

warm furniture

Wittus considers itself in the warm-furniture market because of its focus on design, as well as heating. **by CHERYL DANGEL BARTOLINI**



Wittus – Fire by Design began by chance. It all started when a Danish company began to export free-standing contemporary stoves to the United States. The products had no sooner been shipped when the deal fell through with the original importer, according to Per Wittus, the company's sales manager. "We offered to take them over," Niels Wittus recalls.

Niels, Per's son, is president of Wittus – Fire by Design (Pound Ridge, New York). "It was an opportunity that came to us by accident," he says. The younger Wittus started the company in 1978 and sold those initial stoves from a small trailer. He says, "People loved them, but they didn't sell well, sight unseen. We put products on consignment and did a lot of advertising."

As interest and sales grew, Wittus ran the company. His wife, Alyce, joined him full-time 15 years ago and is vice president. They have worked side by side to build a company that epitomizes contemporary design offerings in wood-burning, pellet, gas, and biofuel heating appliances, in addition

to grills and outdoor products. The couple works in tandem with staff and representatives, who are an integral part of (and a major support for) the company.

When describing what sets Wittus – Fire by Design apart from other contemporary stove manufacturers, Wittus says, "We're in the warm-furniture market. The Klassic stove, a custom-built, handmade, freestanding fireplace/stove made in the United States and designed by Danish industrial designer Bent Falk, character-

izes the underlying concept of our products."

He adds, "It is warm furniture—but our products are not just geared for heating. People want good design first and heating second. Most are not looking for these units to be their sole heat sources; they buy them more for ambience and beauty."

QUALITY AND VALUE

Wittus admits that the price (about \$14,000) can be intimidating for the Klassic stove, but, he says, "If you're building a house today and want to add a fireplace, you can't do it for less. If you look at what goes into these handcrafted units, the labor

involved is significant and the materials are top quality."

The Wittus Twinfire[®] is another outstanding product, with a price starting at \$6,000 and going up to \$10,000. "It is a very unique wood-burning stove—the Porsche of wood-burning stoves, using gasification technology. It is the most efficient wood-burning, natural-convection, natural-draft stove in the world, achieving a 92% efficiency rating," Wittus says, adding that efficiency levels were tested by OMNI-Test Laboratories.



Sales of the Twinfire have doubled since last year. It is a product, Wittus says, that appeals to a select market in areas where people gravitate to green solutions.

Two years ago, Wittus took on a whole new product line when the company began importing MCZ pellet stoves from Italy. They boast state-of-the-art technology, as well as modern design. The new Toba pellet model, Wittus says, looks like a smart iStove would, if Apple ever entered the heating business.

"We think that as oil keeps going up, the next generation of younger clients will be looking for alternative heating and will want something that looks different and fits their lifestyles better," Wittus says. The Toba stove has won the prestigious 2011 IF Product Design Award and will be available this fall.

In addition, Wittus – Fire by Design is now the official U.S. importer of products from Belgium's Bodart & Gonay. One new product is the Optifire zero-clearance fireplace, which is sleek and attractive. It will be joined by a number of new products coming out next year.

FINDING THE RIGHT CUSTOMER

Wittus says that selling to the contemporary market is tricky, but he seems to have found the secret for reaching his specialty-minded consumer. He does advertise to the trade, which is something that he found worked when he started the business—and still works today.

"Selling warm furniture is key. We focus on architects, builders, and designers, and also target some end users as well. Through this approach, we see the orders

come in; builders call and say they are bidding on a house and want to include a Wittus stove," he says.

Wittus advertises through a mix of about 30 magazines. About 15% of the advertising each year is done in new and different magazines to broaden the marketplace. Wittus also makes use of the Internet, and the company's website (www.wittus.com) gets a good response. Currently, the company is getting into social marketing on Facebook and is looking into Twitter.

Wittus reports that most clients come to him when they were originally out shopping for something else and just happened upon one of his stoves. He says, "Then, they find us on the Internet, or an architect recommends a unit as an object of design that is also clean and green. We get the leads and turn them over to our dealers. Their sales are often based on what we give them, in terms of leads."

Wittus says, "We deal with a lot of custom-built homes. The builder specials have died out, but as you work up the ladder, people in their 50s through 80s have money and are ready to build their dream homes. A lot of those people are our clients."



He continues, "The truth is, very few Europeans use stoves as we do over here. They use them more for coziness and decoration, or as a backup to offset oil costs," Wittus says. He believes that the U.S. contemporary-design market is looking for the same objectives and does not want products primarily for heating.

"One of the keys to selling, in this country, is to find the right people, who may or may not be necessarily looking for your product. It is important to provide the education and some of the concepts and benefits of a fireplace and stove. Finding that segment of the population is a challenge, and it is an exciting opportunity to develop this market further," he says. ■

Above: New this fall from Wittus is the Optifire zero-clearance fireplace.

Page 42, top: Niels Wittus with the Klassic contemporary stove, which epitomizes the company's focus: warm furniture

Page 42, bottom: Wittus is introducing the Toba pellet stove this fall.