



# BoF

The Business of Furniture  
October 9, 2019

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The company, with a U.S. base in San Antonio, Texas, has made a name for itself not by being everything to everyone

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## Clear Design Sets Sights on Growth, Fueled by Simple, Effective Formula

THE COMPANY, WITH A U.S. BASE IN SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS, HAS MADE A NAME FOR ITSELF NOT BY BEING EVERYTHING TO EVERYONE, BUT BY FOCUSING ON PRODUCTS LIKE BENCHING, COLLABORATIVE DESKING, OPEN PLAN WORKSPACES AND 120-DEGREE WORKSTATIONS.

by Rob Kirkbride

**Finding success** in the office furniture industry is a mystery for some. How can an industry support so many companies who on the surface are doing the same thing — supplying office furniture to their customers? Add to that similarities in products and from the outside, it would seem there are too many manufacturers, all doing the same thing.

Success and failure in the industry stems from the details. Office furniture makers can set themselves apart by going above and beyond the expected. Brands are built and flourish based on those seemingly tiny intangibles.

A good example of this type of office furniture maker is Clear Design, which began in Sheffield, England, in 1982. The British invasion of the U.S. started in 2003, and the brand has grown year over year by focusing on what matters to its customers: solid, smartly designed products, exceptional customer service, three-day lead times, free project quotes and renderings whipped together in 48 hours.

The company, with a U.S. base in San Antonio, Texas, has made a name for itself not by being everything to everyone, but by focusing on products like benching, collaborative desking, open plan workspaces and 120-degree workstations.

Though the company's roots are in Europe, the Warrilow family which started it always had aspirations to come to the U.S. market. "I guess they saw it as the land of opportunity," said Luke Warrilow, general manager. "And in 2003 things had worked out to an extent that it freed us up to be able to make a move to the U.S. We'd only ever worked in one industry, which was furniture and construction. And we had a vision of taking the finer attributes from our various suppliers that we had back in those days, various manufacturers and merging them into a company in this country and building a business on the back of that, which we did."

Clear Design started out in 2003 by bringing in niche products from Europe, different styles of European furniture from various manufacturers. Over time they developed a relationship with dealers, most based in Texas. Warrilow said during the global financial crisis the company recognized an opportunity for developing its own product in an arena it was very familiar with: benching or open plan systems.





The company was not alone in seeing this trend. Major manufacturers also started working on benching products around 2008-2009. Warrilow spent nearly two years traveling globally in Europe and Asia looking at products, methodologies and trying to find ideas and concepts it could then create a framework using its knowledge of the American market to launch a successful product line of its own rather than using other products made by various manufacturers across Europe.

That resulted in Clear Design's product line called Blade, which was launched in 2011. It became Clear Design's flagship product for many years and was the nucleus for the growth of the company into what it is today. "It sort of transformed us from a company that resold other products to a company that had its own line, its own identity and had a very unique go-to-market approach at that point," Warrilow said.

Since then, Clear Design has kept the momentum going, launching a number of new product lines and pieces to create the company it is today. At the same time, it has always stayed true to its original philosophy of doing business, which is easy to do business with and "offer unparalleled customer experience with a goal to create raving fans," he said.

That laserlike focus has held Clear Design together as a company through the difficult times and changing trends in the office industry. It has loyal



customers who appreciate the Clear Design experience.

Clear Design factories in the U.S. and Mexico — some owned and some under license or partnership investment — manufacture furniture for the hybrid manufacturing system that is so common today. The company primarily operates from one distribution center based in San Antonio, Texas. It has a plant in Dallas, a plant in Houston and a plant in New Mexico along with two other plants not wholly owned by Clear Design in Mexico. All the product is consolidated and distributed from San Antonio. The next plant the company plans on opening will be in the West Coast area, probably near Los Angeles to serve that region as it is one of Clear Design's largest markets outside of Texas. Predominantly, Warrilow said, its products come from Mexico or North America, with a little bit coming in from Taiwan and some seating from Korea. Clear Design is almost completely divested from China because of various trade challenges. The company has about 100 employees.

Clear Design's goal is to truly partner with aligned dealers when their alignments can't meet the customer's requirements either based on a lead time issue or a price issue, Warrilow said.

"We're not a sort of Chinese import that's going to be the cheapest by any means," he said. "There's always somebody that can do something for less







by cutting a corner, but we want a Herman Miller dealer to be able to sell our products knowing that they can confidently maintain their brand as a Herman Miller dealer and the prestige that goes along with that or any of the other associated aligned brands that are out there, but also not lose a project based on price or lead time.”

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**CLEAR DESIGN HAS SPENT A LOT OF TIME AND EFFORT IDENTIFYING DEALERS WHO ARE A FIT FOR THEM, WHETHER IT'S THEIR VALUE PROPOSITIONS OR THEIR STRATEGIES.**

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The majority of Clear Design's dealers fit the bill — aligned dealers that have the need to buy a product line that fits in with the value proposition they build their dealerships around, but with the obvious benefits of lead time or affordability. Speed to market is one of the main factors that sets the company apart. Having a three-day lead time is pretty tough for competitors to beat. “Some of them try to do something similar with various levels of success, but the three-day lead time is a big one,” Warrilow said.

Design services are another factor that sets the brand apart. Warrilow said the company does a very intensive design package with a lot of unlimited revisions for the dealer.

“So you take a dealership that has a very stretched design team, a lot of their salespeople will come to us because we'll turn designs around in 48 hours or for our showcase dealers 24 (hours) often,” he said. “We create a packet that's ready for them to present to their clients. It takes a lot of the legwork out for them to be able to do. And then probably the other pieces, the customer service side, I know a lot of manufacturers will preach their customer service, but it truly is an extraordinary experience (with Clear Design).”

Clear Design works its projects from what it calls its “pizza box” — a box that goes out to the job site with the drawings, configurations, checklist, box IDs — a complete installation guide, prebuilt and custom built for every project for the installers. The company recognizes the ball is sometimes dropped by manufacturers after the sale is completed. They complete the sale, and the project goes to installers who are often a separate company to the dealership. And there's no real attempt to engage or create value with that audience.

“In doing that, we've removed a lot of the punches, a lot of the headaches from installs,” Warrilow said. “We have a team of project managers and



trainers that fly out to installs on a regular basis. So kind of backing up that front-end deal closing process with a back-end support process has been an absolute win for our dealers.”

All of this has resulted in significant growth for Clear Design. Every year, the company has grown by 30 to 50%. “Obviously as you start to get to a significant size, that will be pared back somewhat,” Warrilow said. “But we have aspirations of growth. At the same time we're not going to grow at the expense of our existing dealer experience. So we're not out there saying, ‘Hey, we've got the lowest cost furniture, and we want everybody and their auntie to be a dealer.’ It's primarily built up on showcase agreements.”

Clear Design has spent a lot of time and effort identifying dealers who are a fit for them, whether it's their value propositions or their strategies. Long term, its goal as a brand is to be recognized in the marketplace as a partner of choice for an aligned dealer that fits in below their aligned brands. The products will always be focused around the open plan or agile workspace. Clear Design continues to introduce lines of booth, collaborative hubs, benching, training rooms and conference rooms.

“We won't be doing panel systems, that kind of thing,” Warrilow said. “We will stay in our lane if you like, of what we understand, which is the millennial workforce arena.” **BoF**