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MAGAZINE **MAKING IT****An Executive Sheds the Corporate Life to Pursue His Passion as a Furniture Maker**

BY ELIZABETH CHANG

Sunday, November 25, 2007

John Smith had already made the big leap of leaving "a very good job" as vice president and treasurer of Nextel, so why not make another? he thought.

His children were young, he wanted to own his own business, and he had savings and investments. Taking into account his interest in antique furniture and design, and his desire to create something tangible, he decided to open a furniture company. "At the end of the day, sometimes it can be satisfying to end up with a table," he says. Hoping to make the company stand out a bit, he named it Willem Smith, using his slightly different middle name. His furniture also combines traditional elements with, he hopes, enough different twists to attract devoted customers.



Twist on Tradition: A display area, rather than a pendulum, distinguishes John Smith's standing clock.

John, 42, a native of Canada, had spent a career in international banking, working in Europe and South America. When his second daughter was born with health problems in Argentina in 2000, John took a job with Northern Virginia so the family could move to the States for better medical care. John spent 18 months with Nextel before leaving to focus on his family, which now includes four daughters, and ponder his next move.

He studied the furniture business and attended industry shows all over the world. Then, in late 2004, the Great Falls resident launched Willem Smith with six pieces, including a credenza, a standing clock and a table. The company now has about 30 pieces, manufactured in three plants in the United States, Vietnam and Ecuador. Prices are on the high end, with the company's "Eclipse" credenza listing for \$7,200 and its leather "Caballero" chair for \$4,200.

John puts a lot of thought into his products and tests them with focus groups -- and the CEO, tape measure clipped to his belt, will extol their features in the showroom he shares at the Washington Design Center. For example, he says, he puts bronze feet on his furniture, so "you can bonk it with a vacuum for generations, and it'll only look better; it'll look a little distressed." Rather than arms on one of his dining chairs, he put wooden knobs near the seat to use as hand rests. "It has to be different without being odd, and how much nicer is it if you get in it and it's actually comfortable," he says. In the company's effort to build the brand, each piece comes with an ebony and sycamore inlay to signify it's from Willem Smith.

John may have his work cut out for him. "Furniture start-ups are something of an unusual phenomenon at a time when overall business in our industry is not as bright as it has been in years past," says Jackie Hirschhaut, spokeswoman for the American Home Furnishings Alliance in High Point, N.C. "It has to have a uniqueness to it to stand out and be something that will make buyers want to add to their assortments."

John's four-employee company sold 18 pieces in 2005, its first full year of business, and is on track to sell more than 500 pieces next year, says John, who is financing the business himself. So far, it hasn't broken even, and, because of initial design costs, it may not make a profit until 2009. But John has high hopes that customers will someday recognize his company's name and distinctive inlay.

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"In 10 years, if it means something," he says, "then I've done my job well."

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