

Working smarter, not harder

To run a small family business for a period of over 28 years, there has to be some passion for it. A Class Kitchens, based in the northern Melbourne suburb of Campbellfield, follows a simple path of success: customer focus, high quality products and superior service. In order to stay on track to keep up with the industry's demands, the company has recently invested in a nesting cell from Homag Australia.

Becoming a cabinetmaker was a long-held dream for Ralph Giardina, founder and owner of A Class Kitchens. The French-born entrepreneur, who first came to Australia with his family at the age of 10 and moved back again to France as a teenager, had returned to Australia to realise his dream of becoming a cabinetmaker. The year was 1981, and life was starting to take shape, with Mr Giardina commencing an apprenticeship to learn the trade as a cabinetmaker. By 1986, having established himself in the industry, and now married and the father of a young son, he founded his own company.

Now, 28 years later, son Andrew has grown up and is slowly taking over the company. A goal both father and son have worked towards for some time. This change in the business is supported by the recent investment in a Vantage 100 / 612 – a nesting machine from German CNC specialist Weeke, part of the Homag Group. Sometimes it takes the drive and courage from the younger generation to make new investments. "I made that step because of him," Mr Giardina says, and points to son Andrew. "I didn't want him to be here at first, but now I am happy because he is full of passion to gradually grow the business – and I can slowly start planning my retirement."

Investment in nesting solutions

While 54 year old Giardina wants more and more to stay away from the business, son Andrew is focussed on increasing

volume and improving quality. Therefore, nesting was the obvious step to increase production.

When investing in an addition to their existing panel saw and competitor-supplied edgebander, the Giardina's knew they preferred a German machine. "The Weeke was always in our minds," Andrew Giardina admits. "We were also looking into equipment from Asia but it's not comparable at all. You can tell the difference by simply running the machine. It's all so smooth. Homag convinced us with their quality and reputation."

Father and son had been debating over the size of the machine required for their 400 square metre factory, remembers Homag Australia's technical sales executive Simon Vowles; as the Vantage 100 is available in two different sizes. Finally, they decided to purchase the bigger Vantage 612 with a working table size of 1850mm x 3700mm, which allows them greater flexibility regarding sheet sizes. "With the Weeke, it opens a lot more opportunities to us, starting from rounded panelling or cutting shapes. We can do any type of work now and supply flat pack kitchens in a higher volume," Andrew Giardina explains.

The Weeke Vantage 100 offers German made quality and capacity even to newcomers to CNC processing. The 100 series is likewise available as a fully integrated nesting cell with loading, unloading and label printing. Perfectly suitable for nesting of cabinets, the Vantage also cuts plastic materials and aluminium. By providing customers with not only kitchens but also wardrobes of different material, A Class Kitchens earns the trust of customers, who then recommend their services. "It's all about word-of-mouth," Mr Giardina says. With their down-to-earth mentality, the Giardina family knows about good customer management. "We make an effort to visit every client, or at least invite them to our showroom. The customer always comes first."

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Increased efficiency

Nowadays, smaller kitchen manufacturers in particular, are facing increasing costs for labour and resources. To meet the challenges of the manufacturing process, A Class Kitchens decided on a new investment in machinery and software. Achieving more cutting and drilling, the Weeke Vantage 100 was the best solution for the company.

"The efficiency of the Weeke comes mainly from the twin digital servo drives providing a great vector speed up to 96m/min as well as a very fast tool changing system with 14 places," explains Homag Australia's Simon Vowles. "Also, it uses energy efficiently through high vacuum performances and simultaneously low power consumption. For example, an energy saving mode on the controller automatically shuts down when not processing." At least twice the weight of many of its competitors, the Weeke is completed with electronic surveillance of all stops, 12 hp (9kW) HSK routing spindle, a vertical drilling block with 12 spindles and the appropriate software. The whole working area of the machine can be reached with all processing tools without any restrictions.

Mr Giardina is also very pleased with the safety functions of Weeke: robust fencing, light barriers, electronic monitoring of all stops, automatic tool loading and measuring from the front of the machine. Furthermore, the entrepreneur explains how the nesting cell changes the efficiency for his daily business: "Instead of spending too much time at the machine, I can answer phone calls and see more customers." Thus, the investment will pay off.

From hand-drawn sketches to 3D images

Times change and opportunities change with them. While the Giardina's still provide hand draw images to their clients, more and more customers ask for 3D images at the same

time. In order to keep up with the industry, the young Giardina had pushed his father into an additional investment on software to create 3D sketches.

The standard software package of the Weeke Vantage 100 includes the design software WoodWOP, a tool database, production list software, machine data recording, MCC and a 3D simulation that allows time calculation and collision check. Regarding the quality of his products, Andrew Giardina has noticed a huge difference: "Thanks to the Weeke there are no visible chips on the white board anymore, and sheets are cut precisely 100 per cent square. Everything looks nice and clean."

When it comes to quality, Andrew Giardina understands his father's high attention to detail. "He is very picky and I have to make sure everything is up to his standard," son Andrew says. Father Ralph Giardina adds with a smile: "I have to be that critical because it all comes back to me in the end. I am very happy with the way Andrew has developed. He is very polite to our customers and understands technical instructions much better than I do." Using computer-driven software still seems too hard for Ralph Giardina, so he assigns most of the tasks regarding new technology to son Andrew, who praises Homag's support: "They have all been very helpful to us and we received hassle-free software training."

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A Class Kitchens' showroom might not be the biggest one but just enough to show a wide range of materials that they supply.



► A changing future

After moving the factory twice and employing two more tradesmen, Ralph Giardina is satisfied with the development of his business. "We are doing well. We have seen many others closing down their business due to bad management or spending money on quality cars rather than on quality machines. But who knows where we will be in ten years?" Son Andrew believes in the future of A Class Kitchens when looking at their newest and biggest investment ever made: "Now I hope to grow the company a little and employ more staff so I can stay away from the tools. I'd rather work smarter than harder."

Back in the 70s when father Ralph returned to France and worked as a baker for six years, no one would have imagined how things would develop. Ralph Giardina decided to quit his job to become a cabinetmaker in Australia and joined his older brother John - a cabinetmaker by trade - in the business he ran at that time. While the other three Giardina brothers stayed in France - John and Ralph both set up their businesses successively in Melbourne. The rest, as they say, is history.

With family still in Europe, Ralph Giardina has always been inspired to travel overseas. He visits design shows or trade fairs to check on the latest trends in European kitchen designs. "They produce a much higher quality finish than we do here in Australia. The kitchens are smaller but much more expensive." The entrepreneur sees the market, especially in Melbourne, shifting from large to smaller apartment kitchens, which forms a new and welcome challenge for A Class Kitchens.

No matter how much the kitchen industry has changed in the past, one thing may never change for the Giardina family: the passion for creating great kitchens and cabinets.

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