



# **KINGPOST -TIMBERWORKS-**



## **The Business of Woodworking By Joey Chalk**

**The below is simply my opinion, and what works for me.  
And should not be taken as financial advice**

## **My background:**

I grew up the son of a builder and sound engineer; he was the son of a furniture maker. While we moved around a lot, as a kid there was always some kind of workbench set up in the garage, and enough old tools laying about to get stuff made. The first thing I remember making was a set of "Ninja" stars, inspired by the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles of course. Although come to think of it I'm not sure that they even had ninja stars! I was the kid who got a new toy and by the end of the day, it was taken apart to see how it worked. Of course even with my new found knowledge I could never get them back together again.

I was always looking at things and wondering how they worked, like in Indiana Jones: Raiders of the Lost Ark, I would try and work out how the booby traps were rigged up and what materials would the original creators have had? Had they taken into account time decaying the mechanics? Oh, they must have used water to lubricate the moving rocks. How would they gear up the small movement of standing on a rock to be able to move a huge boulder etc? I wanted to be an inventor, although that never seemed to be a real job that anyone actually did.

By the end of the first year of high school, I was right into skateboarding, but before long, I was getting the hard word from mum and dad about snapping too many boards. At anywhere from \$80 upwards, boards were not cheap - especially when I was throwing myself off roofs every second week.

I had come up with an idea to make a stronger board, basically, by adding an extra veneer layer that started under the trucks and tapered off half way up the nose-tail. After talking with dad about how it was all done we immediately went to work making a mould. It was made out of a pieces of 250 x 50mm floor joists glued together and carved away by hand, which was then covered with two-pot filler and finally, pressing a new board into it. After playing around with pressing veneers for a few weeks, I started producing what could almost be called skateboards. It became clear that my strengthening idea was no good. However, I had developed a pretty good mould and jimmied up a press made from a scrap I-beam and two of grandad's old sash clamps. Dad lent me \$1500 to buy my first pack of 50 genuine maple skateboard veneers, on the condition that I paid him back of course.

And that was the start of my first business, Genesis skateboards. A couple of years later I changed the name to Chalk Boards. I became really good at making boards and would spend all my spare time either skateboarding or making skateboards. This lasted right through high school where I was making impressive money (for a kid with no expenses). I think the best lesson learned from all this was just how fussy a customer can be. It really sharpened my eye for detail.

I took woodwork as a subject every year at school but mostly found it 'very boring and way below my skill level' - or so I thought at the time. Looking back, I could have learned a whole bunch but was too blinded by my 'successful' business and passion for film-making and I just didn't care.

Once out of school, I started working for my dad building. Soon I realised that the small amount I was earning from skateboards, compared to the time investment to make each one, was just not going to work. Building was fun and I was good at it. Dad was 'old school' by today's standards and if I were still building, my brother and I would be the last of a generation of builders who could do every part of a house build. Here in New Zealand the various jobs that make up building a house have been split into their own specialised trades, for example: foundations, framing, plasterboard installation, window installation, roofing, cladding, waterproofing and others. I should mention that in my opinion, this scenario has largely been created by our government. It is also good for business; if you are a plasterboard installer for example, everything is very streamlined. You show up, screw up plasterboard, and go home. It's a good way to make money definitely, but generally, these trades are not so good at communicating with each other and or the foreman. Inevitably, this leads to delays in the build.

This process also makes it much more expensive for the home-owner who is now paying extra in contingencies built into the various trades' quotes. When I was building with dad, we started by laying out the house on the grassy plot of land and did every job except plumbing and electrical. This also included us building the kitchens and cabinetry. In addition to learning a broad skill set that I still use today, the client got a much better deal. One team of builders means one predictable labour cost. We would largely use one supplier so we would get good prices and so would the client, but most importantly, they could rely on us to get the job done. This was probably the most important lesson I learned from dad, as he would say, "The buck stops with me", meaning if there was a problem with something, he would fix it.

A good example would be a client ordering a vanity and a separate vanity top. On installation day the plumber says, "Oh the top is not fitting on this base unit." Phone calls are made and it takes another two days but the plumber is here now and can't be back for a week. The client is supposed to be moving in, in three days. We have a look, and decide if we make a small modification to the base unit, it will work. An hour later, it's all done and the client is happy. It was this kind of thing that really made me realise that it's good service that clients value and need; they want someone they can trust who will actually get the job done without fuss. This is how to build a good reputation.

During my first few years building, I gave up skateboarding and moved into martial arts and I still train in Tae Kwon Do. I also taught myself the drums. One evening after watching a few bands play I spotted the bassist from my favourite local band, Garage Fodder and asked why they hadn't played in a while. He told me that their drummer had quit and they weren't sure what was going to happen. I said, "I'll do it", before I could really think about the fact that I actually wasn't up to playing in a proper band. They told me to come round for an audition. Next thing you know I'm in the band and we have one month before a pretty big show, opening for the Exploited. Did I mention I played hardcore punk? We ended up recording an album before later breaking, up as people were travelling around the world etc.

I met my wife to be and married her. At roughly the same time dad had decided to chase a work opportunity out of the country, so I decided to go out on my own as a builder. This was fine, the business grew and we ended up having four full-time builders. Then suddenly I was diagnosed with bowel cancer and everything stopped.

I ended up having two surgeries and six months of chemotherapy. I'll say that I'm now cancer-free, so as we stand today I'm fine. Of course, who was to know?

Luckily we had some money come in from my health insurance and were able to do what we needed to, sell the house etc. We moved in with my in-laws (for whom I had just finished building a new house), just after I started chemo.

I had been living a very busy, stressful life. Sixty-plus-hour-weeks plus band practice and Tae Kwon Do training. To suddenly stop and have to just sit on the couch due to being so exhausted from the chemo was almost exactly what I needed. It gave me time to work out what I really wanted to do - and that was to make cool furniture. My in-laws' house had a good-sized workshop underneath and I was able to spend a couple of hours a day making furniture for their new house. By the time chemo was over, I had committed to moving into a much more stress-free life style and started KingPost Timber Works, my third business. I was 27 years old.

Having the shadow of cancer looming over my shoulder really gave me a sense that I needed to get a move on with life. I felt as if there was no time like the present to start some projects which I really had no business starting. But why not? It was pure luck that they found my cancer and it could well have been too late for me by now. So there was and still is a certain degree of time pressure to get things done before it's too late. I started making an acoustic guitar, from scratch – every last bit. From maple and rosewood with wenge highlights. I spent a grand total of four hours researching how to do it, then took my 'real' guitar down to the workshop and started to copy it.

It looks ok, sounds not too bad, but unfortunately I stuffed up the angle of the neck, so the strings sit way too high off the frets; I suppose I could play slide guitar. Also the bridge seems to be not quite the right distance from the nut, meaning it's a bit of a bugger to tune. At some point, I'll try another one, but for now I feel like I can cross that one off the list. After that I got into a couple of Maloof-inspired rocking chairs, I managed to get one of them back after it spent five years in a retail store. These are projects I would approach in very different way now but they taught me unbelievably good lessons and I think jumping in at the deep end is a good way to learn. After a year or two, I outgrew that workshop and moved into my current 200m<sup>2</sup> shop.

What I have learned so far, is that knowing that this could well be the last time you get to do this job, you better bloody enjoy what you are doing! With a little imagination and a good kick in the arse you are able to get what needs to be done.

## The business of Business

You are not going to become rich furniture making. If you expect to make a few pieces a year for tens of thousands of dollars each, that will almost certainly not happen - but feel free to prove me wrong. I'm sure someone out there is doing this - but I don't know who!

Any business school will tell you the idea of a business is to increase shareholder value by increasing bottomline profits. In other words, it will continue to grow. I was once asked by a business coach, "Do you have a business or a job?" His explanation was that if I had a real business I could take a two-week holiday, come back and everything would still be running as smoothly as I left it, "Otherwise you just have a job", he said.

This is a typical approach from someone trying to promote the above description. Their goal seems to be to make as much money as possible by doing as little as possible and I guess this makes sense if you hate your job. Not me. I consider myself to be "a creative" as it's put these days, and I want it to stay that way. The last thing I want is to grow my business to a point where I delegate my job to someone else. I love my job and have built a good reputation and client base while growing my business to a level that I can sustain. I want to continue to enjoy my passion as a small business that provides enough to keep my family safe, warm and fed. I don't have any ambition to continue to grow and change my lifestyle. I have been through that before with my building business, where I was pushed 'off the tools', as running four builders required me to be in the office full-time (and it stressed me out!) It seems like most 'makers' of any kind are pretty similar, more like artists than manufacturers. If you are not of this persuasion than this kind of business is not for you.

I should clarify that my business, is making one-off pieces; sometimes I will do two or three of the same thing but never a run of 50 or 100. For me that is creatively stunting. Even though it can be a good way to make money, once you have jigs and procedures to make something. It can be very easy to pump them out – every one the same. To me that is not furniture making, rather small-time manufacturing. This is the kind of work where you can teach someone a particular process and have them repeat it all day long for minimum wage. This is something that I strive never to do, mindlessly repeating a task that machines can't yet do by themselves. And it will happen, it won't be long before the only staff at the Ikea factory are IT specialists. More and more I'm gaining work because clients are sick of furniture that is cheaply built, made from rubbish, doesn't last, caters to the taste of the 'masses', and there are simply thousands of the same item out there. I have found that people are wanting well-built unique pieces for a fair, reasonable price, and that's what I give them.

### **Being a good woodworker does not make you a good business person:**

This is something I never really appreciated earlier on. Unless you choose specifically to take economics in high school or university, you are never really taught how it all works with taxes and government fees etc. We all know it exists but probably don't know how it's all calculated etc and that's about all I can say about this side of running a business. Spend time and learn how it all works in your particular country and then find the best accountant you can afford. I use Cloud-based software called 'Xero' which lets my accountant have direct access to whatever they need. This cuts down a lot of paper work at my end.

The number one question I have had from people considering becoming full-time is, "How do I find clients?" The simplest answer is that they should be finding you. Right from day one, I recognised my business is in the service industry before anything else.

Service is what customers remember, talk about and recommend, this is the best way to get clients. Here is a run through of the experience my customers typically get.

### **Initial contact:**

I see my job as an inventor who helps people realise their dreams, and I try to treat every potential customer with respect and as much time as possible at that given time, really listening to what they are saying and want. I find clients almost always have a good idea of what they want overall, but no clue when it comes to details; that's where a little quick thinking and imagination come into play, (well at least if you're on the phone or face to face). Throwing out a couple of design ideas or solutions right away tends to get the clients excited about the project and makes them want to proceed. This is ultimately what we want - a sale. Oh and don't forget to take down their details! For me that's usually on a scrap of wood, so make sure you have a diary or something to transfer that information in to.

### **A quick aside:**

I found out very quickly that it's super important to be able to convey your ideas to the client clearly. For me this means drawing out jobs in 3D (I use SketchUp). I ran through a couple of their tutorials and then just learnt how to use it, as and when I needed to, for different jobs. It has limitations like not being able to draw complex shapes like Cabriolet legs (unless you buy the professional version), otherwise it's very quick and does exactly what we woodworkers need.

### **Initial contact continued:**

The vast majority of clients contact me through my website, so I'm dealing with them via email straight away and sometimes I won't meet or speak to them until I deliver the piece. A typical first email from a client goes like this:

*"Hi, I'm wanting a new dining table made, that sits about six people. Could you tell me how much this is going to cost please?"*

I often still find myself sitting with my palms up with a bemused look on my face. While my first reaction is to send back a blunt list of information I need to be able to start pricing a table. However, I will send back that same list of what size, what height, what style, what wood, what finish etc plus a few pictures of some tables I have already made, explaining what they are made of, differences in construction and of course what they cost. This is a really good way to vet potential clients. If you never hear from them again, fine, most likely they were not willing to spend what you need to make it worthwhile. If they come back to you with the info you need, you can almost always be sure you'll get the job because they know what the potential cost is likely to be.

### **Quote time:**

You have all the info you need for this dining table. For example, it will be made from oak and will be two metres long by one metre wide and standard height (which for me is 760 mm). The design will be a very basic Scandinavian style.

Work out how much material you need, this will be different for everyone, as it will largely be based on the available timber supply in your area. My timber yard prices timber by the cubic metre and sells most species in either 25mm, 40mm or 50mm rough-sawn stock. So it's fairly easy to work out the total cubic mass of timber and add say 15% for wastage and multiply by the cost of that timber. When I say wastage, what I mean is that it's extremely

unlikely that you will find just the right size boards sitting in the racks at your suppliers. For example, we need a 2m x 1m table top. Chances are the shortest boards will be 2.4m so straight away you will be paying for an extra 0.4m, per board, more than you need. You need to factor this into your price.

For this example let's say the timber will cost \$500. Next, I work out all of the consumables like sandpaper, glue, the sharpening service for my machines, clear coat, rags, etc. Let's say \$80 for these. This is generally just a wild guess as it's very difficult to put an actual price on say the amount of glue you will use. Just be sure to allow for something here.

How much you charge yourself out for in terms of labour is totally up to you and will be based off what you need to earn and what your local market will pay. For the purpose of this example, let's say I charge \$50 an hour. Now that's quite high you might say. Well the truth is, when making one-of-a-kind pieces of furniture it's anyone's guess as to how long it might take. I feel I have to at least try and work it out in a way that's fair to my client and not charge a day rate, which I have found overcharges by a long way.

This is how I work out the labour cost for our table:

<b>Job</b>	<b>Time required</b>
• Pick up materials	2 hrs
• Dress all timber on all four sides	4 hrs
• Glue up large leg stock	1 hr
• Join table top	2 hrs
• Flatten and smooth top	4 hrs
• Shape and smooth legs	2 hrs
• Rails to legs joinery	4 hrs
• Glue up rails and legs	1 hr
• Attach top	0.5 hr
• Apply finish	2 hrs
• Delivery	2 hrs

Which comes to a grand total of 24.5 hours x \$50 = \$1225

Now am I going to make this table in 24.5 hours? Almost certainly not. This time frame does not take into account things such as, cleaning up, changing saw blades, emptying the dust collection, making a coffee, taking a phone call, toilet breaks, and all the things that happen in real life. More realistically, this will take me a week. I can't speak for you obviously, but I'm just fine with making \$1200 in a week. If however, I were to charge this as a day rate job at \$50/hour for five x 8 hour days, that would be \$2000. Sure, that would be nice, but that's also an \$800 difference for the customer and quite possibly the reason whether or not you get the job.

Another good reason not to use a day rate is when your client wants to make changes before the job has started, or just for practical reasons the design needs some rework. Clients always expect to see a price difference if they have cancelled an aspect of the job. Using my pricing system, it's fairly easy to work out how much a particular part of a job will cost. For example, I had a job that required installing LED lights into some cabinets. After a bit of back and forth with the client they said, "Ok we're happy with everything now, only let's delete the lighting as I think it might look a bit cheesy. Let me know what the new total cost is and I'll pay the deposit straight away."

I looked at my quote form and the lighting hardware was going to cost \$250 plus one hour of labour to install it. This made it very easy to deduct \$300 off the total price. If this job had been priced on a day rate, you would need to sit down and try to work out how much labour to deduct. Considering none of your time has been allocated to any one part of the job you would need to break the job down as in the way I mentioned I price things. I should advise that this is only a problem for honest people.

At this point you would be told to add 'profit'. If you were subscribing to the business school way of things, that might be anywhere from 15% to 100%, so go ahead and add it if you want. As far as I'm concerned, my labour rate is my profit. Apart from income tax, that money is mine and if you really want more cash, just increase your hourly rate.

The next and very important aspect is your 'overheads'. Even if you work from home, you still have ongoing costs to run your business, things like your power bill, water bill, insurances, vehicle expenses, bank fees, website hosting and maintenance, accountant fees, city taxes, milk and biscuits etc. I use a simple spreadsheet to work out what each of these items costs per week and from there I can work out what the total weekly cost is. Then I work out what the total cost is per hour. Let's say \$10. So for our table, that will be 24.5 hours x \$10/hr = \$245.

Finally, add your travel costs. Most likely, this will just be petrol but perhaps tolls etc. Let's say for this job, travel costs will be \$30. You will note that I have said this job will most likely take about a week to actually finish, meaning my overhead allocation should be \$400 (\$10 per hour x 40 hours in the week). I almost always have at least two jobs on the go at once so this discrepancy is picked up by the other job's overhead allocation. If I were to work on only one job at a time, I would charge the full week's overhead rate for this job.

This gives me a grand total of \$2080, plus taxes if any. It can sometimes be beneficial to find something similar in a store and compare the price. More often than not, I find my prices are very similar and it can be a good selling point to show the client how much better your table will be than the store-bought one for essentially the same price. This is also a good time to tell the client about your guarantee. I offer a lifetime guarantee on all solid timber furniture, for there is no reason under normal use that a well-made piece will fall apart. Of course, you need to actually be willing to fix things when they go awry.

This is also where you could add in tool costs. Say you want to buy a new table saw, work out an amount you can add to each job, for example \$100, then save it up until you can buy it. Alternatively you can get a bank loan and buy the tool outright and use this money to pay back the bank, however you will also be paying interest, which makes the whole process take longer and cost more. For smaller tools you can just price the total cost of it into the job, say a new block plane etc.

Remember your clients will accept your quote based on their perception of value, if they think the price is right, that's all that matters. As long as you make them what they want, the way they want it, it doesn't matter what you do with their money. Of course, before hitting 'send' on that quote, you need to have made your drawings of the project. This is super important if or when, it comes to a dispute with a client. If you draw and describe the piece just as you will make it, it becomes very hard for a client to say, "Oh, I thought it was going to be different from this."



**You got the job:**

Great, now send the client a bill for 50% of the job cost. This was of course stated in your quote so it's not a surprise for the client. However, don't start anything until that cash is in your bank account. Sometimes you will hear nothing back from them at this point, and well - good riddance. Most of the time though this is paid reasonably quickly as your client is still excited about the project. It can sometimes be trickier getting the final 50%, but more on that later.

If the job is some kind of built-in cabinetry then you will almost certainly need to make a site visit. I never make site visits before I have a deposit as this can easily be a waste of half a day. If it's a freestanding piece of furniture, I get the client to give me a couple photos of the area where it will go. They have already told me they want an oak table, so after the deposit is paid, I first thank them and then ask for their address so I can send them some samples. If you haven't asked yet, get some info on what type of finish the client wants. Usually the answer will be "matt, semi-gloss or gloss". Next you can make up some samples and send them off, for free of course. For clear coat finishes the client can usually just tell you which they like best. When it comes to paint finishes a sample is a must. Send a good-sized one to the client and have them sign it and send it back. This is well worth the effort. Not doing this once cost me \$1500 and threats of going to court, after my client changed their mind. Keep the client informed, let them know you have confirmed a place in your job queue and when you expect to be getting onto their job. Also advise how long the build time should be (all going to plan). After making the piece, arrange a convenient time to drop it off and be on time!

This time still makes me feel nervous. I once heard an older furniture maker say his goal was simply to make just one perfect piece. After all we are only human and try as we might there may still be some imperfections, although most likely only you know where they are and only you could find them. Keep in mind that your standards are almost certainly higher than your client's. That doesn't take away from the nerves of the first few moments when the client has a good look. As expected if it's all good, you can give them the final invoice. I give the client seven days to pay but most people will pay the same night. However, if I don't have the money in the bank on the eighth morning, I will send an email straight away, saying something like, "Hi Bob, I see the final invoice for the table has not yet been paid, can you please see this is sorted out. Cheers." I also attach the invoice in case they have 'lost' it. I'll give them two more days then follow up with another email. If there's still no payment, I'll remind them that for every month the payment is late I charge 2.5% as per the terms on the invoice. So far, I have only done this once, and I still haven't been paid.

**A quick aside:**

Be wary of 'design' firms calling and needing a piece made as soon as possible for a 'big deal' client or building. Stop and think why has this big company suddenly contacted you? Most likely it's because all the bigger furniture makers have said no, either because of the ridiculous time frame or the design is just not going to work. Companies like this will pay your deposit in minutes and then hassle you every day until they see the finished product. All the while promising big exposure and press. Then at final payment time, nothing... You might think that this is a one-off experience which I have had, and it kind of is. I did one of these jobs and it all turned to 'shite'. I ended up giving them back their deposit in exchange for getting back the two chairs I had made for them. It was a case of their design being unrealistic and even after I had voiced my concerns on the structural deficiencies of it, I was

told, “Just make it like the drawing,” and ok fine, I did. They then complained about the chairs not being strong enough. Go figure. I have had a dozen or so of these requests; all outrageous and too good to be true. Learn to say, “No”. Trust your gut instinct especially if you really need some work that week. My advice is to steer clear because when it goes wrong, you’re going to lose money and time.

### **How much did you earn?**

It’s very important to keep accurate records of what everything in a job costs. Keep a simple spreadsheet for every job, listing everything you have bought for it and anything else you want to charge to the job too. Like lunch that other day for example. Now take the total amount of money you were paid for the job and subtract all the expenses from it - that’s materials and overheads. What’s left is your profit, though you will most likely have to give some of that to the taxman. How you keep track of the money you owe in tax is up to you, I keep a separate bank account, which is only used to pay the Inland Revenue department. This sounds like common sense but I have heard a lot of stories of guys ‘keeping track’ of expenses in their head. This can only lead to at best, bad accounting, and at worst, complete and total failure of the business.

### **First jobs:**

Finally coming back to a more direct answer to the question that I’m often asked. “How do I find clients?”

What I did that worked well was to talk to friends, or better still, people I knew but didn’t really know well, like the neighbour three houses down, or my wife’s workmate etc. Ask them if they are wanting anything made or if they have a dream piece they think will always be out of the question. Then offer to make it for only the cost of the timber. I did this three or four times and it’s a great way to learn a bunch of things such as:

- Interacting with clients and dealing with their specific requirements even if you don’t agree on aesthetics
- Taking note of estimated timber/material costs versus what it actually costs. You can really get a good idea on how much extra you need to allow for in wastage.
- Most importantly, you get a chance to take note of how long it takes to do every task.
- For the first 20 or 30 jobs I did, I kept a timesheet set out in 15 minute blocks. I would account for every step of the process, like driving to the timber yard, picking timber, dressing, setting up my machines for a specific process, jointing, gluing up, sanding, or cutting a mortise and tenon.

From this information you can get a pretty good idea on how long things will take to achieve. The whole point being it will be much more accurate to work out your labour costs when quoting. Especially as you get used to the whole process.

Once you deliver these ‘material cost only’ pieces to their new homes and the client is happy, ask them to pass your details on to a friend, or post a picture on their social media. If they are willing, also ask them to write a short testimonial, something like this:

*“The other companies we got quotes from were slow and didn’t inspire any confidence that they’d provide what we were looking for. Joey was more engaging in the initial meeting too. Joey’s quote wasn’t just lower than the others but he got it to us faster and with more complete information. We loved the 3D visualisation and the fact that he kept in touch, and we also liked that we could see our bill online. We’ll certainly recommend KingPost to our friends.”*

These are excellent to have on your website (which you should have at a minimum). I’m not sure that I need to spell out the importance of having an online presence except to say the fewer places you can be found the less you will be found.

(Also get your website and written communications proofread by your friendly local proofreader so you make the right first impression!)

### **Work / rest balance:**

I have worked for someone else as an employee for about one year total, the rest of my 17 working years I have been self-employed. So I really don’t know what it’s like to have ‘time off’. When you work for yourself there really isn’t any time for weekends or for that matter there really is no time for a quiet evening either. That’s not to say I’m in the workshop 24/7. I tend to work from 8am-3pm in the workshop give or take. Then I’ll spend half an hour or so glancing over my emails. I head home and spend some time with my wife and son. Once he’s in bed around 7pm, I’ll usually spend another two hours drawing, quoting, emailing, writing ‘to do’ lists for the next day, and making drawings to take into the workshop the next day. If I’m still fresh enough I will do some editing of a video for YouTube. Weekends aren’t too bad for me, though by Sunday afternoon I’m thinking about what I need to get done the coming week, where I need to be by Wednesday etc. If you don’t stay on top of the peripheral jobs, you end up doing them in the workshop, which means you’re not making furniture, which means you’re not making money.

It really doesn’t take much distraction to throw you off your groove. Phone calls and people walking into the workshop are major time killers for me, I will usually try and get the bulk of ‘heavy thinking’ work done in the morning while I’m still fresh and uninterrupted. This would be making crucial joints, cutting things to final length etc, which leaves the afternoon for less cerebral jobs, like dressing, sanding, finishing etc. Of course, this is not always possible - but I try.

### **Getting stuff done:**

One thing that I feel can’t be taught is getting stuff done while dealing with the ever looming pressure of time. I have seen it many times when someone is either not happy with their job or not financially invested in it, they tend to ‘dilly dally’ around with no real focus on getting things done. Remember the longer it takes to build something the less money you earn. This will be self-evident I think, as soon as you have a paying customer.

I find it’s crucial to have a plan for each day, for example, a typical day for me would be:

- first thing in the morning apply primer to cabinet
- then start dressing timber for next project
- go back and sand cabinet, apply first top coat
- go back to dressing/cutting up timber to my cut list
- final sand of cabinet and top coat of paint
- start laying out joinery on new job
- achieve goal of completing first joint of project.

Just keep pushing until you get the list done. Sometimes I'll find myself ahead of schedule for the day in which case I just keep pushing my day's goal out further and further into the project. If you don't have a sense of urgency when working, it becomes easy to put off more complex aspects of the job, but giving yourself a daily deadline makes you plough on into each step of the job.

Sometimes of course, speed and accuracy are not friends. If I'm trying something for the first time, say a particular kind of joinery, of course I will slow down and have a good think about what I need to do. Generally though I have already planned out how I will do each aspect of the job at hand. I never write this down, it's something I know more from experience. For example, I know that I can cut small to medium tenons on my router table with a particular bit, really fast. I'm pretty sure I could change out the bit, set up the fence and cutter height and rout a tenon in under 3 minutes. Now when this comes up in a job I know exactly what to do and how I'm going to do it. Efficiency is all about learning what works for you with the tools you have and knowing how you can make changes to that trusted system to create different results. This can only be achieved by practice and time.

To get the most out of each day actually making furniture I plan out every step of each project in my head, usually the night before I start making it. With this firm 'order of operations' in place it makes it much easier to chop and change jobs throughout the day as I'm also trying to achieve my day's goals.

### **Custom Vs a line of products:**

My experience tells me that I could make a line of furniture, for example, three styles of chairs and four tables where each of these styles could be customised with paint, stain, upholstery etc. It's very easy once you have the designs sorted and jigs ready to go. You can either pump these out and try to sell them (difficult at best, to get what they are worth) or you could try to make only these pieces to order, perhaps even getting a standing order from a retailer for a whole set per month. Great, but boring and there is very little room for movement price-wise. I found that when a client sees a 'range of products' they expect lower prices as they assume some kind of 'mass production', which in this case is not far off. In the case of retailers, they will really push you down on price.

In my case, I strive for constant different challenges, so making one-of-a-kind custom pieces is great, but better yet making something that is unique requires a unique price. Customers generally expect a higher price for one-off pieces. Remember custom piece equals custom price. Clients will often ask for a 'ball park price' over the phone but I very rarely do this. It's almost impossible to do this accurately. Even though it's only a 'ball park' guess, people will hold you to whatever number comes out of your mouth.

### **Quality:**

I always like to make the best quality piece I can, or should I say, that the client will pay for. When I price a job I will price it as the best (chair/table/cabinet) that I can make. I will explain to my client why a bedside table has come out at \$1000, explaining that I'm going to use quarter-sawn French Oak and it will have hand-shaped cabriole legs with fully hand-cut dovetailed drawers finished with hand-rubbed Danish oil. Around half of my clients go for the 'high end' version. The rest say something like, "Ok, this looks awesome, but it's over my budget - is there any way we can bring the price down?"

Yes, of course there are things we can do. We could use flat-sawn American Oak, the drawer could be made from plywood with an oak front and so it goes on. I could keep reducing the cost by reducing the material quality and joinery methods. As long as the client understands they are no longer getting the best quality work, that's fine with me. I'll do the best job I can, of course, inside new parameters. It all comes down to expectation. Don't promise the best when the client is not willing to pay for it. Don't sell yourself short. Be open and honest with your clients and they will reciprocate. There is a feeling I think that everything that comes out of a furniture shop should be A++ quality. It's a very nice feeling to make those pieces, generally though there just is not enough of that work. Taking on smaller less prestigious work is often what keeps the lights on so you can take on the better jobs.

### **Design :**

As a maker of custom-made mostly 'one off' pieces of furniture, you might think I must be constantly designing pieces but that is not really the case. There is 'design' and then there is design.

Most clients come to me with or for one of the following:

- The 'designer' version of something in the stores does not fit their space
- They are not looking for stupendous design necessarily but functional use of space
- They are after a pre-existing style (Shaker, Victorian etc) and need a piece made to fit a space
- They have several pictures of, for example, different tables and want them combined.
- They want a specific piece to fit a specific place
- They have their own CAD/SketchUp drawings already

You get the picture, the 'Design' as in the look of the piece is already almost complete. For me this is where the fun really starts. It doesn't really matter what the thing looks like so much as how will it be built. There are nearly always physical challenges on how something will actually be made (something I feel most 'designers' never consider). I love the challenge when a client asks for a classic dining table that lowers down to become the floor! Or a bookcase with secret doors, or a seemingly simple curved front bedside table. This is where the real design work starts. How is part A going to join part B while not interfering with part X and maintaining structural integrity and maintaining the desired finished look? It can be an incredibly difficult challenge sometimes especially when designing a unique piece like a recent build I did. It was described as a four-poster bed but the client actually wanted a 'cube floating off the ground made in Walnut'.

This is my initial thought process.

1. Yes, a bed is easy and I have a system for bed frames, check
2. Four posters - I have done a few and learned some lessons, check
3. Making a three-way corner join that is strong and can be assembled onsite easily by me and my client in the future, Hmm not sure - maybe sliding dovetails?
4. The posts need to be at least 75mm square to look good aesthetically, solid timber is no good as it will warp and twist over time. I'll need to make up glue-laminated post. Should I just glue up a stack of 25mm thick walnut? No, that will look ugly, especially with the colour difference in walnut sometimes. Long mitres would be best. I'll use 25mm stock and wrap it around a plywood core for stability. (Cue long discussion in the workshop about how exactly this one stage would be made).

From here, I could refine these thoughts and was able to put together a quote for my client. With a few changes to my drawings, my client was happy to proceed. Working within strict

constraints (the client's wants/needs) is a great challenge and conjures up all sorts of creativity. Designing a unique piece with no restrictions is great fun and equally a great challenge, however I can't recall ever having a client ask for, say a table and saying, "Just surprise me", in regards to what it looks like.

This kind of experimental design/art is great fun but very hard to sell for a number of reasons. One being the price will usually be horrendous, and two the piece itself will most likely be a source of "Ooh's" and "Ah's" and great admiration, but will not fit in many homes on a daily basis, thus will be hard to sell. These types of pieces are usually a 'labour of love' for the makers, something they have always wanted to try or a progression of older ideas, the type of things built after long hours and taking weeks and weeks to finish. Short story - not heaps of money in it but heaps of heart!

Heart, is really the key to this job I think, if your heart's not in it, it's not in you.