



# RENEWING A BRAND

Under new leadership, Homecrest is revitalized through innovation and efficiency. **by JESSE BURKHART**



**This is not your grandmother's Homecrest. That much is made clear by executives at the Wadena, Minnesota, manufacturer of outdoor furniture, which is now repositioning itself under newly installed leadership.**

When Tim DeJong became the CEO of Homecrest in the summer of 2013, he identified two main areas in which the company needed to improve: product design and manufacturing efficiency. The goal, he says, is to reinvigorate one of the legacy brands of the casual-furniture industry.

"If you're going to be a successful North American manufacturer, the way you're going to compete is through technology and design. In addition, you have to drive speed and efficiency into manufacturing operations. We've focused a significant amount of energy in these areas to relaunch what



Homecrest is about," he says.

The need to revitalize came after Homecrest emerged from the most challenging time in its 51-year history. The company went through two bankruptcies before being resurrected, in January 2008, by Mike Bullinger, an investor who purchased Homecrest's assets. He reopened the plant in Wadena a month later; 70 employees were called back to work, and over the past few years, the company's payroll has grown to about 200 (with seasonal variations).

Now, having regained the trust of retailers, Homecrest is taking the next

step in its rebuilding effort. It's easy to see the source of the heightened emphasis on product innovation: DeJong joined Homecrest after serving as the head of North American manufacturing for Polaris Industries, a U.S. manufacturer of snowmobiles, ATVs, and utility vehicles. During more than 20 years with Polaris, DeJong says, he learned how critical it is for domestic manufacturers to be strong from a development perspective, in terms of both product design and the integration of new technologies.

"I think the market is always looking for what's new, what's innovative, and what's unique.

New, exciting products are a high percentage of total retail volume," he says. "I think that's how you compete in a consumer-products marketplace: by being a leader, from an innovation perspective."

To that end,

Homecrest is implementing technologies that are largely new to the outdoor-furniture industry. For example, specialty retailers who visited the company's showroom during the Chicago International Casual Furniture & Accessories Market™ in September saw the Atlas collection, a new line of aluminum tables and benches. The pieces are decoratively patterned (with the grain of ash wood) using hydrographics, an immersion-printing method for applying designs to 3D objects.

In addition, Homecrest unveiled products that are artistically decorated using dye-infusion technology, along with a line of crushed-glass and aggregate accessories made using a technology previously implemented in the road-building industry. "Product innovation isn't going to be strictly just bending a piece of aluminum or steel differently than it has been bent in the past," DeJong says. "You're going to have to bring new

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