



## From NIMBY to IMBY



“Community Futures has been an important part of OLM’s growth success. They were there at the start when I moved the business out of the garage, helping me purchase a laminating machine that we still use today. Community Futures has provided two additional timely loans that have helped us expand over the years.”

### OLM Brings Do-It-Yourself Outdoor Furniture To The Masses

“Do It Yourself.” Those three words strike fear like no others into the hearts of homeowners around the world.

Where countless tradesmen and psychologists have capitalized on this terror to make a living off it, 19 years ago Penticton-based Outdoor Living Manufacturing Ltd (OLM) saw an opportunity to build a business that would eliminate it at the source. OLM’s range of pre-constructed cedar gazebo, pergola, shed, and playhouse product lines empower the hammer challenged to overcome their fear with projects that really can do by themselves.

Like a vast number of businesses, OLM was started in the garage of its owner, Craig Cooke. “I had a wife and two young kids. I needed extra income, and I had a friend in the camping business who needed a camp shower deck,” he says. “So I developed a cedar prototype and sent it to a distributor in San Diego. Before I knew it, I had an order for 1,200 and spent day-and-night building them with the help of a friend and my Dad.”

For Craig, the focus of the business has been as natural as the wood products he uses. “Dad and Grandpa were do-it-yourself-ers. The family was always tinkering. When I was five, I remember helping my grandpa build his house on the ocean in Vancouver, and I took woodworking in high school,” Craig recalls. “I guess the experience of my youth stuck with me.”

Today, OLM’s 30 employees generate \$3 million in annual sales and produce 50 DIY kits made out of Western Red Cedar in a 20,000 square foot manufacturing facility. The foundation for that facility is Craig’s keen sense of what is needed to make a business successful: a focus on quality, a focus on customer satisfaction, and an inventive spirit that always looks for ways to make processes more efficient.

“We don’t skimp on grade, and our customers appreciate that,” Craig says. “We take pride that someone who doesn’t know a hammer from a nail can build our products – only needing a drill and a screw gun, and a hammer to

tack things in place. We have many contact points with customers during the DIY process, and we've spent a lot of time on our instruction manuals to leave no question unanswered."

Success can often come from seeing opportunity in unforeseen challenges. The U.S. implementation of the softwood lumber duty in 2000 tested the company's foundations, but it also forced the company to value-add wood material and create today's line of outdoor cedar products. "There are doubts and bad days in any business," Craig says. "But I'm not a 'we can't do it' person. I'm a 'how can we do it' person. If this was easy, everybody would be doing it. Perseverance is huge."

In addition to perseverance, constant innovation is needed to accelerate business success. For OLM that has included use and re-use of raw materials to capture maximum value, and an inventive spirit that can be seen in three press machines Craig has designed to pre-fabricate components. Innovation has also been aided by Community Futures, which provided loans that helped Craig purchase equipment and expand.

"If you follow the path of least resistance, you may not be as successful as you want to be," Craig says. "You need to think about new ways of doing things every day."

Successful businesses look forward. A big boost to the business came when OLM partnered with Outdoor Living Today ([www.outdoorlivingtoday.com](http://www.outdoorlivingtoday.com)) to handle sales, marketing, and the supply line. In addition to creating an online sales presence, the relationship has expanded OLM's retail presence into Costco, Home Depot, Lowes, and Sears. OLM is presently looking at more overseas markets, which already include South Korea and the U.K.

Even with retail expansion and 19 years of history, OLM is still deeply committed to its roots: the direct-to-customer relationship. For example, OLM asks all customers to send photos of their finished project. On the customer "wall of honour" hangs the framed picture of a decorative playhouse that a woman bought for the kids so they could go out and play while she worked at her home-based business. Turns out, the kids now play in the house because the mom loved the playhouse so much she began using it as her work space.

"She's very proud that it's her office," Craig says. "That makes us proud—to fulfill dreams, make people happy, and make their back yards a better place."

"I'm highly motivated by the positive responses we get about our product. I want to create the best product possible and share it with everyone."

Growing communities one idea at a time.

