

## SMART BUSINESS

### A man with a plan

*Thomas Johnson's ambition and enthusiasm have already resulted in considerable success. But that's just the beginning*

By DEBORAH NASON

Ghana native Thomas Johnson doesn't just have big plans; he has boundless plans.

This year, he will create a 30,000-square-foot retail and distribution center within his

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Thomas A. Johnson at his furniture warehouse in Lynchburg

## Plan

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facility, a 100-year-old, 75,000-square-foot former warehouse. And that's just the beginning. He also has plans to:

- Put in a sawmill on the property to saw the several thousand boards of wood that came with the purchase of the warehouse. "I have enough [free] wood to last me for the next five years."
- Next year, he is planning to create a private trade school in Lynchburg "because the [woodworking] trade is becoming extinct." Johnson says his primary challenge has been finding skilled craftsmen.
- He is developing a factory in Ghana to make mass-produced furniture; he hopes to use the profits from this operation to build a trade school in his native country.
- He is planning different Web sites to serve retailers and furniture manufacturers.

Charismatic and full of laughter (that smile will blind you), Johnson is a savvy businessman with the ability to think globally. "The Ghana operation will benefit the Lynchburg operation and local economy," he says. "The Ghanaian employees will create inventory, which will create retail and distribution jobs. I hope to develop a business exchange between the two countries."

Johnson went to college for timber technology, in Italy. After graduation, the 24-year-old returned to Ghana and combined his business and humanitarian interests by starting a training program in furniture-making in 1988. After five years, he immigrated to the U.S. "with \$20 in my pocket," he likes to remember.

Ultimately he moved to Lynchburg in 1995, and started building bookcases and tables and selling them from home.

He landed his first major customer in 1999, a large bookstore that needed extensive woodwork. Through word-of-mouth, other large commissions followed, includ-

## Briefly

**Business name:** Thomas A. Johnson Furniture Company.

**Location:** Lynchburg; future plans call for a manufacturing and training facility in Ghana.

**Year founded:** 1996.

**Owner:** Thomas A. Johnson.

**Business activities:** Two divisions: custom-made high-end cabinetry, furniture and architectural products; and mass-produced furniture as a subcontractor for large furniture companies.

**Geographic reach:** Currently, about a 60-mile radius. "My ultimate goal is Washington, D.C. and further," he says. "Now that I have some skilled craftsmen working for me, I'll be able to hit the road [and sell]."

**Market niche:** "Using reclaimed lumber. Customers love it. [Ironically] people stop here on the way to the dump to throw wood away, and they give it to me. Some of it is 100 years old. I am strategically located," he says, laughing in stitches.

**Number of employees:** Six now, planning on 25 to 30 within the next year or two.

**Growth rate:** The company has doubled its revenues since 2000. In 2001, Johnson purchased a 100-year-old, 75,000-square-foot former tobacco warehouse and outbuildings on the banks of the James River.

**Unexpected result of business networking:** Johnson invited to this year's presidential inauguration.

**Motto:** "Discipline, determination and success."



Johnson

ing producing tables and chairs for a resort, and cabinetry for a manufacturer. He also creates custom furniture and cabinetry for residences and small businesses.

As the business grew, he was thinking about where to expand, but acted on instinct when he purchased the warehouse. "I was driving down the road and saw trucks parked at this old abandoned building. I went in to talk to them and they gave me a tour—and I made an offer right then and there."

He explains that the idea of the Ghana operations "came about due to a large manufacturing contract. After I accepted it, I realized that in order to be profitable, I must outsource outside the country...to survive."

"You can't blame industrialists for looking for cheaper costs," says Johnson. But he takes a long view. "Outsourcing to other countries is a trend, a fashion," he says. "It may not go on forever. [In the future], Americans may decide to only buy American, or other countries may experience political unrest or natural disasters or collapse of their economies."

In addition to producing quality products, he credits net-

working and relationship-building for the growth of the business. And he's been at it for a long time. He became a Rotarian in Ghana in the 1980s, impressed by the organization's dedication to community services. He continued that affiliation when he moved to Lynchburg, as well as joining the National Federation of Independent Businesses (NFIB).

Again working on instinct, Johnson decided to attend the NFIB small business summit in Washington, D.C. last year. Bringing with him copies of local articles about him and his business, he caused a sensation. Not only did he make some valuable business contacts, but he caught the attention of a Washington insider who arranged for Johnson to attend the presidential inauguration.

The attention hasn't stopped yet, he says. Governor Mark Warner invited him to serve on a state board. Johnson is embarrassed to admit that he had to ask for a rain-check. "I've been too busy," he laughs.

(Deborah Nason is a Roanoke-based contributing editor for the Journal.)