

“We can do it”



Modern needs well-rounded woodworkers, able to do everything from sawing to finishing to final assembly.

Hardip and Sujit Rai have the same answer for every challenge they meet in life. As young men on a farm in Mirpur, a tiny village in the Jalandhar district of India's Punjab state, the brothers were given the chance to emigrate to Canada when their uncle arranged for Hardip to marry his Canadian friend's daughter. Arriving in Canada in the middle of the early-'90s recession, they got a chance to learn woodworking on the job at Value Woodworking in Bolton, Ont., and Can-Pride in Toronto. According to Sujit, when he met resistance to his ideas for improving processes at Can-Pride he left the company and created an opportunity to open his own shop.

Now both brothers operate Modern Kitchen and Woodworking out of a cramped industrial unit in Mississauga, Ont. Having moved beyond doing kitchens for their friends and relatives in the local Sikh community, they are seeing increasing demand

throughout the Greater Toronto Area for their innovative custom cabinetry and face an opportunity to increase their business rapidly. Each of these opportunities has been met with the same confident answer from this energetic duo: "We can do it."

Sujit runs the production side of the business and Hardip the sales and front-office work. Neither of them came to Canada with any training in woodworking. But even back in India, Sujit was recognized for his mechanical ability and often called on to fix things without any parts or proper tools. "They took a risk," he remembers. "Sometimes I fixed it; sometimes it never worked again." His abilities found more fertile soil in Canada, and his successes here have boosted his confidence. "This is the talent God gave me," he says. "Show me any pictures of a design and I can make it right away, like that. It is not a big deal to me."

Sujit has used his comfort with improvising to save costs in the shop and take risks other custom kitchen manufacturers might shy away from. The only stand-alone equipment is a table saw, an edgebander and a bank of manual hardware drills. Most of the work is done by hand by him, two employees and his father, who the brothers sponsored to come to Canada to help out in the shop.

Despite limited resources, Modern Kitchens has produced some very trendy work with innovative storage solutions using the latest hardware. A Toronto condo got robin's-egg blue European-style boxes with slab doors and a high-gloss finish, sprayed by hand right in the shop. Another kitchen wall unit featured a concealed, floor-to-ceiling door that opens into a walk-in pantry. A narrow closet included banks of drawers on either side cleverly designed to open without interfering with each other. When a larger kitchen manufacturer



nnovative European-style kitchens made here.



Hardip handles the sales and estimating side of the business.



Sujit has been able to get creative with colours and finishes because Hardip has located some work in

got an order for face-frame cabinets it did not want to fill, the Rais jumped at the chance to try something new. Now they get ongoing subcontract business from that company whenever it needs to supply face-frame.

When Modern Kitchen started out, the brothers were able to get off the ground with business from their network of contacts in the Mississauga Sikh community. The Punjab Sports Club is a focal point for Sikhs to watch and play kabaddi, a sport combining elements of tag, wrestling and pearl-diving. The Rais started there, spreading the word of their new business and offering good deals to new customers. A few years later, they were approached by a contractor in Brampton who was fed up with his cabinet supplier. He was so happy with Modern Kitchen's work he has never gone back. This man is Portuguese and has referred the Rais to a lot of business in the local Portuguese community. Modern Kitchen

relies mostly on referral and word-of-mouth. Sujit says customers are always happy to refer them or offer repeat business because he will not leave any job until it meets their satisfaction in every respect.

The physical location has not played a big role in Modern Kitchen's branding and promotion; it is a nondescript industrial unit with the front window festooned with real estate listings, signs that would be at home on a used car and some deteriorating vertical blinds. The showroom has some nice examples of the brothers' work, but is poorly lit and cluttered with dozens of door samples. The rest of the shop is so jammed with supplies and work-in-progress it is sometimes like walking through a tunnel. In contrast to all this, the website is slick and modern, with an attractive slide show introduction, well-organized descriptions of the company's services and large galleries of high-quality photos. The

website was designed by Desi Connection, a web portal for south Asian businesses. Their listing on that site is the closest thing to advertising Modern Kitchen does.

Hardip says his lead times are now getting as far out as four and five months and it is time to start looking at expansion. Two years from now he wants to be in a facility twice the size with a large showroom and CNC equipment. Sujit says the brothers have run their business in accordance with a Sikh saying that roughly translates as "Do not get too big for your clothes." In everything, they have proceeded in careful steps, refusing to overextend themselves or invest where they cannot see a clear return. Even with this conservative philosophy, Modern Kitchen and Woodworking finds itself at a point where aggressive growth is the plan for the future. 