

Persistence pays off for accidental manufacturer

Owner of D.L.M. Manufacturing sees \$1 million in sales last year.

By ANNA VOELKER
Rockford Register Star

Three banks turned down Duntai Mathews when he wanted to buy a Rockford wood manufacturing business in 2000. Others laughed at his business plan.

Instead of feeling rejected, the 34-year-old Rockford native asked each person what they didn't like about his plan, and he jotted their comments in a notebook. He also noted what people liked about his plan.

"When I would look at the list of pros and cons, everything would be cons," said Mathews, who had worked at the company, Expressions in Wood, since 1993.

"All that made me strong. I was going to hang in there. I was not going to give up even as these banks closed their doors on me."

Mathews retooled his plan, and eventually people started to buy into it. Last spring, he bought the assets of the 20-year-old business for an undisclosed amount and renamed it D.L.M. Manufacturing. In September, he paid \$80,900 for the building off Kilburn Avenue in northwest Rockford.

Since then, Mathews has doubled his staff to 15. Last year sales were at \$1 million.

Ten years ago, Mathews never imagined he would run a company, a manufacturing one at that.

In 1993, he returned to Rockford because he had run out of money in college, where he was studying mass communications. He found a job at Expressions in Wood as a shipping and receiving clerk and quickly proved he could manage people and the business. In 1995, he became production and shipping manager. Two years later, he was assistant plant manager.

His boss soon put Mathews on the road selling. Mathews met with old and new clients. He finally got a meeting with the company's biggest restaurant client, McDonald's.

"It took a year for me to meet with corporate, but it gave me an opportunity to put a suit on," Mathews joked. "I was trying for a price increase. They didn't want to talk price. They wanted to talk about how we could help each other."

He worked out a deal with McDonald's to make the fast-food giant's wooden holders for napkins, straws and newspapers. McDonald's now makes up 30 percent of Mathews' business.

"McDonald's has a very positive working relationship with Duntai Mathews and his company," said Jill Marquardt, McDonald's purchasing manager.

"He's an entrepreneur who's worked hard to be where he is today, which is reflected in the craftsmanship and quality of work in his company's products."

Mathews' company also makes wood pieces for children's and library furniture assembled by Gressco in Waunakee, Wis. About half of Mathews' business is with Gressco.

"He's an individual, and he doesn't take no for an answer," said Dan Kujawski, Gressco's purchasing manager. "If he wants to do something, he'll find a way. He had a lot of hoops to get through. A lot would have quit."

In 2000, Mathews' boss offered to sell his top employee the business. Then the headaches of finding capital began. Rick Wiermanski, vice president of business banking at Associated Bank in Rockford, said Mathews' persistence paid off.

"He was going to need to be realistic," Wiermanski said. "It was going to take a number of parties coming together. He was thinking too big, but he got with a consultant to help him and had him look at things in a way the people he was trying to sell to could understand better. It finally came together."

Mathews also took out loans through the city of Rockford, Riverside Community Bank and Rockford Local Development Corp.

Mathews' uncle, Joslyn Hanserd, pitched in collateral and owns 15 percent of the company. He lives in Atlanta.

"I would like to continue to grow in the restaurant chains and get our products in each one and, possibly, in the future get involved in the hotel, motel business," said Mathews, who frequently travels trying to attract new clients.

"I also am trying to get into stores like The Home Depot, Wal-Mart and with companies like Coca-Cola."

Wiermanski said it was the first time in his 25-year banking career that he had worked with someone as persistent as Mathews. Often, borrowers give up after the second attempt at getting a loan.

"He gets people to buy into things," Wiermanski said. "He's quite a salesman. He got us all on board."

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Profile: Duntai Mathews

- **Age:** 34
- **Job:** Owner, D.L.M. Manufacturing
- **Education:** Attended Morris Brown College, Atlanta; Morehouse University, Atlanta; Triton College, Chicago. Graduated from Rockford East High School, 1987
- **Family:** Wife, Kimberly; five children, Shereka Knuckles, 19; Corey Knuckles, 16; Justin Francis, 15; Shataivia Shaw, 13; and Joyous Mathews, 6.
- **Hometown and residence:** Rockford
- **Activities:** Singing, playing basketball and spending time with family.
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Profile: D.L.M. Manufacturing

- **Address:** 919 Taylor St., Rockford
- **Products:** Wood pieces for restaurant condiment holders, newspaper racks and children's furniture.
- **Company type:** Private
- **Employees:** 15
- **Sales:** \$1 million 2003, no change over 2002



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