

VERMONT WOOD PRODUCTS BRAND MANUAL



A How-to Guide to the Vermont Brand for Wood Products



Prepared by Glenn Ravdin, 2Ns Structural Marketing, with support from the Vermont Council on Rural Development

2006

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: How to Use this Manual	1
The Vermont Brand.....	2
Aligning Vermont Wood Products with the Brand.	5
The Brand and Your Collateral Materials	6
Graphic Elements and the Brand.....	7
The Brand and Advertising	9
Public Relations and the Brand.....	10
The Brand and Trade Shows	11
The Brand and Promotional Sites	12
The Brand and the Shop Tour	13
Enhancing the Vermont Brand.....	14
Resources and Contacts.....	15

Introduction: How to Use this Manual

This is a guide to the Vermont Brand for Wood Products. It is intended to show wood products producers and manufacturers how to apply the brand to their work, how to benefit from the power of the brand, and how to invest in the brand so that it becomes stronger for all of us.


It is not a graphics standards manual with a lot of rules and restrictions. Brands are not tangible like graphics or text, and the Vermont Brand has to be flexible enough to enhance your own brand without getting in the way. When you feel the Vermont brand conflicts with your own, be true to yourself.

The purpose of this manual is to connect you with those expectations and perceptions of your customers that are set because you have chosen to set up shop in Vermont. These have physical, functional and emotional facets – customers buy based on how it looks, how it works, and how they feel about it on a personal level. Once you understand how they view you, you can better create the ideal customer experience for buyers of your work.

Our brand is intangible and exists only in the minds of our customers and people familiar with Vermont. Since customers often interrelate with many Vermont things, the brand for Vermont cheese and Vermont as a tourist destination reflect on the brand for Vermont wood products. It is one of the strongest, most positive place-related brands in the world.

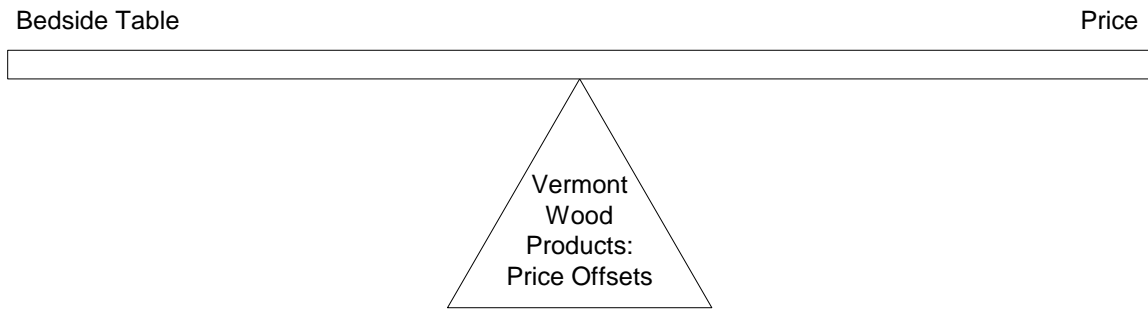
Think, for a moment, about moving somewhere else. All the reasons you choose to stay and work and live here are part of the Vermont brand. Visitors get a brief taste of it while they are here...that's why they come again and again. Buyers of Vermont wood products get it when they buy and again each time they enjoy them. They all want to feel connected to this place.

Do nothing but put the name Vermont on your products and you will benefit from the Vermont brand. Wrap yourself in it and work hard to build it, and the Vermont brand can withstand threats to the industry, both domestically and internationally. We can succeed in the face of competition as long as we are true to the brand and make sure it works hard for all of us. In any industry, there is always room at the top.

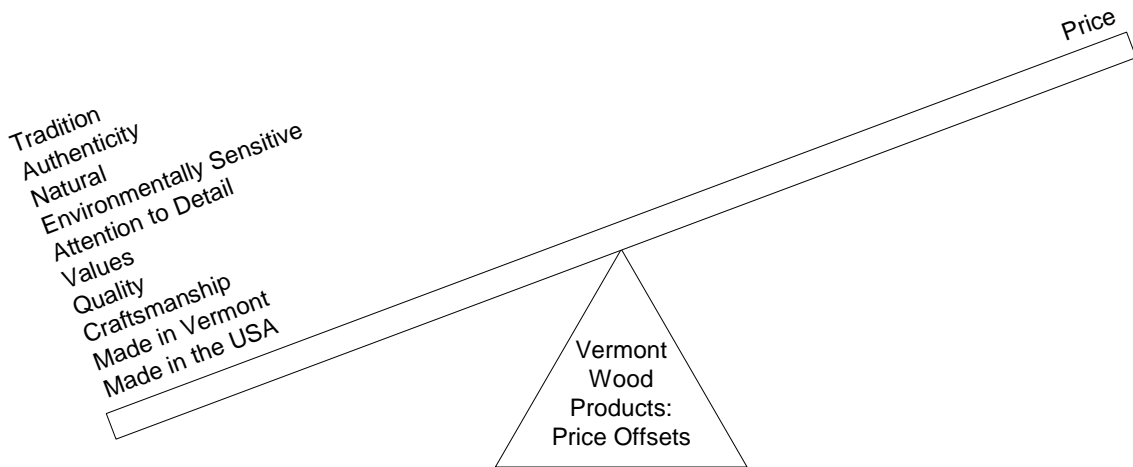
Thank you for your continued commitment to Vermont, to crafting your living from wood, and to the wood products producers who share this great place with you. 

The Vermont Brand

The concern we hear most often is about how we are being driven out of business by price pressures from Asia and elsewhere. While this is true, in large measure it is due to how we market ourselves. We must come to the understanding that we cannot compete on a commodity basis – so many dollars for a bedside table.



The Vermont brand gives you much more to talk about...and to justify a higher price:



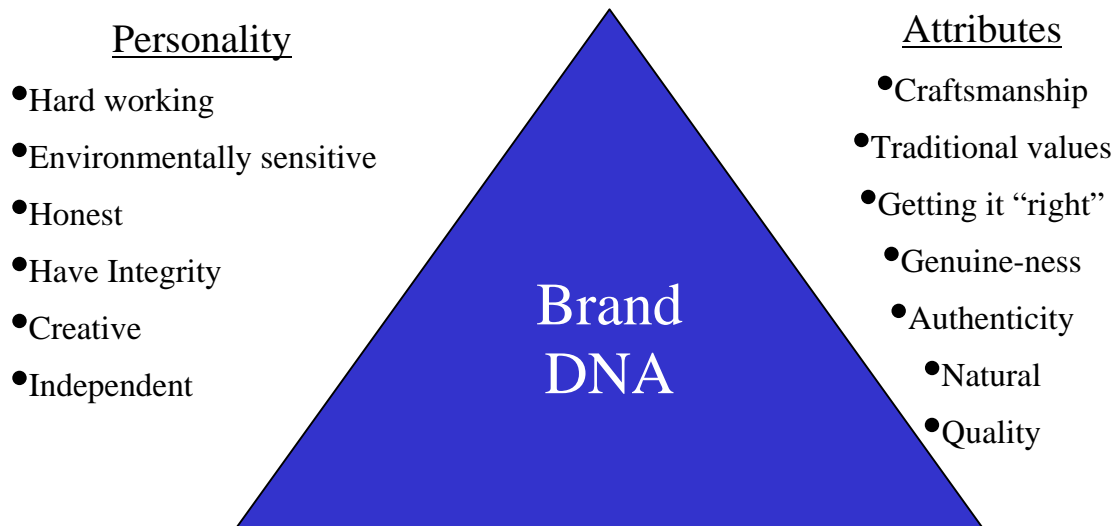
The sum total of these qualities cannot be found anywhere else...in fact, the vast majority of American manufacturers can't live up to these perceptions, which is one reason they are finding it hard to compete with Asian manufacturers. When you tell people your products are made in Vermont, these are the qualities that instantly come into their mind and which they automatically associate with you. This is what we call **Consumer Shorthand**, and it is added to all the qualities and perceptions your company's brand already communicates.

These perceptions are just scratching the surface of the market's affiliation with Vermont. They represent people's physical and functional relationship with Vermont products, but the power lies in stimulating people's emotional connection to the brand.

- If people can't live here, they want to become as connected to Vermont as possible:
 - They miss at home what they think we have in Vermont in terms of quality of life – they envy us and what they see as an ideal lifestyle.
 - They want to help “preserve” Vermont and our way of life.
 - They feel pride when they see Vermont products in their local stores, in the catalogs they receive, and in the products they buy and use.
- Vermont gives people a profound sense of well being...it makes people feel more alive and more engaged in the important aspects of life and living.

You've all felt a connection to the wood...using your smoothing plane on a tabletop then running your hand over the silky surface – that same connection to your work is what you need to foster in customers and the brand makes that possible. People want to have the same feeling when they run their hand across your work.

Let's look at this in a Brand DNA model:



Brand Core Value

People's romantic perceptions of the past still live in Vermont wood products.

In the above model, the Attributes are the list of things to include in your communications. It's not a literal use of these exact terms (all our communications will sound the same, and that's not good), but the use of language and storytelling that communicate these qualities.

The Brand Personality is a guide to the tone of voice your communications should take on. Again, these are added to your own attributes and personality traits – you are just adding what people expect from Vermont producers.


Lastly, the Core Value hints at the deep emotional connection people already have with you and your work, even if they have never met you or been to your shop. They think we are *all* working in a small shop, using the finest hardwoods harvested in our backyard, working with hand saws, planes and chisels, scrapers and spokeshaves, employing traditional joinery, and topping it off with a traditional French polish.

When we asked people to rank several brand promise statements, these are the ones that rose to the top:

1. Craftsmanship is everything in wood products. I buy Vermont wood products because I know that each one is carefully crafted rather than stamped out by some cookie cutter machine. (Score: 339)
2. Vermont wood products are made with an eye towards tradition and the values of days gone by. Old time values of hard work and getting it right are important in how Vermont wood products are made. (Score: 327)
3. To me, Vermont is authentic...the real thing. Even the wood products I buy feature old-fashioned craftsmanship and attention to detail. (Score: 318)
4. Vermonters work hard to preserve their environment, and that makes me feel better about buying their wood products. I like knowing that the wood products I buy from Vermont are made by people who are sensitive to the environment. (Score: 306)

These were supporting promises:

5. Integrity is a word that comes to mind when I think about Vermont products. I feel like the Vermonters whose wood products I buy are honest and trustworthy, that their products are of the highest quality, and they stand behind everything they make. (Score: 280)
6. Vermont is a place that gives me a profound sense of well-being. Enjoying products from Vermont lets me experience that feeling even when I am far away from there. (Score: 280)
7. Quality is what sets Vermont wood products apart from those made in other places. Vermont wood products have lasting value. (Score: 271)
8. Because Vermont wood products companies are small, locally owned and operated businesses, I feel like I can have a one-on-one relationship with the company. And if I need any help with my products, the people at the company will be accessible to me. (Score: 254)

Not once is price mentioned. By competing on price, we elevate all competitors to our level, including the Asians. By competing on all these other factors and emotions, price becomes a means of exchange and positions low wage producers where they belong – in the cheap seats. 

Aligning Vermont Wood Products with the Brand.


The ideal Vermont wood product is made of solid hardwoods, sustainably harvested from Vermont forests, dimensioned from logs in the shop, stickered and dried through many seasons waiting for the perfect piece, worked with hand tools, showcasing traditional details and joints, and finished with shellac and paste wax.

Okay, a few of you deliver on that standard. Most of you work in solid wood, some use certified lumber, you employ hand tools at least in part, and all delight in a tight hand cut dovetail and a well chopped mortise.

What counts in branding is that you not proactively disabuse people of all their romantic beliefs about how you ply your trade. You buy your lumber from sources all over the world so you can select the very best species, and among those species, the very best boards. You prefer using hand tools because they bring you closer to the wood, but sometimes a jointer is faster and better. You are certainly capable of dovetailing a carcass together, but a lock miter is an easier way to join the sides to the bottom. And while French polish may be your favorite finish, modern catalyzed lacquers can move that piece out of the shop in hours rather than days.

Remember that most people can't distinguish a hand-cut dovetail from a machined one. They won't see whether you cut the mortise with a chisel or plunge router, or cut the tenon with a backsaw or band saw. They will believe that you made the satinwood inlay even if you bought it from Constantine's. Buy your woods from Hearne and they will still think that you harvested it in your backyard. Is it a pinned tenon, or a plugged screw hole? Let customers answer that question for themselves; they may assume ours is a pinned tenon while that Asian piece is glued and screwed, even if the reverse is true.

The brand is about function as well as form. What counts is how well the drawer slides without racking or binding in the opening. How well the tabletop adjusts for changes in humidity from season to season without warping or splitting. How comfortable the new chair is to sit in. How many times guests "Oooh" and "Ahhh" over a burl turning. These design elements are what need to be marketed rather than the specific details of construction, especially when those details may run counter to people's perceptions and expectations.

So talk about dovetails if you machine them, and hand-cut dovetails if you don't. If you use veneer over manmade materials, talk about the benefits of this approach as opposed to using solid wood for this part. If you use non-native woods, talk about the look you're working to achieve and how this can only be achieved if you use Pennsylvania cherry or claro walnut from California. Just don't stretch the definitions and call a biscuit or doweled joint a "loose tenon" even if it's technically true. 


The Brand and Your Collateral Materials

Collateral materials range from your stationery and business cards to banners and signage, brochures, posters, your website, sell sheets, and any other promotional materials you distribute.

We need to avoid man made materials like plastics as much as possible. Recycled papers, woods and wood derivatives, stone, and even metals are more acceptable materials to use. Here, the brand attributes of “natural,” “environmentally sensitive,” and “genuine-ness/authenticity” rule the day.

We have already discussed how the attributes contribute to the content and tone of your communications and messaging. The more these are woven into a compelling story about your company’s origins, your work, or your tools and techniques (within the brand envelope), the more you will find an attentive audience willing to buy. Remember, we’re not just selling that bedside table; we’re selling everything that went into making it.


Materials should use colors, fonts, graphics, and other elements that support and reflect the brand attributes like traditional values, craftsmanship, natural, authenticity, and quality. Designs should be clean and focus on form and function. Communications need to focus on a single primary message and no more than five supporting messages. Focus equally on the quality of the look as you do the quality of the text. Half of people are visual learners and the other half are audio learners, so don’t forget to accommodate both in your storytelling.

For examples, look to other successful companies in this and other industries that are marketing to your target audience(s). Jewelers (Tiffany or Zales), car companies (Mercedes or Toyota), bathroom fixtures (Kohler or American Standard), kitchenware (Calphalon or Farberware)...there are a myriad of examples you can use to guide your process. Take the examples you like, put them in the context of the brand and you will develop materials that work effectively. Your designer will thank you for this upfront research. 

Graphic Elements and the Brand

This manual is not a graphics standards manual, and you must use the elements that best reflect your work and your target markets. For the most part, when looking to use the Vermont brand to your best advantage, the following guidelines should apply:

- Photography is the best graphic medium to show off your work. Illustration is best left to the design stage. Illustration with photography can also be used to demonstrate how work goes from design to finished piece.
- Use color photography where possible. There is a role for black & white photos, especially high quality, high contrast photography, but color is perceived to be more high-end. B&W can have a modern look that may run counter to the Vermont brand.
- Use images of your completed work and people at work using traditional tools. Images of a CNC operator next to a large machine run counter to the brand.
- Avoid using cartoon-like graphics and graphic elements.
- Don't over accessorize photos, and try to use accessories that you sell or that are made in Vermont. Keep the focus on your work, not the setting.
- White seamless is the best backdrop for your work when taking photos. The resulting photos are very versatile and can be used in many applications.
- Different lighting can have differing impacts on photos. What works well for maple is different from lighting for cherry or walnut pieces. Experiment with lighting types, intensities, and colors to find the right blend for each species. Figured stock can also pose lighting challenges. Getting a warm look is consistent with the brand.
- Use insets to show off details that might not be apparent in photos of entire pieces. Details are one aspect that helps differentiate your work from others, and is consistent with our attribute for "attention to detail."
- A picture may be worth a thousand words, but it is the words that place it in the context of the brand. Use words to tell stories about the photography and photography to illustrate your words.

Finally, remember that type is also a graphic element, both in the fonts chosen and in the way they are placed on a page. Great type treatments can turn ordinary materials into extraordinary ones that reinforce our quality attribute. 

The Brand and the Internet

Your website is essentially a digital brochure with a lot more capabilities than paper. Web design and content follow the same brand principles that apply to traditional marketing materials.

Your website is primarily an informational tool with two distinct advantages:

1. It has the potential to capture people's attention for long periods of time, and interact with them in real time.
2. While they are on the site, they have chosen to give you their full attention with no competitive distractions.


No media has ever been able to offer these same two advantages. Branding can attract the right people to the site and keep them there as long as they are content to be there.

Link Programs – create a reciprocal link program with others reaching similar audiences but with whom you don't compete, such as artists, musicians and writers. Create a links page and place their link there, and they do the same for you. This positions us as part of the fine arts community – where we belong – and is consistent with the brand. Start by linking with other Vermont sites and grow your program from there. Remember: part of how a search engine decides to list you is based on how many other sites link to yours.

Keywords – the words you use in your text and code into the underlying keywords also have a big impact on search engines. Choose words that are consistent (but not necessarily those listed here) with the Vermont brand for maximum effect.

Bandwidth – if you sell to a higher-end clientele, the vast majority have high-speed Internet connections. Do not let the speed limitations of dial up compromise the presentation of your brand. If video would enhance your market position, use it. The Vermont Brand is all about the highest quality and your website should be a reflection of this position. You can always offer a low bandwidth version of the site for dial-ups, accessible off your home page.

Work Together – this is a difficult thing for you who are used to competing with each other, but it bears mentioning that your competitive threats are coming from outside the state. The more ways prospects have of finding you, the more often you will win. And with all of you promoting and living the Vermont brand, and each other, the stronger it will become and the threats will diminish.


Content – this has already been covered elsewhere in the manual, but one point deserves repetition: tell the stories well and sell the brand, not the bedside table. If your work is good, the table will sell itself. 

The Brand and Advertising

We have already dealt with the issues of copy and design. What remains is the selection of the right media. And the right media, in most cases, is the one that reaches the right audience.

This is not just the media that serve your special interest, like Architectural Digest, Guitar, or House Beautiful. It can be media that reach the same audience via another route, such as The New Yorker or Gourmet. You can even selectively buy their subscriber lists (with pre-approval) and send direct mail to their customers living in a given part of the country. All these media are selections that are consistent with the brand.

For various reasons, other media might not be as good. Newspaper may not offer high enough quality to reproduce photographs of your work. News media may reach the right audience, but it would be counter to the brand to have our brand message adjacent to a story on something that's not beautiful and peaceful. And gender plays a role, which is why none of us market through Sports Illustrated, even though it, too, reaches a more affluent reader.

Finally, look for places where our market, or market influencers, tends to congregate. Our market may employ interior designers, so marketing to one designer may reach several consumers. Designers have their trade media, through which you can influence many designers, again, even if it's buying their subscriber lists for direct mailings. Rely heavily on the Vermont brand for these communications and you will stand out, and perhaps earn a call in return. 

Public Relations and the Brand


PR is a specialized field, and I would encourage you to hire a professional to undertake any serious effort. For the rest, this PR brand primer.

First, for most writers in the trade media, they seldom hear from Vermont. When they do, they react like everyone else...the same brand attributes come to mind. Use this knowledge to your best advantage in the opening paragraph of your press release. Again, don't be literal; instead evoke a positive image. Make them read the rest of the release.

Second, don't waste writers' time with news that isn't news. Assume they see hundreds of releases every week (they do) and make sure yours has a legitimate reason to stand out. Make sure your tone and content are consistent with the brand personality and attributes, just as with any other communication.

Keep your eyes on the prize: all you want is the writer to contact you. You don't want them to write the story from your letter or press release. Tease them a bit... make them want to call you to find out more.

Don't send pictures, but offer to make them available if they are high quality.

When targeting media, use the same factors outlined in the section on advertising. The one difference is that editorial content and coverage is based on the special interest served by the medium, and the farther you get from that interest, the less likely it is that any coverage will result. Gourmet will probably not cover your work unless it's related to cooking, eating, or the kitchen. 


The Brand and Trade Shows

Trade shows are typically a riot of color and motion, with every vendor looking to attract the attention of passersby. The philosophy has always been that the spoils go to the loudest, largest, and showiest.

This is certainly not consistent with the Vermont brand; ours is beautiful, peaceful, natural, renewing, and relaxing. The more we can use these elements to carve out an oasis of those qualities at trade shows, the more attention we will get.

Use the senses as much as possible to differentiate your space, but make it a subtle difference. Don't hit them over the head with it, and only do what feels right for you. You can use sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch:

- White noise machines and noise canceling technology can make your space seem quieter, albeit at a price. Use nature sounds if that is your preference, or light classical or jazz music in the background. Remember that the space doesn't have to be quiet, just noticeably *quieter or different*.
- Pine or potpourri scented space fresheners, or more sophisticated aroma generators can draw people to the space. Direct fan fresheners into the center of your space and halfway out into the aisle at nose level.
- Color can be a huge differentiator, and adding motion can also attract attention. For us, motion should be slow and sensual, not fast and frantic.
- Go "outside" your space by hanging banners from the ceiling or hiring people to hand out promotional items in the aisles can also draw audiences into your space. Directing scented air into the aisle is also a way of going outside your space. You can also "hang" banners from the tops of your booth and use fans to direct them up into the airspace above your booth. Follow the rules of the show, and if you think of something that isn't restricted by the rules, go for it. It may be against the rules next time, but you'll have already made an impression.
- Give people something tactile to touch and hold. The worst thing you can do is put a "Do Not Touch" sign on your wares. This doubles as a "Do Not Buy" sign.
- Use food to impact the senses, but tie the food to Vermont. Ben & Jerry's is our national icon, but our cheeses, maple products and specialty foods all have appeal.

Finally, keep in mind that we aren't carnies hawking our wares at a carnival. For most of you, this isn't a problem; woodworkers are typically not a flamboyant group. Be passionate about your craft but a little restrained in your enthusiasm. 

The Brand and Promotional Sites

The Brand applies whenever and wherever we interface with the public and potential buyers, from manufacturing facilities to empty storefronts to inns and restaurants.

Passive Displays

Displays in welcome centers, storefronts, inns, malls and other settings where there isn't a live person to answer questions and guide people through the display are considered passive, or self-directed displays. Here, the materials in the display do the talking for you. Passive displays can range from a tent card in a room at a B&B to text and graphics on a board to a high definition DVD that runs continuously on a large plasma screen monitor.

Most of the guidelines for collateral materials and trade show displays apply here as well. There are other factors to consider.

Contact Information – don't forget to make contact information easy to find. If possible, have it on something they can take with them and include a map so they can find you.

Lighting – the material may need to be seen at night, which in winter falls before 5:00pm. Proper lighting may be crucial in empty storefronts inside a mall where ambient lighting may not be enough to show off your work.


Changes – static displays that are the same for weeks or months on end are not good at venues that see a lot of repeat traffic. For sites like Welcome Centers, the traffic doesn't repeat, so static displays will be adequate.

Wear and Tear – if the display is accessible as opposed to behind glass, it may get worn as people touch it. Check the displays often to make sure they are always in good condition. Worn displays reflect badly on the quality of your work.

Active Displays

When you or someone else is accompanying the display, there is opportunity to interact with visitors and sell yourself and your work. The display can be more engaging and interactive.

Demonstrations – especially appealing are demonstrations of traditional tools and woodworking, for example, taking a rough board and preparing the surfaces using a hand plane or creating a panel by jointing narrow boards. You can give demonstrations at an inn, or invite the inn's guests to your shop.

Q&A – when prospects ask about your work it's an opportunity to engage them on an emotional level. The deeper you draw them in, the more likely they are to purchase. Just as with other venues, make sure the site you choose is consistent with the brand attributes and reaches an audience you want to reach. 

The Brand and the Shop Tour

If you take people on shop tours it will be impossible to hide all those power tools, nor do you want to. Here, it is how you tell the story that makes the difference.

If machinery is presented as a way to do things faster, it runs counter to the brand. If machinery is presented as helping us do things with greater accuracy or to make more efficient use of resources – to make it *better* – it becomes part of our “hard working” and “get it right” attributes and enhances the brand. We may need to remind people that machinery, often powered by water or human “engines” was in use in the 1800s and before.

Develop a story for each of those aspects of your shop that falls outside the brand attributes of “tradition” and “authenticity” and that brings those elements back into line with the brand. You can tell a similar story about planers, machine sanders, drill presses, band saws, and spray equipment that improve upon tradition rather than replacing it.

Keep the shop clear of dust, but wisps of wood from the plane and traditional tools looking like they are in mid use is a nice touch. The tour is your show, and everything in your “theater” must be attended to, from the “set design” and props to the “actors.” Present the brand so that it benefits you.

Focus on the art/aesthetic of woodworking as opposed to the mechanics. People are interested in how it gets from conception to the last coat of finish, and how much goes into the process. Emphasize how function influences design and how good design can then improve function. Reinforce your brand attributes and those that Vermont brings to the table.

Focusing on the artistic can be a challenge if you have a woodworker on the tour. In this case, if you have the resource, ask your partner or an employee to give the woodworker(s) a special tour focusing on the mechanics or techniques.

If you have a good size inventory of wood, show it off, especially if you do custom work. People want to believe that if they commission you, you will go out and find that flitch you’ve been saving for years because it is perfect for their piece.

Again, if you do custom work, have a design space or design table that looks like it is used often. It’s the same as working with an architect on a new home for customers and they want to see nice drawings and photos on the wall. It makes them feel confident you can build what they want – even if they don’t yet know what it is they want.


Finally, make sure your shop is OSHA and VOSHA compliant. You never know who is going to walk through the door on a tour. 

Enhancing the Vermont Brand

One of the best examples of branding and promotion I've seen is Thomas Moser. Most people would believe you if you told them the company had been around since Colonial times. I've heard him lauded in the media as the epitome of chairmakers. He commands a higher price and gets it by virtue of how well he promotes his brand, not necessarily by the quality of his work.

The key is: How do we get our brand to work that hard for us? The short answer is that we have to be in front of the right audience at the right time. Moser does it through advertising and public relations – since he can't predict the right time, he needs to be top-of-mind all the time with his target market.

This is why furniture stores work as concept; when the time is right, you go to the store. Both require the buyer to select the timing, and both supply the means to satisfy the demand. If you're a large manufacturer with a retail presence, and if you selected your locations well, you are in front of the right audience at the right time.

We need to make sure that when the right time comes, prospects think of Vermonters and come looking for us. For this to happen, we must live the attributes of the brand. All of us, reinforcing and building our group brand is what gives it strength and power. In time, it will become the most powerful tool we have. 

Resources and Contacts

Download the Vermont Quality Wood Products logo and usage guide from:
www.vermontwood.org/branduse.htm

Vermont Wood Products Marketing Council

The mission of the Vermont Wood Products Marketing Council is to promote the quality and craftsmanship of Vermont wood products, so that residents and nonresidents may increase their awareness of the outstanding design of the products, the environmental sensitivity of the manufacturers, and their commitment to customer satisfaction.

Guild of Vermont Furniture Makers
www.vermontfurnituremakers.com

Vermont Department of Economic Development
www.thinkvermont.com

Vermont Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation
www.vtfpr.org

Vermont Forests Products Association
802 224 9177

Vermont Wood Manufacturers Association
www.vermontwood.com

Vermont WoodNet
www.vtwoodnet.org

With advice from
Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing
www.vermontvacation.com

PO Box 6004, Rutland, VT 05702
802 747 7900

