

Not all doom and gloom for furniture industry

The Greek Philosopher, Plato, said that necessity is the mother of invention, while the American scientist, Jonathan Schattke, added that invention's father is creativity and knowledge the midwife. For many people these are mere quotes with which to impress or motivate colleagues, but for Neil Curtis, director of the newly formed City Group, it proved to be a mantra for immediate change in a world fighting a virus.

"The COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying lockdown had a devastating effect on many of us in the furniture industry," says Curtis. "However, if there is one thing that I can add to what Plato and Schattke said, it is that you need to break old habits and act on opportunities immediately if you want to make a success of your invention."

City Group is the brainchild of Curtis and George dos Ramos, owner of well-known South African furniture factory and supplier, City Office. According to Curtis he was watching international news one evening back in March, when he realised that South Africa is going to have a serious shortage of medical furniture, specifically affordable hospital beds for field and temporary hospitals. He immediately called Dos Ramos who needed no convincing to turn the idea into reality, while at the same time supporting the call of President Cyril Ramaphosa to help the government and all communities in fighting the pandemic.

"I knew George's factory was at a standstill owing to lockdown, and for entrepreneurs like us it is all about providing job opportunities in an economy that has been retracting over the past couple of years. The retrenchment of employees is a non-negotiable and by pivoting the factory to manufacture hospital beds, could be a lifeline for them," says Curtis.

Within days, the necessary permits to provide essential services were obtained, while at the same time they had to look at design, sourcing durable steel and making sure the beds will be easy to transport and quick to assemble. Simultaneously, the two entrepreneurs came to the conclusion a new, separate branded business from Dos Ramos's City Office is the preferred way forward and City Group was formed.

| Co Registration Number: 2009/003078/08 | Public Benefit Number: 930 031 297 | Level Four B-BBEE Contributor |

Directors: B Isaacs, JJA Claassen, J Coffin-Grey, J Van Rooyen, LG Dirksen, M Frehse, ME Richardson, M Smith, MF Tshigo, NJ Badenhorst, PC Grey, PS Niewoudt, RMS Lethoba, SP Lunga, VA Abrahams, WW Dyers

“We recognised the current need for an affordable, strong and versatile product, while at the same time offering modular scalability to meet the requirements for any situation, including side rails, adding wheels and making it possible for a health worker to move a patient from the bed to an emergency trolley without assistance,” says Curtis. “To establish and uphold a good reputation, it was pivotal to design and manufacture an upmarket product that will last for a long time and comes with a 5-year warranty.”

Barely two weeks later, the factory assembled the first prototype hospital bed complying with SANS 521 specifications and within a month they were producing 500 beds for their first customer.

But, as with any business, it was and still is not always smooth sailing. According to Curtis, the challenges they faced over the past few months were numerous. Product development proved a nightmare in that specifications were not readily available. Furthermore, in the past, South African hospital-care facilities seemed content with importing medical furniture while focusing on the high end of the specification spectrum.

“Lockdown put an end to that, for the time being anyway,” says Curtis. “The opportunity for South African businesses, specifically those in the furniture industry, is to change the value chain, manufacturing and procuring locally and preferably to do this on a permanent basis in the future.”

While South African businesses are asking where the promised funding of government is, City Group was trying to find the end-users of their newly developed product. The decision makers at corporate companies, who were discussing sponsoring field hospitals internally and government officials responsible for the procurement of medical furniture were difficult to identify.

“Yes, we are still finding it a challenge, but we also relied on industry organisations like SAFI for support. In fact, it is not only providing beds now, but trying to solve the problem of too many beds when we might go back to a more *normal* time in the future,” says Curtis. According to him, that is why the beds were designed in such a way that they can double as bedding for hostels, dormitories at schools and government organisations like the SANDF when needed.

By producing locally at an affordable price, opportunities exist to expand to neighbouring countries as well, especially while international imports are at a basic stand still.

A standout innovation implemented recently is offering sanitising stations on short- and medium-term rentals. Currently, City Group offers a wall-mounted unit, a floor-standing dispenser and a 25 litre sanitising stand named Simply Big. According to Curtis, they are very aware of the current economic climate, which is why rentals make sense. “By providing essential personal protection products without capital outlay, maintenance costs and with product consistency and quality to businesses, we can make a positive difference in their budget.”

“We are proud that we were able to approach and solve much-needed issues for the healthcare sector by escalating our product lines to preventative equipment, furniture and accessories as well as providing health and hygienic related products nationally!” says Curtis. “I am extremely proud that we could do this in record time and with the support we received from family and employees in difficult times, once-again proved that anything is possible!”

- City Group is based in Robertville, Randburg, with a warehouse and distribution centre in Cape Town. More about the group’s products can be found at www.citygroup.co.za.
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