

## Boomerang brings unwanted stuff back to where it's wanted

### Furniture reseller gives new life to high-end products

Seth Deforest sells used office furniture. Desks and chairs and cubicles. So why does he have a full-size airplane in the lobby? That's right. There's a biplane named Ruby and a 1956 Porsche that goes by Rosebud. He plans to add a 1947 Indian Chief motorcycle and an Airstream trailer soon.

Maybe it's a generational thing. The co-owner of Boomerang in the Hurffville section of this Gloucester County township is just 28 years old.

And he has this weird idea: Work should be fun.

"We work our butts off, and we get tired of talking about cubicles all day," he said. Guess that explains the coffee bar that serves liquor after hours.

But it's more than just fun and games. It's a deliberate growth strategy, a way of forming personal relationships with the customers.

"It makes us more to our clients than just a place to get cubicles," said DeForest, who has plans to add a putting green to his 70,000 square-foot space.

A graduate of Cornell University's hospitality-management program, DeForest left the restaurant business in 2001 to set up his own used furniture store.

"I didn't know a cubicle from a widget from anything," he said "but my perspective was that we could turn the industry around."

"The industry was just guys selling cubicles- vanilla, vanilla, vanilla- and I thought there had to be a niche for someone who could position these products differently. We could present high-end products, the pre-owned BMW, the pre-owned Mercedes of the furniture world, and make these things available to people who otherwise could not afford them."

The financial potential is there. Ten years ago, Inc. magazine estimated the market for used furniture at about \$800 million annually in the U.S. Since then corporate belt-tightening has only pushed the numbers higher. There's an economic incentive for businesses to seek out used furniture.

"There's that really famous Aeron chair, for instance. New, that goes from \$700 to over \$1,000 depending on your bells and whistles. We can sell that chair for \$400 to \$500," DeForest said. "Then there are Knoll workstations. Their

new products go from \$3,000 to \$4,000 per workstation. We can sell those for about \$1,500 each.”

Money is only part of the picture, however. Industry analysts say there is another benefit for businesses that do go the pre-owned route. They get to tout their environmental sensitivity.

“Reusing and remanufacturing office furniture is good for the environment because fewer raw materials are needed,” the Saint Paul Neighborhood Energy Consortium notes in its “Green Building” report. “Remanufacturing conserves natural resources such as wood, aluminum, steel, plastics and fiber.”

Still, the Boomerang team has a job to do in convincing potential buyers that the stuff is worth owning. “When you think used furniture you think used car. Is it broken inside? Does the motor function? This industry started off with a lot of bad people in it, so my biggest challenge is in overcoming that image,” DeForest said.

It took a hands-on experience to convince Daniel Tumolo, the recently retired director of corporate services at china manufacturing giant Lennox in Lawrenceville.

While replacing cubicles at Lennox, he was tempted by the \$5,000 per-item savings he could reap by going used, but he also was wary.

“I was concerned about the accessories, the plastic or wood tops, the end caps, all the small pieces of hardware that cover where the wiring runs through the cube,” he said.

“But that quickly dissipated when they sent in the first three systems.”

Boomerang developed its supply line early on among a number of sources. DeForest established relationships with high-end furniture retailers, giving those retailers a way to add value for their clients.

“They have spent \$4,000 on this cubicle, and we want to help them get a return on that when it is time for them to move and to buy all new stuff. I told them I will pay more than anybody else if they will give me the opportunity.”

He also made contacts with designers and architects, the people most likely to be recommending furniture to relocating businesses. These relationships cut both ways: Boomerang can buy up the old stuff as businesses move out, and perhaps sell them more suitable items to fit their new spaces.

DeForest also relies on traditional marketing. The company will spend \$50,000 to \$75,000 this year on brochures, mailers and networking events.

Boomerang is using Philadelphia PR firm AgileCat to help with the creative side. In one recent mailing, a cow stares you in the face. The caption refers to the company's expansive warehouse and offices: "Sixteen acres, perfect for raising cow, corns...and cubicles?"

Ok, so maybe "traditional" is not exactly the word.

But this is hardly a traditional company. Employees zip around on the office Segway. Salespeople court clients while rocking on the swings that hang from the ceiling. The swings also are a helpful management tool.

"I have a designer here who gets all stressed out about everything being so perfect," DeForest said. "Sometimes I have to just tell her: Go swing!"