



Interview With an Industry Expert



Benjamin Fitch began making split bottom chairs at his cabin in the Ohio Western Reserve in 1816. As his early efforts paid off, his company grew and employees were added. One of his workers, William O Taylor married Fitch's daughter in the 1840s and took over management. What resulted over seven generations became The Taylor Chair Company, The Taylor Desk Company, and ultimately The Taylor Companies.

In March, 2012, Taylor celebrated 196 years in business. Three months later, their president, Jeff Baldassari, announced that the oldest furniture manufacturing company in the United States would be closing its doors. This proud, long-standing member of the furniture manufacturing community had been illegally denied a significant tax abatement after investing more than \$6 million to turn a brown field property into a sustainable gem in northeast Ohio. Add a costly law suit and lack of funding availability for marketing during the credit crisis, and you've created the perfect storm to destroy this once strong office furniture manufacturer.

In addition to high quality office furniture, The Taylor Companies became known in recent years for their efforts and status as leaders in sustainability. Before this company and its history fade from our memories, Jeff Baldassari agreed to share with us the story of Taylor's green efforts.

TM: *Jeff, the story goes that back in the early 1800's, Benjamin Fitch, and subsequently The Taylor Companies, followed the lead of Native American Iroquois law requiring the company to consider the effects of its decisions seven generations into the future. Sustainability has been a key factor throughout Taylor history - not just a trend of the past dozen years.*



JB: There is a very strong business case for sustainable practices. They just make sense. From energy conservation to waste diversion and carbon emission management, these practices are not only the right thing to do for the environment but they also improve a business's bottom line. In addition such practices are typically risk adverse and that positions a company well. Finally after several years of implementation, these practices can be expanded and combined to form a narrative that creates a value proposition for customers driving top line growth.

TM: *At what point in more recent history did Taylor decide to jump on the band wagon - or lead the band wagon, making sustainable decisions throughout the company? What turned your focus in that direction?*

JB: We had to answer a simple question: How are we going to pay for this investment in a new manufacturing facility? We had remediated a 50 acre Brownfield to locate our factory. That act alone was a major step on the path of sustainability. We then reduced our natural resource consumption by an astounding 59% through the purchase of energy efficient equipment and proper usage through an energy audit. Then we found a way to divert nearly 90% of our manufacturing waste from local landfills. These two practices alone saved our company over \$100,000 annually in our Bedford, Ohio facility. We took similar steps at our Lynwood, CA factory and saved another \$25,000 annually at that factory.

TM: *What was involved in getting the entire Taylor team on board for this effort? Was a totally new corporate culture necessary to make these changes to sustainability or was everyone pretty much on board from Day One? This is not the type of strategy that can easily be implemented from the perspective of a command from on high.*

JB: It was done piecemeal. There was no original game plan to dramatically alter the corporate culture. It simply evolved. The process was fairly smooth because we had a solid framework to start with. Taylor manufactured its furniture from scratch using locally sourced raw materials whenever possible. Frugality, efficiency and yield was already embedded into our corporate culture. We just engaged a lot of people and extended the manufacturing process a little further without polarizing the employees by only focusing on a single reason for our efforts. The triple bottom line has something in it for everyone and we capitalized on that in our approach.

TM: *I understand that Taylor's sustainability strategies did not go unnoticed and a number of awards were granted for your efforts.*

JB: We were very fortunate to receive both national and regional recognition for our efforts over the past three years. These awards included: [2011 Pillar Award for Sustainable Practices](#) (Medical Mutual and Smart Business); [2011 SJF Institute Green Jobs Award](#); [2011 Sustainable Enterprise of the Year](#) (Institute for Sustainable Development); 2010 Crain's Cleveland Business Emerald Award; and the 2009 Evolution of Manufacturing Honoree (Smart Business).

Although the outcome for The Taylor Companies was not what it's leadership expected, there is much to be learned from their environmental and sustainability efforts. You can learn more about how they became industry leaders when it comes to sustainability by connecting to the links above. If you have not already moved in this direction, it's time to include working toward a greener work environment in your own firm's upcoming strategies.

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Terri L Maurer, Owner of [Maurer Consulting Group](#) and publisher of 'Designing Strategies' newsletter and blog will be presenting 'Target Market: Interior Design Practitioners' at the Decorative Plumbing and Hardware Association conference in Chicago on October 5 and 6, 2012. Attendees will include manufacturers, showroom managers and sales representative groups in this industry interested in learning how to incorporate design practitioners into their business teams.

If your firm would like to learn more about how to work with interior designers as a part of your marketing strategy, contact Terri by phone at: 330.666.0802 or by e-mail at: tmaurer@maurerconsultinggroup.com

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