



Phenix Biocomposites Routs Custom Commercial Furniture

Product Spotlight:
Gerber Sabre 408
Phenix Biocomposites
Mankato, MN

Looks like solid natural granite, works like wood Environ® biocomposite is one of several unique composite materials developed and manufactured by Phenix Biocomposites, located in rural Mankato, Minn., an hour south of Minneapolis. These materials are put to use in furniture tops, flooring, and architectural millwork in addition to signage. Mike Riebel, executive vice president, says Environ is one of the best materials you can rout. So of course he wanted the best router he could find to do the job.



For the past year, Phenix Biocomposites has been using a Gerber Sabre™ 408 precision high-speed router. Riebel reported, “The Sabre allowed us to expand into new and creative product areas and uses for our materials.” This expansion is evident in the addition of a 200,000-square foot facility to the company's existing 50,000-square foot plant.

Phenix Biocomposites relies on the Sabre 408 for different types of fast prototyping and short runs. “One of the reasons we bought it was for its flexibility to do a lot of these very design-oriented prototypes and testings that will eventually go into production. Before, we were very limited in our ability to do the types of designs that we needed in our company,” Riebel explained.

Producing the prototypes and short runs in-house saves a tremendous amount of money compared to the cost of subcontracting. He estimated that the router paid for itself in only a few months.

“Because of the router's incredible speed, we were able to meet timelines more efficiently at a much lower cost,” he acknowledged. “It definitely took a lot of the hassle out of that function of our business. We perform a lot of test runs in which it's critical to keep expensive design and setup time to a minimum.”

The company has found an application which combines the benefits of the composite material with those of the router – custom runs of tables with scanned-in customer logos either carved or inlaid into each table. These tables, approximately three feet in diameter, have rapidly become popular among the customers.

One of the ways the Environ tables are promoted is by making a fast sample, usually for a corporate client or restaurant. One example is Godfather's Pizza in Minnesota. After quickly obtaining the logo, the group at Phenix routs out the material and uses the router's auto inlay technique to inlay another color of material, finishes the table, and ships it out within a day or two.

"After you're done talking to a prospective customer, you can all of a sudden send them a high quality sample. The samples have led to more orders and repeat business," Riebel commented. For a restaurant, the table was designed using gray granite with a rose-colored inlay. A table for the art department of the U.S. Department of Agriculture was light green with a dark green granite inlay.

To achieve the added versatility of quick yet sophisticated carving, he added the Auto-Carve™ 3D option. "It's very innovative and definitely worth it. I debated about whether to put that on at first, but that's one of the best investments I've made," he stated.

In addition to signs and furniture, Phenix has produced prototypes for large flooring companies to show them the array of inlays and borders this automated routing technology can achieve in a solid wood floor. These manufacturers can then provide custom-designed flooring for their customers.

Of his own customers, Riebel said, "They have given a wonderful reception, rave reviews, to everything we've done on the router."

He looked at least ten different routers before choosing Gerber. Although he appreciates Gerber's hardware, it was the integration of both hardware and software that really caught his attention. In his observation, "That package approach really allowed us to do a lot of innovative things very cost affordably."

Riebel continued, "There is very little training time required to be productive on this system. We've put people on it with virtually no experience, and they were proficient within almost the same amount of time as I was. Because the software is designed so well, it allows a faster learning curve; and people can be more creative in a shorter time."

He went on to say that the accessibility of the table makes loading and unloading simple. He had also found the system to be trouble-free, from its installation to the present.

Riebel reflected upon his company's progress thus far. He concluded, "We've experienced growth through innovation, and we're able to develop new products faster. Nowadays, you have to be very flexible in meeting customer needs and providing rapid turnaround, and I think the Sabre 408 allows us to do that."

Gerber Sabre and Auto-Carve are trademarks of Gerber Scientific Products.

Environ is a registered trademark of Phenix Biocomposites.

©2007 Gerber Scientific, Inc. All Right Reserved