

JAT Holdings: Hard Work And Commitment Pays Off, Thatâ€™S A Fact!



It isn’t everyday that you come across products and services in the market that beg to differ, in the sense, providing total solutions, to those incredibly valuable and moreover sentimental comforts – our furniture. From the get go JAT Holdings had its objective set on developing an industry that in the past lacked an innovative spark. In 1993, Aelian Gunawardene, Managing Director, JAT Holdings, took on the task of transforming a finishing agent for wood coatings to become – in his words, “the undisputed leader” in Sri Lanka’s furniture industry.

By Sonali Kadurugamuwa
Photography Indika de Silva

“When we first started the company in 1993, the furniture market only used a product called NC (Nitro Cellulose) lacquer to add a finish to furniture,” says Gunawardene, implying NC to be a low-end, basic finishing wood coating agent that didn’t meet the criteria of durability when it came to facing the elements.

“NC doesn’t have any chemical, scratch or heat resistance neither does it have good UV resistant properties so should never be used to finish exterior doors and windows,” he adds. While marketing a superior NC to the furniture industry who insists on still using it, JAT was the pioneer to introduce a product called polyurethane (PU) lacquers from Sayerlack of Italy, which is a two pack system that acts as an epoxy between catalyst and resin, forming a very hard coating together, in turn strengthening surfaces’ resistance. According to Gunawardene, “JAT holdings took this product from a very modest beginning to be the lacquer of choice used by leading furniture manufacturers in the market.”

In 1998, a breakthrough in water-based coating changed the way the world did wood finishes forever. Fresh timber has high moisture content, which has to be reduced considerably to around ten to 12 percent before the production of furniture, hence up until this no company had introduced a water based wood coating. “Sayerlack, one of our biggest principles and also the number one wood coating company in the world, pioneered the water based coating for wood,” adds Gunawardene. They were the ones to come up with the technology where you can have a coating, which is water based, but doesn’t affect the structure or moisture content of the wood, “and we introduced it almost immediately to the Sri Lankan market. Sayerlack water based coatings today is one of our top selling products,” he continues. Speaking of the characteristics of water based coating, he says, “it is very flexible, elastic and has UV absorbers so it holds the power of the UV rays during the morning and releases it in the evening, thereby increasing the lifespan of outdoor coatings.” Water based coatings, he notes, does two essentials for timber finishes; while brightening wood aesthetically it also protects it from the penetration of fungus and wood destroying insects like borer. Therefore, the product not only beautifies wood it also protects it. There are some people who feel wood should be left natural without any artificial finishing. This is a grave mistake because unfinished wood will perish rapidly due to the effects of the sun, rain and insects that destroy it. Furthermore, wood is extremely expensive to replace. As explained by Gunawardene, “this is the reason JAT carries the slogan

‘get the right finish first’ because if we are consulted and our advice followed, customers can save considerably.”

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He further explained the steps to be taken in finishing any wooden item stating that foremost it has to be treated with a good preservative depending on the area it is used in. “Products like Sayerlack Wood Preservative stops fungus (blue stain) borer and termites infecting the timber. For wood that is placed in the ground the treatment is different to wood that is above ground,” added Gunawardene.

Secondly, the wood has to be seasoned where it is kiln dried to bring down the moisture content to around ten percent. “This stops the timber warping, shrinking and also does not allow for fungus and bacteria to live in it, due to the lack of moisture,” states Gunawardene.

The final step according to Gunawardene is coating it with the appropriate wood finish. “A rustic finish does not mean it is un-finished. Rustic is also a finish and using the correct lacquers one can achieve a rustic finish while protecting the timber for generations,” he adds.

He also believes that as water based coatings are environmentally beneficial as it does not have solvents that evapourate into the environment, such products should be promoted in the furniture industry as a way of fostering the environment around us, “plus all products that we market come conformed with EN 71 part 3, which means that the products do not contain the harmful effects of eight heavy metals and is therefore non toxic to children.”

JAT Holding’s products are available throughout the country with over 2,000 dealers in the island carrying their products. In addition to having numerous distributors island wide, five of JAT’s own Tech Centre’s in Thalawathugoda, Nawala, Mount Lavinia, Kandy and Trincomalee offer technical expertise on their products. JAT hopes to open three more of these centres in Galle, Kurunegala and Jaffna, in the near future.

On taking their products to international markets, Gunawardene explains that JAT Holdings is the undisputed leader in wood finishes in Bangladesh. “Ten years ago I

visited Bangladesh to find out that all furniture manufacturers used up to eight coats of polish applied by a wad to finish their furniture. As Bangladesh has over 160 million people using only solid wood to manufacture furniture and finishing with polish caused a real challenge for these manufacturers to supply to the high demand in the market." After introducing their product to the Bangladeshi market, according to Gunawardene, it had been extremely successful, as wad and polish had been replaced by spray guns and Sayerlack PU lacquers, while time constraints and poor quality had been traded for cost-efficiency, quick finishes and high quality. "It was only after we introduced PU lacquers and the concept of using MDF, Veneers and other boarded furniture did the Bangladeshi furniture market take off," explains Gunawardene adding that the JAT team in Bangladesh, which includes six Sri Lankans, is doing a commendable job and service to the market which is appreciated by the Industry.

Not too far from the same path of market success, for JAT Holdings, stands the Maldives and South India, which are currently as enthusiastic about their products. "JAT was offered the South Indian market by Sayerlack only two years back and already has started making an impression with the PU and water-based products, while in the Maldives the exterior and interior water-based products are the products of choice being used by all resort owners who need to maintain their wooden items," states Gunewardene.

Gunawardene believes that JAT Holdings could not have come this far without his committed team. Commending their efforts, he admits, "we have a very strong technical team in Sri Lanka with 18 technicians." The company also conducts training programmes, not only for their own staff but also for applicators and laymen. He continues, "we have three trainings island wide every month, which we conduct amongst 60 – 70 wood finish applicators and anybody who is interested in learning. Our users have become the ones who promote our products as they can offer a guarantee to their customer and know that they are using the best product in the world."

More recently, JAT Holdings has added a twist to their business model by representing some of "the world's best brands in the finishing and furnishing industry, with names such as Herman Miller, Brush Master, Borma Wachs, Hettich International and Armstrong," Gunawardene explains, adding that by 2015 their target of attaining a five billion turn over will be achieved. According to him, Herman Miller of the US is known throughout the world as the most technically superior office chair supplier and every product they manufacture is designed by

some of the world’s top designers.

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Explaining further Gunawardene asserts, “while the hotel industry in Sri Lanka is growing rapidly and has been a very important market for us so is the hospital industry, and Herman Miller has a very high-end range of furniture and chairs specially designed for hospitals. We have made presentations to all leading companies in hospitals including Nawaloka, Hemas, Lanka Hospitals and Durdans and introduced the Herman Miller range. The top banks, IT companies and foreign missions are among our leading customers for Herman Miller and Armstrong,” says Gunawardene. Armstrong is the leading brand in the world for timber floorings and mineral fiber and steel ceilings.

He also appreciates the role of social media, stating that “it is a fantastic method of promoting your product and we use it particularly because of its reach and cost-efficiency.”

Looking ahead, JAT Holdings is tying hands with foreign principals to manufacture wall paints for the Sri Lankan market. They would be the second in the market to introduce an internationally recognised and accepted brand. The quality of wall paints and the safety requirements needed in manufacturing an environmentally safe wall paint is what JAT Holdings would focus on.

Another goal, according to Gunawardene, targets covering the rest of the Indian market. “The fact that we have been able to achieve our objectives and during a short period of time, growing year on year is purely because of hard work and there is no substitute for it. Many people may say that they have been lucky but I certainly don’t believe that. It’s all about hard work and we’ve been really fortunate to have a very committed staff that has stuck with us through the years,“ he stresses. In conclusion he says, “we strive to always service our customers efficiently and exceed their expectations. Our main objective is to supply quality products at an affordable price backed with an unmatched service.”

