



Custom Cabinets From Stock Parts

by David Frane

Stock or custom? It's one of the first questions you ask when you estimate a job that will include cabinets. The answer will determine where you get the cabinets and how much they will cost. You can usually get stock cabinets faster and cheaper than you can order custom ones, but if the clients want odd sizes, or unusual materials, finishes, and details, then custom-built is the only choice. When I ran a custom cabinet shop, in fact, I figured out that I could do the same quality work for less money if I bought certain parts rather than making them. At various times I bought drawers, doors, and cabinet carcasses, and I eventually discovered that I could build entire cabinets using nothing but components. All I had to do was assemble them on site. If you don't have a shop, using components will let you sub out those fancy raised-panel doors to a custom cabinetmaker, while buying drawers and carcasses from a less costly supplier.

Drawers



Figure 2. Cabinet carcasses, like this one from Cab Parts, come predoweled and ready to glue together.

I used to make all our own drawers, whether plywood, dovetailed solid wood, or laminate. Then I found out that I could call a component supplier and order solid maple dovetailed drawers with a two-coat lacquer finish for



EAIGLE WOODWORKING

Figure 1. The author buys solid maple dovetailed drawers for what it would cost him to build unfinished birch plywood drawers.

what it cost me to build unfinished birch plywood drawers (see Figure 1). I could buy a prefinished, 4-inch-tall, 15-inch-wide, 20-inch-deep ready-to-assemble birch plywood drawer that can be assembled in five minutes and costs under \$20. My costs would be around \$30. The plywood drawers are available in many types of plywood, as well as in melamine and vinyl-wrapped particleboard.

Doors

If grain-matching isn't an issue and the door design isn't unusual, then you can also buy doors and drawer fronts for less than it costs to make them yourself. Premade cabinet doors come in a wide variety of styles: flat and raised-panel, rectangular and arch-topped, with square or molded edges, and so on. Materials include hardwood, softwood, and laminate-clad particleboard. Some companies even have MDF doors that can be ordered raw, primed, in standard finishes, or finished to your specifications. As a matter of comparison, raised-panel MDF doors with square inside corners and a satin enamel finish cost around \$55 each. Unfinished raised-panel oak doors would cost around \$25 each, including materials. That wouldn't even cover my labor costs.

Carcases

Some companies also make and sell cabinet boxes, or carcases. While carcases may be the last thing many cabinet-makers want to sub out, the fact is that most customers care more about the visible parts of a cabinet than they do about the boxes behind them. If the carcasses for a particular set of cabinets are to be fairly generic, you may be better off buying them premade. Not only are most premade carcasses of good quality, but there is no way you can compete on price with a company that buys material by the boxcar-load and machines parts with computer-controlled equipment (Figure 2).

The ready-to-assemble carcasses I've used cost around \$60 for a 36-inch-wide base cabinet, and around \$35 for 36-inch-wide upper. Shelves are extra. The boxes come in white, almond, or gray melamine as well as in wood veneer and MDF. Visible edges are banded with PVC tape, plastic laminate, or wood veneer. The cabinets are easy to assemble on site, and are predrilled for the dowels used to hold them together as well as for adjustable shelf pins. Backs are fully housed in slots cut in the top, bottom, and sides. All it takes to assemble a finished cabinet box are some glue, a few bar clamps, and about ten minutes.

Component lead times can range from two to six weeks, so you should know exactly what you want to build far enough in advance to order parts. The companies I have bought from have been quite reliable about delivering when they said they would. In fact, the only times I got the wrong size parts were when I ordered them wrong. ■

David Frane is a foreman with Thoughtforms Corp., a construction company in West Acton, Mass.

Sources of Supply

Drawers

Eagle Woodworking
1130 East St.
Tewksbury, MA 01876
800/628-4849

Valendrawers
P.O. 1169
Lexington, NC 27293
800/334-4825

BHK of America
3 Bond St.
Central Valley, NY 10917
914/928-6200

Doors

Heritage Doorcraft
363 S. Roberts St.
St. Paul, MN 55107
800/536-2635

Cabinet Factory Inc.
2600 Hemstock St.
Lacrosse, WI 54603
800/237-1326

Cabinet Boxes

Cab Parts
716 Arrowest Rd.
Grand Junction, CO 81505
303/241-7682

Accent Manufacturing
1585-B Mabury Rd.
San Jose, CA 95133
408/926-3667