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Sofa in a Box

The story of how we invented our easy-to-ship furniture

The Internet seemed like a silly idea back in 1995. The first time I tried to log on, the only thing I saw was a tiny graphic of the “back” button. And that was after a five-minute wait! I couldn’t understand why folks were making such a big fuss about the “information superhighway.”

But by 1998 cyberspace was going crazy and everyone was beginning to understand the potential. At the time, I wasn’t involved with the World Wide Web. I was a partner in a furniture business making sofas and lobby seating for hospitals and colleges. We’d grown quickly and had been named to the Inc. 500 list as one of the fastest-growing private companies in America.

We were dreaming of ways to reinvent the furniture business by using the Internet. We were full of e-commerce ideas, but there was a problem at the center of all these concepts—a shipping dilemma. A sofa can’t be shipped by UPS because UPS doesn’t accept packages that large. The only way to transport a sofa across the country is by using a big freight truck (such as an “18-wheeler”), and that method is very expensive and inconvenient. We didn’t want that; we wanted delivery to be quick and easy for our Web site customers.

Would it be possible to design a sofa that could be packaged in UPS-size boxes? We hand-built some containers to UPS size specifications and started to consider the solutions. We said, “OK, there’s the maximum box size; whatever we devise...it has to fit in there!” It would require a design that would ship nearly flat and allow the customer to provide the finished setup.

Thus began a four-year quest. We built and destroyed hundreds of sofa frames. Our first attempts were a complete disaster. They were absolutely dreadful-looking, flimsy and difficult to assemble. We were leaving behind a trail of trash and discarded models.

Our first breakthrough

...was creating a small plastic connector that held parts together tightly and yet could be reused over and over without loosening. Then we found automated woodworking equipment that could produce our detailed frame parts with absolute precision.

As time passed, we got so involved with the idea of a sofa-in-a-box that we sold our company and dedicated ourselves completely to the creation of a unique business that would offer these new easy-to-ship sofas online. We were going to call the company Home Reserve.

Once the frame was developed and the parts were fitting inside the shipping box, the next challenge was to figure out how to get all the foam for a sofa inside the package. During the experiments to find a solution, one of our engineers came in and asked, “Hey, have you seen the ad for that machine that seals food in a vacuum bag? What if we tried something like that?”

It was the answer! We put all the foam parts into one big plastic bag and drew out the air, and they compressed like a magic trick. This method for compressing foam became one of our first patents.

As we showed people prototypes of the sofa, they told us that they liked the built-in storage space, but that they also wanted us to incorporate changeable fabric cover sets into the design.

Wonderful idea.

The difficulty was making sure that no one needed to be an upholstery expert in order to dress the sofa. Everything had to look wonderful and be secure without staples or clips or anything cumbersome. The customers would be putting this all together themselves, and it had to be fun. All our efforts could easily be worthless if folks told their friends, “Don't buy that stuff; it's too hard to do.”

By 2002 we were getting excited. The frame, foam and fabrics were looking good and fitting into the box! And people who were assembling the sofas said, “You did it. That was easy!”

As a final challenge we took the frame to a testing program that Purdue University had developed for the Army—testing furniture for military bases—and ran it through the program's series of examinations. It passed!

It was hard to believe that after so many years, we were at the point where we had to finalize our plans for the Web site and manufacturing systems because Home Reserve was going to happen!

And indeed it did. What an exciting time! We've since gone on to develop many other products and accessory items, but the excitement of those early days and of that first project still lingers.

Now another story begins.

This next adventure places you in the leading role, for ultimately the experience you have furnishing your home is what matters. So remember to sign our guest book, send e-mails or join the “fans of Home Reserve” group. We would love to hear from you.

And if you are ever in the Fort Wayne, Indiana, area, come by and visit our factory; it would be a delight to meet you.

Blaine Wieland
Founder
Home Reserve

For more details on product features, see “why buy.”