

SAWDUST ETC

A GUIDE TO MAKING A LIVING WOODWORKING



HOW TO MAKE A LIVING WOODWORKING



PREFACE

This guide is what formed the basis for my blog post on the same subject. You can read it here; <https://www.sawdustetc.com/blog/2018/4/27/how-to-make-a-living-from-woodworking>

Alternatively, this PDF is yours to download, print, keep, and share. I hope you get some benefit from it. I'd recommend printing it off and keeping it near your desk. Add your own notes when you learn something new. And please don't be shy about sharing what you learn in the comments section over at www.sawdustetc.com

INTRO

People often ask me— "Can I make a living from woodworking?". The answer is of course yes. Millions across the world do it every day. That doesn't mean it's easy.



When I talk about making a living from woodworking, I'm talking about a genuine, legitimate, full-time business. One that is depended upon for income to pay the mortgage or rent, feed the family, and educate the kids. I'm not talking about a hobby business, or a side hustle that doesn't yet provide a living. Lots of hobbyists (and many full-timers) don't have the mindset outlined below. But from my experience it is needed in order to make a living.

I'm also not talking about someone making a living as a woodworker in full-time employment— a company employee for example. What I reference below is the small to medium sized business owner, employing one to twenty people.

MY EXPERIENCE

I've worked in the woodworking industry for the past eighteen years. I've run my own business for at least ten of those eighteen years. I've learned some things along the way. But this isn't about me. Throughout this post I will reference insights from other woodworkers. I've done some reading on this subject to help crystallise my thoughts for writing this guide. Links to articles that have helped me will be at the end of the guide. They are all well worth a read.

THE GUIDE

1. **KNOW THAT YOU ARE RUNNING A BUSINESS.** This is the most important thing once your livelihood is dependent on woodworking. Business is priority number one. Woodworking is secondary. Closing sales, marketing, etc is now more important than joinery, designs, or finishes. If you don't close those sales, the joinery is irrelevant. You are now a business person first and a woodworker second.
2. **RECOGNISE YOUR EXTRA TASKS.** Once you have accepted the fact that you're a business person, you need to recognise all the tasks you now have to carry out that have nothing to do with woodworking. They include, but are not limited to; customer service, marketing, photography, copy writing, graphics, advertising, publicity, sales, design, purchasing, scheduling, maintenance, shipping, and accounting.
3. **KNOW YOUR COSTS.** Rent, insurance, utilities, waste disposal, tool maintenance, website costs, photography, marketing, advertising, vehicle expenses, fuel, professional services, legal fees, payment processing fees.... The list goes on.
4. **COVER YOUR COSTS.** What you charge for your time needs to cover; all your costs; all your non billable tasks; your holidays; plus your take home wage; plus your taxes; plus a healthy profit to allow you to stay in business. Still think your price = materials + labour x profit? I'm afraid it does not. If you price for just materials, labour, and profit—you do not have a business. You just have a job with no holiday pay, sick pay or benefits.
5. **FILTER.** You need to filter your customers. You won't want to work for everyone that contacts you. Try to put off people who are only interested in cost. This can be done by the language and imagery used on your website and in your literature. Be honest & open with them. If their opening line is "we saw these beautiful cabinets in [insert high end cabinet supplier here], but can't afford them", then they can't afford you either. Clearly outline what goes into making such cabinets. Many customers get the picture quite quickly.
6. **IF YOU WIN EVERY JOB YOU PRICE, YOUR PRICES ARE TOO LOW.**
7. **DON'T APOLOGISE FOR YOUR PRICE.** The price is the price. If you've priced it correctly—how can you possibly give a discount or knock a bit off? You can't. Some people take offence to a perceived high price. But that's not your problem. That's their perception. I never understand anyone being offended by a price. If I walk into a Mercedes dealership, I don't get offended when the salesperson tells me the cost is 100K. That's just a fact. No need to get offended. If someone gets offended at your price, it's nothing to do with you.
8. **DON'T GIVE FREE QUOTATIONS.** Producing a quote for a commercial fit out, or for a domestic kitchen fit out takes a lot of time and effort and shouldn't be done for free. If you are a pro woodworker, you should be able to say to your customer in the initial phone call; "The fit out you are describing to me, sounds like it will cost you somewhere in the region of 30K to 40K. Is this within your budget? If it

is, I can survey the job for you and provide you with a quote. But this quote will cost X amount, which will be deductible from the final amount if I get the contract". If they say no they only have a budget of 10K, you've saved yourself a lot of time and effort. If you can't estimate on the fly, learn to do it. There's a difference between a quote and an estimate.

9. **DON'T VISIT EVERY JOBSITE YOU'RE ASKED TO VISIT.** As above, estimate on the fly, and do this over the phone, or by email, even when the customer has given you a minimal amount of detail. It will save you a lot of time and travel miles.
10. **ALWAYS TAKE 50% UP FRONT.** Why should you finance someone else's project? A customer not willing to pay a 50% deposit, is a customer you don't want. Trust me.
11. **HAVE TEMPLATES FOR EVERYTHING.** Use simple template sheets that help you with pricing, invoicing, and tracking. These will help you complete these tasks in the minimum amount of time possible.
12. **REVIEW EVERY JOB YOU DO.** Track your hours building, making, and fitting. Keep all your material costs, receipts etc in one folder. Then at the end of each job, see if you made a profit. If you don't do this, you have no idea how you're doing. The last job informs the next one.
13. **CHARGE FOR DESIGN.** If design is part of your service, you need to charge for this too. Most woodworkers don't charge. But it's a valuable skill. Imagine an architect, or interior designer not charging for design. Crazy, right? Same applies to you if you have the design skills and don't charge for them.
14. **JUST SAY NO.** Don't be afraid to turn down work that won't make you enough money. It will free you up to get work which *will* make you money. The simple fact is that millions of woodworking customers across the world get products and services that they shouldn't be able to afford. Don't be the sucker that pays for them. There are plenty of great customers out there that can afford to pay, and will gladly pay you what you're worth. Your job as a business owner is to find them.
15. **DON'T FOLLOW THE CROWD.** How often do you see; "No job is too big, no job is too small"? This is bullshit. Lots of jobs are too small, don't bother with them. Similarly, don't over stretch yourself if you're not ready for a large scale job. The stress and the heartache isn't worth it. You can lose your business when you over stretch yourself. Be careful.
16. **REFINE, REFINE, REFINE.** You need to refine your making process like crazy. Be obsessive about it. Constantly analyse how you make things, and how they can be improved and sped up.
17. **INVEST IN YOUR BUSINESS.** Invest in the correct tools that save you making jigs and fixtures. It's worth it.
18. **AVOID MAKING SMALL PIECES**—for the most part. Large tables and cabinets are your friend. Being large, they are perceived by most people as being higher in value. You have less difficulty in marketing their value.
19. **NICHE.** If you can, then narrow your focus. If you make tables all day every day you will become highly skilled, and highly efficient at it, allowing you to provide a

better service. Switching from making tables, to making cabinets, to making doors won't be beneficial.

20. **DIVERSIFY.** To slightly contradict my last point; there are times when you will need to diversify. If you focus on making tables for example, but there is a lull in orders—you may need to offer another service such as making wardrobes. Over a fifty year career, external influences such as the economy will affect your business. You need to be able to adapt quickly. The next recession will come at some stage. What will you do?
21. **SUB-CONTRACT.** Sub-contracting work from a main contractor is a viable option when work slows up. Don't rule it out. Good contractors are always looking for good "subbies".
22. **FOCUS YOUR MARKETING.** If your aim is to build a business doing custom cabinetry, then only advertise this on your website, and literature. But it doesn't mean you can't do other work to pay the bills while you work towards this aim. Keep your eye on the goal though. Say no, and work towards your cabinetry business when you can.
23. **USE TECH TO BRING IN WORK.** If you have no work lined up, and need a contract immediately (as in tomorrow), here is a little trick that has worked for me in the past. Spend \$50-\$100 on google adwords. Run a campaign for a week. Set your google ad to run locally, and pick your keywords carefully. If you have no idea how to use google adwords, use adwords express instead. It's pretty much foolproof. Trust me, if you do it any way right, the phone will ring.
24. **PUT YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD.** Every woodworking business should have a beautiful website that is simple, clear and has beautiful images of your work. Do it yourself if you can, or pay someone, but get it done.
25. **BUILD RELATIONSHIPS.** Build relationships with local interior designers, and local interior architects. They are often looking for good, reliable woodworkers. A good relationship with a handful of designers can mean constant, steady, nice work.
26. **GROW & IMPROVE.** Constantly look to improve your woodworking and business skills. Almost anything can be learned online these days, but there's nothing like taking a class, and learning first-hand. Don't think you know it all. Nobody does. I definitely don't. The points above are just what I've learned so far.

CONCLUSION

Like every industry, some woodworkers do nice work and make a comfortable living while others scrape and struggle. I've been in both situations throughout my career. Woodworking can be an enjoyable and fulfilling career. Set yourself up to win. There are always woodworkers somewhere that are winning. Decide you're going to be one of them.

LINKS

http://www.garyweeks.com/business_making_furniture.htm

<http://www.finewoodworking.com/2014/12/22/how-to-make-a-living-building-furniture>

<http://www.finewoodworking.com/2017/08/14/nancy-hillers-reality-checklist>

<https://www.theenglishwoodworker.com/how-not-to-earn-a-living/>

<http://www.finewoodworking.com/2017/02/22/three-tips-pricing-work>

P.S. Sawdust Etc is a crowdfunded service. We are not a large media company. I am a one-man-show. I'm still on the tools every day as a working joiner. I also work hard to do interviews; curate; design; write; shoot; and edit in order to bring you the best the internet has to offer on modern day woodworking—all in one place. If you'd like to see this service continue and see how you can get access to exclusive extra features—please head on over to the [Sawdust Etc Patreon page](#).

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YOUR NOTES

