Steve's success has also been fueled by support from his family. He credits his wife, Martha, with managing the dairy farm while he operates the shed business. "Because of her involvement and interest, it helped me stay focused on moving ahead and expanding," he says.

He has also found support in SCORE Lancaster, a mentoring group that provides workshops and counseling for emerging and existing small businesses. Several word-of-mouth referrals prompted Steve to contact SCORE. Working with counselor Dave Templeton, Steve was able to analyze core business information, such as profit and loss reports, cost tracking and profit margins. They also worked together to create a strategic plan that would guide Homestead Structures through its growth. Dave was particularly helpful because he owns and operates two businesses of his own.

"It's helped me a lot of ways, having a more experienced person come in from outside the business who is able to see the things you might miss because you're in the thick of it day in and day out," Steve says. "He really helped me become a better business owner."

The proof is in the numbers. Homestead Structures has experienced double-digit growth and has maintained good profit margins despite the downturn in the economy. This entrepreneur's blend of old-world craftsmanship and new-world business savvy has created a business that's as successful as it is unique.

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