

Stevens' RX for Medical Casework

'One-stop shop' makes Stevens a go-to manufacturer for hospital and medical office furnishings, architectural wall panels, solid surface countertops and more

By Richard Christianson



North America's largest casework plant is a vertically integrated, continuously improving operation, brimming with some of the most advanced woodworking machinery the world has to offer.

It embraces lean manufacturing and leverages one-piece workflow, allowing for the efficient production of customer orders regardless of a part's size, color or shape or complexity of hardware and assembly requirements.

That extraordinary 500,000-square-foot facility is operated by Stevens Industries and can be found in, of all places, Teutopolis, Ill., population 1,530.

Founded in 1956 by Chuck Stevens in a two-car garage to make solid wood kitchen cabinets, Stevens was an early adopter of European panel-processing equipment and in 1979 installed a direct melamine laminating line. What production capacity Stevens didn't use to satisfy its own needs resulted in the creation of a profit center – now known as StevensWood - dedicated to making and selling thermally fused laminate (TFL) panels to other manufacturers.

As Stevens celebrates its 60th anniversary this year, the 500-plus employee-owned company is riding a sustained growth spurt. Annual sales are poised to crack \$100 million for the first time.



Much of that sales growth has been driven by increased demand for StevensWood textured TFL and Stevens I.D. specialty education casework, which is used in school libraries, science labs and music rooms. An up-and-coming contributor to the company's bottom line is the medical group, which Stevens has ramped up considerably since completing its first major hospital project 10 years ago.

Derek Koester, a Teutopolis native who worked at Stevens during high school and college, joined Stevens' Major Medical Team in 2014 as sales engineer. He is one of a half-dozen key additions to the medical team in the last three years.



“As Stevens got more serious about the health care market, we learned that we did not have all of the knowledge in house to serve the market as effectively and efficiently as we would like,” Koester said.

“We brought people into our team with experience in installation, general contracting and construction engineering, including expertise in how the health care industry works and what goes into actually managing a hospital build project. Now we can do a better job by applying our knowledge and manufacturing expertise so that we can more fluidly create products that provide good results within the hospital’s budget.”

“It takes a team effort to make a project run well from top to bottom,” added John Pals, installation manager, who has worked for Stevens since 1981. “Everyone gets involved – general contractor, subcontractors, architect and the client.”

The team effort, supported by what Stevens bills as its “one-stop shop” for producing cabinets, countertops and millwork using a variety of materials, was fully evidenced in a pair of projects that Stevens recently did for Sarah Bush Lincoln Health System (SBL) of Mattoon, Ill. -- the remodeled SBL hospital lobby and new SBL Regional Cancer Center.

In both cases, Stevens worked closely with SBL’s facility management team and the architect assigned to each project to value-engineer and produce furnishings and architectural details. Each project involved a mix and match of decorative surfaces including wood veneers, thermally fused laminate, high pressure laminate and solid surfaces.



Lobby Remodel Creates ‘Grand Entrance’

Remodeling the SBL hospital lobby was part of the \$48 million master facility plan completed in early 2015.

Tim Kastl, director of facility services for SBL, called the two-story lobby project a “total facelift.”

“The old lobby was stuck in the 1990s with colors no longer in style, mostly mauves and blues,” Kastl said. “We wanted to do something a little more neutral, something that would stand the test of time and not be just a color fad. We also opened up the lobby to make it look more like a grand entrance.”

Kastl elaborated on the first impression the new-look lobby was designed to project.

“When a patient comes in, we want them to know that they are in a calm environment where they feel confident that they will be well taken care of,” he said.

Stevens’ contributions to the new lobby were manifold, including a long reception desk near the entrance, a radiology reception desk, architectural wall panels, display cases for the gift shop and the

“donor wall” that showcases crystal plaques engraved with the names of major contributors to the non-profit hospital.

The reception desk is a case study of value engineering, demonstrating how SBL achieved a balance of aesthetics and performance in a cost-efficient manner. It combines Makore veneer panels and an African mahogany hardwood base, each with an amber finish stain to match Wilsonart Amber Cherry high pressure laminate panels for areas subject to impact. The countertop and transaction top were fabricated using Formica Chicory Mosaic solid surface. The reception desk and other lobby casework made with Wilsonart Amber Cherry also blend with the quarter-sliced architectural veneer panels that were balanced and end-matched from the same flitch at Stevens’ plant. The wall décor also was stained to match the Amber Cherry finish.

Ed Strader, construction project coordinator for SBL, said the lead architect, TEG of Jeffersonville, Ind., relied on “traffic studies” to design a lobby flow less confusing for visitors. “The lobby is the central hub,” Strader said. “It connects with the emergency room, testing labs and other services. We wanted a design that would make it easier for people to get around without traveling all over.”



Focus on Patient Care and Comfort

The new 21,000-square-foot freestanding cancer center built on the SBL hospital campus is two-and-a-half-times bigger than what it replaced. The \$15.4 million project includes a \$4 million linear accelerator that delivers precision radiation treatment to patients in 16 infusion bays, each more than 10 feet wide and outfitted with a padded lounge chair.

“We did some Band-Aid approaches to get more seats in the old center,” Kastl said. “But while we were able to take care of more patients, it just wasn’t quite as comfortable for them as we would like. We definitely had to do something to alleviate the congestion in that area.”

Brian White, architect for BSA LifeStructures of St. Louis, Mo., said: “What we try to do with hospital environments, especially with one like this, is to design a warm environment for a patient’s comfort because they are sitting for hours at a time during their therapy. We wanted to create a space where they have the option of being in a private setting or they can be open to the room to talk to others based on their personality.”

White said wood and wood tones were incorporated to add warmth, and the curvilinear design of the building and the nurses stations makes the space seem “more organic” and “less rigid.”

Stevens manufactured the nurses stations using Wilsonart Brazilwood HPL for the exterior and interior panels, Nevamar Aged Elements HPL for “dry” countertops and Corian Clamshell solid surface for sink areas. Stevens’ TFL was used for cabinet interiors.

Stevens also produced custom nurse servers -- units that on one hand accommodate patient amenities such as TV monitors and magazine racks and on the other storage for nurses’ supplies.

On Budget with Integrity

“One of the good things about Stevens is they have worked with us for a long time and pretty much know our standards,” Kastl said. “For example, with the cancer center, we had a lot of special cabinets with things like curved designs. Stevens is really good about providing us oversight of project specs and offering us alternative material, construction or hardware recommendations that will keep us on budget without compromising the integrity of the project.”

“Sometimes we need three or four cabinets at a time, and sometimes we need 50 or 300 depending on the size of the job,” Strader added. “It seems that Stevens’ production is able to accommodate no matter what the size of the job is. They’ve been really good to work with.”

“We brought people into our team with experience in installation, general contracting and construction engineering, including expertise in how the health care industry works and what goes into actually managing a hospital build project. Now we can do a better job by applying our knowledge and manufacturing expertise so that we can more fluidly create products that provide good results within the hospital’s budget.”