BY MARC SPAGNUOLO

To Build or Buy?

Cost, time and a spouse's patience help determine the course of action.

It's a dilemma nearly every woodworker must face. Whether you are a weekend warrior or a woodworking pro, eventually you will ask yourself, "Should I build or buy?" I know for many, the thought of building their own furniture was the reason for getting into woodworking in the first place, and buying furniture is borderline sacrilegious. But we need to be realistic. We simply cannot build everything. For the pros, time is money and working on a personal project means one less commission for a client. And for you hobbyists, well, you barely get enough shop time as it is. But building things for our own homes is really at the heart of what we do. The need to surround ourselves with our own creations is natural, instinctive and very important to us. But things such as immediate gratification and cost are always there to confuse the decision-making process. There has to be a better way!

That's the thought that ran through my head as my wife and I pondered the furniture (or lack thereof) in our new house. Here's a small sampling of some of the things we need: a kitchen table and chairs, entertainment centers for both the family room and bedroom, office furniture, a coffee table, a closet organizer and a new bedroom set.

So how do I decide what to build and what to buy? Considering I won't have a shop right away, things that are needed urgently are not good candidates for my project list – for example, the kitchen table and chairs.



Analysis. *Sure, as a woodworker, you could build all the furniture you need – but that may not be the most practical approach.*

As much as I would love to build these items, we can't go very long without a place to eat. So let's break it down. A kitchen table is a simple project that would take a week or two, at the most. But how about those chairs? Well, that's a different story. You either need to do a bunch of mock-ups or you need to find a set of plans that are close to what you want, and modify them accordingly. Assuming I find an appropriate plan, I still have the challenge of making the entire thing look nicer than the table and chairs my wife just fell in love with at the store. All things considered, this is one project I am not going to tackle. If I had a fully functioning shop, I might consider making the table and buying the chairs. That's an easier pill to swallow than giving up on the entire grouping.

Now although I eventually arrived at a decision concerning the table and chairs, I may have saved myself some time and frustration if I had some simple way of addressing the build-or-buy question. So after some serious thought over a cup of coffee at my new kitchen table, I've come up with a quick, decision-helping worksheet that may in fact do just that. All you need to do is answer the following nine questions as honestly as possible then add up your score. The final result tells you whether you should build or buy. As it is, the worksheet will give you a very generalized objective answer.

The Wood Whisperer's Score

So just for fun, let's test the quiz with a real-life scenario. Our kitchen features a small

Online EXTRAS

To download a PDF of the Wood Whisperer's Build-or-Buy Worksheet, go to:

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Wood Whisperer's Build-or-Buy Worksheet

Difficulty of the Project
1 - Very difficult. Will require research, mock-ups, new tools or new skills.
2 - Moderately difficult. Will be a good test of your skills but nothing you can't handle.
3 - Easy. Should be a slam dunk!

Urgency of Project
1 - We needed it yesterday.
2 - Can live without it for a couple months.
3 - It doesn't matter when it's completed

Likelihood of You Actually Finishing the Project
1 - I am not much of a completer, but I love starting new projects!
2 - Most of my projects are completed but I occasionally lose interest and abandon one here or there.
3 - I finish every project that comes through the shop.

Recipient Patience Level
1 - If it's not done on schedule, you are in trouble!
2 - It would be nice if it was completed on schedule, but if it takes a little longer it's OK.
3 - As long as it's made by you, your recipient has the patience of a saint.

Cost Savings
1 - It will actually cost more to build it yourself.
2 - It's about the same price.
3 - Building it yourself saves you money.

Your Stubborn Pride
1 - You are easygoing. One less thing on your to-do list!
2 - You prefer to build it yourself, but the purchased piece is welcome in the house.
3 - You never let him/her live it down if they actually purchased a piece of furniture.

Quality Level of Store-bought Product
1 - Much better than you could build in your shop.
2 - About the same quality construction and materials.
3 - They can't even come close to your level of craftsmanship.

Visibility the Item Will Get in the Home
1 - No one will ever really even see it.
2 - Some people might notice it when they visit.
3 - It's in plain view and would get a lot of attention from guests.

Need for Customization
1 - No specific size/color/species requirements (anything will do).
2 - It doesn't have to be perfect, but there is some consideration given to size/color/species.
3 - Very specific size/color/species requirements.

If your score falls between 8 and 17, you should buy it. If your score falls between 19 and 27, you should build it. If your score is right in the middle at 18, see below for suggestions on how to break the tie.

island that would look great with a pair of bar stools. Unfortunately, given the close proximity of the kitchen table, we decided against it. As luck would have it, we recently came across a unique pair of stools. Instead of having a full round seat, these stools feature one straight side. The low profile design was a little strange to the eye at first but would fit our kitchen perfectly. I pulled out my phone and began taking pictures from all angles. Although these stools looked pretty sturdy, I just knew I could improve on the design. My mind began to race with all the possibilities but before I could get too carried away, I received a little tap on my shoulder. Apparently, my wife was having a different reaction to the stools. She pointed to the price tag: $90 for two stools. She indicated that the finish would match perfectly. Then she executed the death blow by reminding me that I don't even have a shop right now. I had no choice but to raise the white flag and surrender. With as much dignity as I could muster, I picked up the box and placed it in our cart next to my Honey Nut Cheerios. Later that evening, I un-boxed the stools and found that they were completely assembled! And to add insult to injury, they had the audacity to be sturdy and well-built. At this point, there was absolutely no way I could deny that purchasing these stools was the right thing to do. Sigh . . . so let's see what the quiz would have told us. Here are my answers in order: 2, 2, 3, 2, 1, 1, 2, 2, 2 = 17

My total score was 17, just barely squeaking into the "buy it" recommendation. That does seem a little odd because at the time of purchase, the decision seemed so clear-cut. So when taking this quiz it's important to remember that it doesn't take into account the fact that some questions carry more weight than others. Perhaps you have a very impatient recipient. Maybe the need for customization is paramount. For me, cost was a major factor. After our recent move, things are pretty tight financially. And from



Store-bought. *These two stools were bought rather than made. The low cost, compared with the time and money is would take to make them, wasn't worth an argument.*

my estimation, building these stools would have cost me roughly $20-$30 more in wood alone. This doesn't even take into account the finish materials and the shop time. Giving the cost more weight in the quiz would definitely push me deeper into the "buy it" recommendation. So feel free to alter the values of the quiz as you see fit, especially if your score is 18.

If you folks are anything like me, you have this vision in your head that eventually everything in your house will be built by you. But I have to be realistic. In order to keep my wife happy, I need to operate on a certain timetable and occasionally swallow my pride. A quiz like this is helpful to me because it serves as an "impartial third party," giving me a gentle nudge one way or the other. Now you and I both know that you will probably just do what you want to do anyway. But at least if the quiz results come out in your favor, you can use it as part of your argument. **PW**

Marc is a professional woodworker as well as the creator and host of The Wood Whisperer (thewoodwhisperer.com). The Wood Whisperer (an instructional Internet woodworking show) represents Marc's three passions: woodworking, technology and education.

About This Column

Our "Wood Whisperer" column features woodworking thoughts and ideas, along with shop techniques from Marc Spagnuolo. Most columns have a corresponding video related to the techniques or views expressed in the column available at popularwoodworking.com/video.