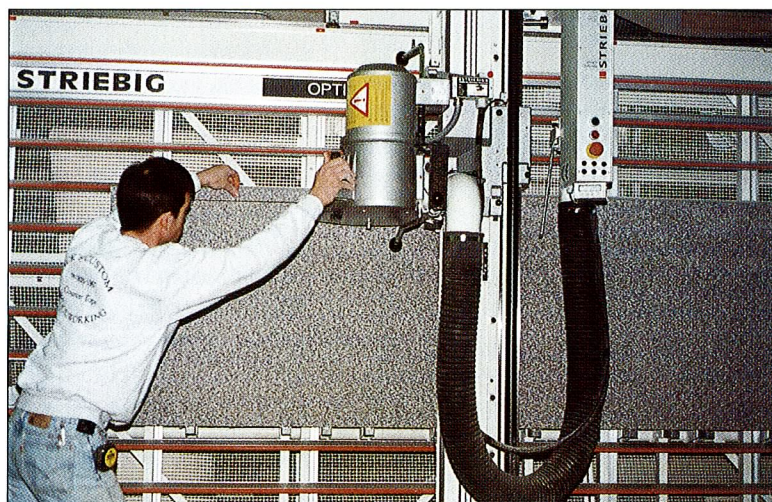




# V-Grooving Solid Surface

Shop saves time, adds customers with new V-grooving system for solid surface countertops

By William Sampson



(top) Using a Striebig Optisaw vertical panel saw equipped with a special cutter, Rob Brabant of Jack's Custom Woodworking can V-groove solid surface material quickly and precisely both vertically and horizontally.

(bottom) The first step in fabricating a countertop is cutting the stock to size on the Striebig Optisaw vertical panel saw. Two saws are in use in the shop: one for cutting stock, the other for V-grooving.

A Massachusetts shop has helped develop a new V-grooving system for solid surface countertops that not only saves hours in the shop, but the owner claims it has boosted sales and even improved employee morale.

If you had made such an all-encompassing claim to Jack Hussey more than a year ago, he probably would have been skeptical. That was when Hussey, the president of Jack's Custom Woodworking in Woburn, MA, began applying his experience and innovative spirit to V-grooving. All he really expected to accomplish was a significant reduction in the time required to make certain countertops. But the new process unexpectedly rewarded him with a host of other benefits that extend well beyond the shop floor.

The new process is a natural outgrowth of Hussey's pioneering involvement with solid surface material. Hussey has been fabricating solid surface countertops since the early 1970s. Tom Young of DuPont Corian contacted Hussey in 1972 to put on some of the first workshops in how to use the material. In the early 1980s, Hussey saw the creative potential as Avonite began offering material in a wider selection of colors. His enthusiasm for solid surface



material led him to drop cabinets and millwork from his shop's repertoire in the mid-1980s. Today, Hussey has two shop locations: one with 15 employees in Woburn, the other with six employees in Windham, ME, and he boasts an annual sales volume of \$2 million, specializing exclusively in wholesale counter-tops.

### Starting to V-groove

Always looking for new ways to improve his business, Hussey became interested in the potential of V-grooving early on. By cutting a V-groove in solid surface material and folding over the edge, you can create a 90-degree mitered joint in far less time than with other methods. The finished joint is nearly invisible, allowing thinner, less expensive material to rival the look of thicker or stacked countertops.

Hussey began his involvement in V-grooving by purchasing two specially designed hand-held routers from Art Betterley Enterprises Inc. Hussey describes that as an "awesome step" to his understanding of V-grooving, and he still uses that equipment in his smaller shop. But another machine inspired Hussey to develop his new technique.

An old 1956 Tannewitz table saw had been the heart of Hussey's shop for years. He and his employees loved the old saw, but Hussey decided a dedicated precision vertical panel saw might be an improvement.

## Shop snapshot

**Company:** Jack's Custom Woodworking

**Location:** Woburn, MA, and Windham, ME

**Proprietor:** John (Jack) A. Hussey Jr.

**Founded:** 1971

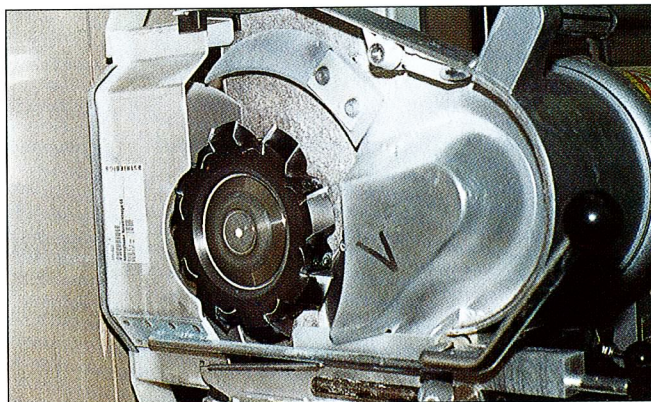
**Primary business:** Solid surface countertops; all wholesale; 60 percent commercial, 40 percent to builders and remodelers.

**Annual sales:** \$2 million

**Employees:** Woburn — 3 in office, 2 in outside sales, 10 in shop; Windham — 1 in sales, 5 in shop.

**Shop size:** Woburn — 8,400 square feet (owned); Windham — 3,000 square feet (leased).

**Key equipment:** 2 Striebig Optisaw vertical panel saws (one set up and dedicated to V-grooving), 1956 Tannewitz table saw, Powermatic 66 table saw, SCMI edge-bander, Powermatic planer.



The heart of the V-grooving system is this special cutter that was jointly developed by Jack's Custom Woodworking and Colonial Saw.

That's when he purchased a Striebig Optisaw from Colonial Saw. The new saw was so effective that Hussey began to wonder about the possibilities of adapting it to do V-grooving.

Working closely with Colonial Saw, Hussey and his lead man in the shop, Rob Brabant, began working on the problem. Quite frankly, Brabant was not entirely sold on the project, and Hussey says he appreciated the critical analysis

that Brabant brought to the development work. First they tried mounting cutters intended for metalworking. "They did a lousy job," says Hussey. Eventually, after a year of "going back and forth with cutters," they designed a special cutter just for V-grooving solid surface material. It could be mounted in the same panel saw that cut the material and then do both horizontal and vertical V-grooving flawlessly.

As good as the results were, Hussey still wasn't satisfied. He decided to add an additional Striebig Optisaw to the shop and dedicate it solely to V-grooving. Some in the shop questioned the investment since it took them less than 10 minutes to change over to the V-grooving cutter.

But Hussey's gamble has paid off. With the two saws set up side-by-side, workers in the shop can easily cut, V-groove, and assemble a basic countertop in as little as 10 minutes. In a recent visit to the shop we saw one worker cut, V-groove, and glue up three countertops in about 20 minutes. In one recent week, Hussey says, the shop built 16 countertops, and the new equipment saved nine full hours of shop time. Once the skeptic, Brabant is now sold on the process, too.

"The people in the shop are enthusiastic about the machines," says Hussey. "It's a nice thing for morale. That's a bonus I didn't imagine."

### Sales tool

The new process is so effective that seeing it has an impact on even the uninitiated, says Hussey, and that translates into an extra benefit. The saw has become a selling tool as well as a production aid. "People are extremely impressed when they see it run," says Hussey. "It will do 12-foot lengths dead accurate." He notes that no elaborate fixtures are



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required to hold the material for cutting and grooving. Gravity does the holding work. The saw is so precise that it cuts a perfect V-groove and still leaves intact the tape secured to the face side of the work to hold the V-grooved piece together and act like a hinge. All that's required to finish the countertop is to apply adhesive, fold up the edge, and secure it with more tape until the adhesive sets.

Of course, not all the work the shop does is V-grooved, and Hussey emphasizes the process is not for everyone. High-end customers frequently still insist on 1-1/2-inch solid tops, stacked countertops, or countertops with radiused corners, all of which don't lend themselves to V-grooving. But those same customers still get a positive impression from the V-grooving equipment, says Hussey. Showing off the equipment to prospective customers helps drive the point home that Hussey's shop is both modern and efficient.

"It's our responsibility to



**(top)** Coming off the saw, the two sides of the V-groove are held together by tape that was applied to the face side of the solid surface material before grooving. Adhesive is then applied to the groove.

**(bottom)** Jack Hussey assists as Rob Brabant uses tape to secure the folded up and glued edges of a V-grooved countertop.

our customers to stay as state-of-the-art in this industry as possible so they don't lose our respect," says Hussey.

Hussey's "state-of-the-art" philosophy contrasts with his humble beginnings.

One of his grandfathers was a mason from Copenhagen; the other was a carpenter from Stockholm. His father was a carpenter too, so Hussey grew up steeped in the trades. He started work

at the age of 14 at a two-man shop in Woburn, MA. Then in April of 1971, he started his own shop literally in his backyard.

"There was a barn where we had horses," Hussey recalls. "We moved out the horses and started building cabinets."

### Early days

It was in those early days that Hussey began laying the foundation for many of the long-term relationships that have characterized his business. He started that shop with Gary Johnson who still works for him, now as the company's head estimator. A number of other employees have stuck with Hussey for the long haul, too, reflecting the success of his simple management philosophy.

"Each individual is an individual," he explains. "I try to be easy-going. If they see the owner or general manager doing the right things, if they're comfortably paid, then they're happy. If they see that the owner spends money in a self-centered way, they don't think

## The future of solid surface

Having worked with solid surface materials since the 1970s, Jack Hussey has a lot to say about changes in the products and the industry as a whole. He remembers how dimensionally unstable early solid surface material was. That was a particular problem for him, operating out of tiny shop in the changing weather of New England. Noting how the work sometimes outgrew his shop in the early days, Hussey wryly advises, "When you're making countertops outside you'd better hope it's a good day."

Today's products have come a long way, he says. Now you can count on consistency, and manufacturers' warran-

ty programs have boosted the support of consumers. He sees manufacturers in general as very supportive of fabricators, and he reserves particularly high praise for DuPont.

"They're the leader of the pack," he says.

But Hussey acknowledges the industry is still changing rapidly. He sees manufacturers trying to drive the price down to the end user, while fabricators are trying to hold the price. That makes fabricators work hard, says Hussey. But he is confident that dynamic operations can keep pace. "Today, we are selling tops for less than we did 10 years ago and with a better margin," he says.



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there's a future."

Although Hussey has an office upstairs in his 8,400-square-foot Woburn facility, you'll rarely find him there. "I'd rather sit at a drafting table in the middle of the floor," he says. "I like that. I think my people like that."

Hussey still thinks of himself as a cabinetmaker, although he stopped building cabinets in the 1980s. He says he's adopted the new challenge of the business side of his operation. By dropping cabinets and focusing on countertops, Hussey opened the doors to his cabinetmaking competition, turning them into his customers. Recently, he expanded his operation by buying an additional shop in Maine. Run by his partner, David Pease, that shop employs five people working in 3,000 square feet of leased space.

Over the years, Hussey has built a solid customer base, emphasizing service. His two sales reps have been in the industry a long time and make a point of regularly visiting and staying in constant touch with all the customers. Any requests for quotes are handled in 48 hours or less. "If we just service our customer base," says Hussey, "we'll grow with the industry."

Located in the Boston metropolitan area, Hussey's primary shop is in a very competitive market. He says there are at least three shops his size going after the same business. But Hussey doesn't view his com-

petitors in any kind of a negative or adversarial way.

"I think my biggest competition is me," he says. "I love outsmarting my competitors on quotes. I get a charge out of that. But my competition is not somebody who I hunt. They keep me on my toes."

## Business strategy

Part of his strategy for competing can be found in the way he bids jobs. He doesn't quote jobs over the phone, and he doesn't price by the foot. He views every job as different, worthy of a carefully considered, unique price. And once that price is quoted, he puts it in writing and stands by it. "There's nothing worse than a surprise when the bill hits the table," he explains.

Another facet of Hussey's business strategy is making it easier for his customers to sell his work. Even though Hussey's operation is exclusively wholesale, he's invested a lot of time, money and floor space into a retail showroom. It features the work of three kitchen cabinet suppliers as well as samples of Hussey's solid surface countertops. The showroom is open during regular busi-



**Although Jack Hussey's business is strictly wholesale, he has developed a retail showroom for the use of his customers.**

ness hours, and Hussey is considering opening it one evening a week. The idea is that it's a place where Hussey's customers can bring their clients to see the work.

"It's for the guy in the pickup truck," Hussey explains. "It's his personal showroom."

As to the future of Jack's Custom Woodworking, Hussey is optimistic. Two of his three children have chosen to join the business. His oldest daughter is now 21 and works full time in the office. His 18-year-old son is working full time in the shop. Hussey says he has always encouraged his children to choose their own way, and in fact, his 17-year-old daughter has embarked on quite another career path. Still, you can hear the pride in Hussey's voice when he talks about his children in his business. "They've always wanted to work for Dad," he says. □