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CEO goes out on a limb for perfection

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By: ANDREW PETERSON - For the North County Time | Posted: Thursday, June 1, 2006 12:00 am | Loading... | Print



Gary Hanick, chief executive officer of Nature Maker in Carlsbad, stands next to a 2-story-tall interactive banyan tree, with a carved face, which will go in a children's museum in Wisconsin on Wednesday. NatureMaker makes hyper-realistic trees with a structural steel skeletons.

PHOTO BY HAYNE PALMOUR IV / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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CARLSBAD -- The role of chance in the birth of companies is one of the great themes in the annals of business. Consider a sculptor's walk in the woods on the edge of a national forest the morning after a snowstorm in 1983. By chance, a fallen tree limb heavy with ice and snow caught his attention.

The sculptor, Bennett Abrams, had already enjoyed artistic success and recognition; his "eco-art" wax sculptures had been commissioned by museums, corporations and private collectors.

Gary Hanick -- Abrams' business manager at the time, and now chief executive officer of a Carlsbad company called NatureMaker -- recounted what happened next:

"(Bennett) dragged the tree limb back to his studio, turned it upright, and this 5-foot branch became in his mind a full-blown tree."

Abrams' winter-morning retrieval of the tree limb on the outskirts of Idyllwild Forest -- and the inspiration that it sparked -- would eventually lead to the creation of an entirely new art form.

That art form's premier practitioner today is NatureMaker, and its product -- steel trees clad in hyperrealistic artificial bark -- now adorns everything from hotel and casino lobbies to high-end residential homes and children's libraries. The trees must not only be true to life in appearance, but meet fire and structural code requirements and ADA regulations,

Hanick explained.

NatureMaker's first major client was Macy's in San Francisco.

"We took their main floor and the Christmas windows ... and turned it into a walk-through forest of forsythia trees," Hanick said in a phone interview.

NatureMaker reproduces a wide variety of trees.

"It's across the board," Hanick said. "We do lots of oak trees, banyans, pines, maples, acacias, palm trees, strangler figs, ficus (we're) limited only by the client's imagination, budget and what sort of foliage we can have made to fit that tree."

All trees are made to order. Prices start at around \$25,000, but can go much higher. A recent client inquiry about a 125-foot tree could be worth around \$1.5 million if NatureMaker's proposal is approved.

Hanick oversees a staff of 30 to 40 artists who work on 20 to 25 projects at any given time. The work is slow and painstaking. Project time frames range from four to six months to several years.

"They like to say that I micromanage things," he said. "It's not so much I micromanage things -- it's a matter of we really care about what we're producing. Our people are 99 percent perfect in what they do, and if the 1 percent needs to be tweaked, that's why I'm there."

Hanick says he is uncompromising when it comes to standards.

"Whoever the client is, (the work) has to be the best we're capable of creating at that very moment," he said. "As any of our clients will tell you, that's our main passion. We don't have A, B, C, D and E qualities. It all has to be the best."

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He concedes that such exactitude has its costs.

"We realize that if we're giving an estimate or quotation to a client, and we're estimating a certain amount of time to create the tree and it takes longer than that, which it often does, so be it," he said. "It's more important that we put our best foot forward and have the best work we're capable of than to try to supposedly save a nickel -- in the end, the quality is gonna work out."

NatureMaker's artists work from high-resolution photographic references to achieve an extraordinary degree of accuracy of detail in bark patterns, coloration, striations and texture.

"Perfectionism is an ongoing process," Hanick said. "It's also not just a noun, it's also like a verb. It's a process, and we believe that each project, each part of your life, is supposed to be better than the day before -- we just try to have that as part of our culture."

As demanding as this way of working is, it pays big dividends over time.

"It's the art and the fact that we're really creating something new that's kept us going for the last 30 years, not the fact that we're constantly counting beans," Hanick said, who graduated from Wharton with a bachelor of science degree in economics. "The quality of the work has to be foremost in what we're doing. To me, that's good business."

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