



living in style

A CORNWALL-BASED SUSTAINABLE FURNITURE SUPPLIER IS TICKING ALL THE RIGHT BOXES WHEN IT COMES TO STYLE AND SUBSTANCE, WRITES AMBER KEY

It took a while to locate Margaret Larson's sustainable furniture business; I was half-relying on Google Maps and half-expecting to find a trail of benches or picnic tables leading to her mid-Cornwall location. But there was neither. So when the owner of Sustainable Furniture UK ushered me to a meeting room featuring a huge reclaimed timber centerpiece, it was clear I was in the right place.

Sustainable Furniture UK does exactly what it says on the tin. Founded by Larson five years ago following a successful career in furniture sales, the company started small and has now grown to a projected £750,000 turnover business this year. It's growing so fast – summer is traditionally the busiest time of the year – that Larson is building her team with two new appointments and a warehouse in Par from where she ships her mix of indoor and outdoor products.

"I started in outdoor furniture buying wholesale from my former company," she explains. "Then, as I expanded, I wanted to go more into UK homegrown and manufactured products, so I narrowed it down to Cornwall and Devon – anything that's manufactured here I concentrate on."

Around 40 per cent of her sales comes from stock sourced directly from Devon and Cornwall. "Douglas Fir is native to our county, so I manufacture products with this timber. And of course, with Douglas Fir being from our climate, when you cut a tree down that grows here, it really does last," she explains. In fact there's a 30-year life expectancy for furniture made from this species, with

stainless steel fixings chosen specifically for their longevity too (often it's the fixings on outdoor furniture which perish first).

The other 60 per cent of Sustainable Furniture UK's sales derives from stock sourced via managed forests in Indonesia. Larson is keen to dispel any misconceptions about a timber which has had a distinctly dodgy press since the 1980s: teak. Many of the company's products use both the timber and the root of this versatile and long-lasting tropical hardwood in designs which are developed in conjunction with a Dutch business associate. "There's a new product called Grade 3 teak, which is basically sapling wood," she explains. "If you think of managed forestry, they plant these trees and they take out the little ones, and after another ten years, they take out another, so the trees grow well, and the trees you chop down you use. That is why we have to support it. Teak will last a lifetime too – another reason why it's sustainable."

In addition to the 100-foot tall trunk above the surface, there's also the striking teak root under the ground, which Larson uses in her ranges of glass tables. It's vital that this root is excavated to ensure ongoing replanting, and it makes hardwearing furniture due to the fact that the root is already weathered. The most that will happen is that it may change colour a little, and this can be prevented by treating the product. Larson has so far sold three large teak tables and says it's only a matter of time before people become

more educated as to its newfound ecological soundness.

The remainder of the range is made from reclaimed wood sourced from boats and buildings; there's even a slightly cheaper range made from reclaimed pallet wood. "The reclaimed teak is 60 to 70 years old and there will be very little movement in the furniture as a result," Larson explains.


Larson's business goal has always been to make the traditionally seasonal business a year-round one. This has been achieved by ensuring differentiation in her market. "The way I make the business work is finding niche products, concentrating on large, differently-styled furniture, not the typical replica oak pieces everyone sells." In addition, Sustainable Furniture UK offers value-add services such as parasol-printing for businesses, so that the company is effectively a one-stop-shop. "70 per cent of people who buy a table buy a parasol or cushions – and we always try to find suppliers who manufacture from source and in Cornwall."

As a result, its customer base is as varied as its product offering. Around 50 per cent of trade is from the public sector – schools, hospitals, parish councils and county councils, to name a few areas. The other half comes from individuals, or businesses keen to meet their sustainability targets. The company now counts cafes in Padstow, English Heritage and Kent Wildlife Trust among its clients, while the range is diverse enough to attract people of all demographic profiles and budgets.

The company's next step is product design, an area into

which Larson has already made inroads following visits to trade shows around the world gathering ideas. "I'm looking at a range without fixings – as I mentioned, the fixings are always the first to go. We come up with similar ideas to ensure furniture lasts a long time," she says. "Customers also phone with ideas, such as a picnic bench featuring a baby seat."

The immediate challenge is to keep up with demand following the rapid growth generated entirely through online search engines and recommendations (if you type sustainable furniture into Google, the company will appear top of the free ads).

The company's success lies in knowing its market and in Larson choosing a company name which captures what the brand is about – perfect for search engine finds. The website content and media monitoring is managed by Larson and her small team, with regular range additions and updates as the company expands. There will also be a push into other areas of marketing and PR as part of the ongoing expansion plan. Larson's determination and emphasis on teamwork are proving sustainable too: "In the words of Nike, my advice would be if you've got great ideas, you need to get off your butt and do it," she says. 

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