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# WE'VE JUST BEGUN!



## DISTINCTIVE DESIGNS & CABINETRY INC.

We've just begun!

BY SCOTT LESLIE  
*The Business Link*

### Past

In April of 2002, Anne Lennard-Otto found herself unemployed after working for a kitchen design company in Stoney Creek. In many ways, the three years she spent working here became the impetus for her current business—Distinctive Designs & Cabinetry Inc., an interior design company based out of St. Catharines that specializes in kitchens, bathrooms, cabinet management and office design.

Anne originally began her design career as a marine drafting technologist, having graduated as the first Canadian female from the Marine Technologist Apprenticeship Program at the Port Weller Dry Docks. By the early 1990s, however, she had found her niche in kitchen design and began working in kitchen design for a local manufacturer. However, her employer didn't demonstrate a commitment to either their industry or their employees, and Anne decided

to leave and start up her own design company. In the summer 2002, Distinctive Designs was born!

As the owner and designer of Distinctive Designs, Anne rented a computer and began working out of the tiny confines of a bedroom at home, keeping samples in the trunk of her car. It was a challenging time for Anne as she worked long hours trying to build up her design firm and get herself established.

"Fortunately, I'd grown ties to the construction community through local associations and developed business relationships that have been instrumental to the success of my business," she explains. "However, I continued to remain in Niagara because my family is here. None of this would have been rewarding to me if I couldn't share it with my family."

At first, all Anne really wanted to do was to pay the bills and help raise her two small children. But she quickly realized how much she loved designing kitchens and making her clients happy. Anne slowly began to demonstrate a natural ability as a business owner. Her friends and associates had always encouraged Anne to believe in

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Anne-Lennard Otto, owner and designer of Distinctive Designs & Cabinetry Inc.

herself. As her reputation grew and the work began to roll in, Anne didn't need any more convincing to grow Distinctive Designs.

"It was about this time that I realized something about myself," she explains. "Once I understood that I needed to strike a balance between working in the business and working on my business, I began to realize the potential for real growth. Only at that point did it really start to happen."

**Present**

At Distinctive Design, Anne and her team put a large emphasis on the client—whether they're a homeowner or contractor. Anne starts by having an initial consultation with the client where she can get a firm sense of their wants and desires and help them to achieve their "dream kitchen."

When it comes to creating kitchen designs, Anne and her team focus on functionality, making sure that each design fully reflects the client's needs, personality and lifestyle. Throughout the process, Anne works closely with her customers to determine what they're looking for with a particular space—everything from style and colour choices to budget concerns. Anne believes in making sure she works with the client on the project from start to finish so she can achieve the best result for them.

As an independent designer, Anne has the creative freedom to explore new avenues of design, specialty niches and non-traditional design avenues.

"We're not restricted to one specific manufacturer's product line," she explains. "That allows us to personalize your selections from an endless array of wood species, design options, cabinetry,

door styles and finishing choices."

Distinctive Design promotes members of the Niagara Home Builders' Association, qualified renovators, custom builders and local suppliers to provide a level of service that is beneficial to their clients' wishes. Anne hand selects all the manufacturers and installers she works with on each project, proudly working with many vendors, fabricators and interior designers throughout Niagara.

As a successful entrepreneur, Anne is always mindful of the need to satisfy her customers' expectations. Each year, she and her staff attend several workshops and seminars on topics like design and colour coordination. They also attribute a good deal of their customer satisfaction to continually perfecting their internal procedures.

"I love to read about the newest trends in design and colour," Anne says. "I often attend design shows and research on-line through the Home Builders Association. I also consult with many of my business mentors, and I'm fortunate to consider many of them good friends."

In recent years, Anne's commitment to the community has brought her many moments of peace and fulfillment. A strong supporter of charities like Gillian's Place and Big Brothers / Big Sisters, she is a member of Women in Niagara and the organization's International Women's Day Luncheon advisory committee. Anne is also big supporter for Habitat for Humanity. When she's doing work for a client, she often recommends that they donate their older cabinets to Habitat for Humanity. (This non-profit organization will pick up cabinets for resale at their Restore and will provide a small tax receipt.)

*Continued on page 14...*

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In the business community, she has been an active member of the Niagara Home Builders' Association since 1992, and proudly sits on their board of directors. Anne continues to lecture to the Construction Techniques / Renovation Program at Niagara College to help inspire today's students and uphold her commitment to being a strong business role model. In 2010, she also became a member of the St. Catharines Ad & Sales Association.

**Future**

Anne has seen the success of Distinctive Designs go far beyond her initial dream. She's gone through one expansion after another—from "surviving" to "thriving."

Today, Distinctive Designs has become one of Niagara's premier kitchen design specialists, serving clients throughout the region—and even taking on select projects like a condo renovation development in Toronto and a cottage renovation in Parry Sound. Nearly 100% of their projects now come through customer referrals—and that strong word of mouth has helped her continue to expand.

In 2005, she established a new office, showroom and studio at 22 Perma Court, Unit 2 in St. Catharines to accommodate her growth. Anne now has four employees including a full-time installer, and serves customers throughout Niagara and southern Ontario. Anne has also diversified her services in recent years by working with selected contractors in the building and development of sub-divisions. Anne always welcomes new business and looks forward to working with new contractors.

Last year was a banner year for Anne and her team. They won in the Most Outstanding Kitchen Renovation category at the 2010 Niagara Home Builders Association Awards of Excellence, and in the Most Outstanding Kitchen Renovation category at the 2010

Ontario Home Builders' Association Awards of Distinction. Anne also received the Innovative Small Business Award at the 2010 Niagara Entrepreneur of the Year Awards.

Anne is currently in the middle of several kitchen renovations and custom home projects. But she isn't one to sit still.

As Anne approaches her 10-year anniversary in business, she looks back with a tremendous amount of pride. But she also looks forward to expanding her team of designers, working with talented individuals and developing innovative designs for her long list of clients.

Every day is filled with creative challenges. And Anne wouldn't have it any differently.

"I really love what I do," she says, "and the natural high I get when clients see my vision and believe it's also the best design for them. I've always had a real passion for design and I think that comes through in every one of our projects." **BL**

We are proud to be a part of the success of Distinctive Designs & Cabinetry Inc.



**Susan Danychuk**

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