



# buzz feed

IN AN AGE OF ONLINE SHOPPING AND CHEAP KNOCK-OFFS,  
THE INTERNET MIGHT JUST BE OUR LINK TO THE PAST.

*Writer Chris Harrigan Photographer Saskia Wilson*

FRED KIMEL AND PHIL MARTIN ARE UNLIKELY CHAMPIONS OF THE CARPENTRY TRADE. THE FORMER BANK WORKERS HAVEN'T LAID HANDS ON A PIECE OF PLY SINCE THEIR HIGH SCHOOL WOODWORK CLASS, SO ON PAPER YOU WOULDN'T DESCRIBE THEM AS HANDY.

Yet, as founders of Handkrafted – an online marketplace connecting normal people with craftspeople – they've carved out a spot for themselves as leaders of a growing community of hands-on makers.

It's difficult to take the maxim 'do what you love' seriously when the skills at your disposal are a long way from the ones you want. By surrounding themselves with creative people they looked up to, the duo may have achieved a slight work-around.

As a collector of antique and vintage furniture, Kimel developed an affinity for the makers he encountered in his spare time, while Martin caught the bug renovating. "I'm in awe of the skill and artistry involved in shaping raw materials into beautiful and purposeful objects," Kimel says. It was an affection they wanted to share, and Handkrafted became the medium.

But the road to artisanal-matchmaking had some detours. For years, both Kimel and Martin worked at Macquarie Bank. Kimel spent 10 years designing and managing online platforms for investment banks, while Martin worked in software development and IT management. It wasn't what they wanted to be doing, but teaming up wasn't a calculated move. "Last year we independently decided to pursue careers more aligned with our interests and passions," Kimel explains, which happened to be the same thing: woodwork and custom-made furniture.

Walking into their brick and sandstone office in Sydney's CBD, it's apparent that Kimel and Martin's end of the operation is more aligned with BuzzFeed than a buzz saw. Based in Tank Stream Labs – a collaborative hub home to over 25 Australian start-ups – Handkrafted is the techy heart of an old-world trade. It's a disjointed partnership, but one that works. Customers post info online about the kinds of things they want made and, like a dating site, Handkrafted hooks them up with craftspeople – ranging from professionals to students to hobbyists – who can do the job.

They have makers in almost every state and territory, tethered across Wollongong and Waratah Bay by the sinewy tentacles of cyberspace. A cursory glance reveals the range of different objects available, from Tasmanian blackwood bookshelves to bamboo bike frames, or walnut chess and backgammon tables. Though other skills are on the horizon – the site will soon open to creators of all types – for now it's mainly carpenters taking the orders, who range from high-end, traditional designers to innovators working with reclaimed timber.

Like most online communities, Handkrafted's seemingly homogenous wood-enthusiasts are a diverse group. A self-taught woodworker, Ben Taylor is exemplary of the site's un-businesslike approach. "I was working full-time in the city as an account manager for a marketing and sales company," he recalls. "Quit that job. Felt much more comfortable wearing shorts covered in sawdust than a suit." Working part-time, Taylor honed his woodcraft skills in his garage, and started to turn recycled wood into usable furniture. "I basically just built things for myself and for friends and family," he remembers. Now taking orders for reclaimed timber cabinets and tables online has become a full-time occupation.

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THERE'S A MYTHOS THAT PITS CYBERSPACE AND THE REAL WORLD AS DISPARATE REALMS SEPARATED BY AN LCD BARRIER... FOR SITES LIKE HANDKRAFTED, ONE FACILITATES THE OTHER.

*Page 126, from top, left*  
Makers Josh Pinkus, Evan Hughes and Natasha Dickins.

*Opposite*  
A carpenter's apron, chisels and tables from Evan Hughes's Sydney workshop.

*Page 130*  
Handkrafted founders Fred Kimel and Phil Martin.





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Josh Pinkus represents Handkrafted's more professional wing. Focusing on one-offs using century-old lumber and metals from barns and bridges, his pieces have a rustic, time-worn feel. A former apprentice who cut his teeth working with various building firms, Pinkus ventured out on his own after becoming a qualified carpenter in 2007. Since then, he's worked on jobs both creative and corporate, making industrial tables and old timber signs for clients including Batlow Cider and Google.

Evan Hughes is similarly well-versed. An experienced residential carpenter and joiner, he has moved into the custom furniture game under the name Sankhara Co., building everything from reclaimed burnished Douglas fir coffee tables to one-of-a-kind chopping boards from recycled Australian stringybark. Not every project starts with a tree, reclaimed, recycled or otherwise. Natasha Dickens of Little Red Industries focuses on furniture restorations, taking dilapidated chairs and tables and turning them into modern/vintage hybrids with a little wood treatment and reupholstery work.

There's a mythos that pits cyberspace and the real world as disparate realms separated by an LCD barrier, one sucking time away from the other. But as the raft of modern handicraft businesses like Etsy and Artsy demonstrate,

being on- and offline isn't a zero-sum game. For sites like Handkrafted, one facilitates the other. "We feel strongly about giving opportunities to newly emerging makers who are highly skilled but don't have traditional channels available to them to connect with clients," Kimel says, then lists them off. "The students, the apprentices, the retirees, stay-at-home mothers, the hobbyists and others who cannot be found in typical business listings and directories." On the consumer side, like eBay or Amazon, the site's pull is linking consumers with products they're after. Each of Handkrafted's makers may differ in style and skill, but it's this underlying commitment to sustainable, high-quality craftsmanship that binds them.

In internet parlance, the handmade movement has gone viral; we may be spending more time online, but much of that is spent looking up stuff people have made out in the real world. The question for Handkrafted is whether that kind of enthusiasm will translate into cash. "Our business model is very simple and transparent," Kimel says, pointing out that their fee – 10 per cent of the price of commission – is significantly less than the margin charged by existing channels like shops and galleries.

Predicting trends is a difficult job in any market; in the social media world it's close

to soothsaying. Well-designed programs that make sense on paper can disappear without a trace (remember Friendster?), and once successful behemoths can lose their edge without warning (think MySpace), while obscure and downright banal apps can take off without rhyme or reason (if anyone can explain why *Flappy Bird* was more successful than the games it ripped off we would love to hear from you). But so far, things look good.

In two short months Handkrafted has gone from having two registered builders to over 40, and hired Serina Huynh as a full-time web developer to keep the digital side of things going. "Our vision is for a global marketplace," Kimel says. "Why shouldn't you be able to connect directly with a knife maker in Japan whose family has been perfecting that art for many generations?" he asks.

Kimel and Martin's success will not depend so much on what's happening online, but what's happening off: so long as people love well-crafted objects there will be work for those who make them. "We want people to connect with the person behind an object, and how it was made," Kimel says. "Hopefully, they can also have a part in shaping its design." It would seem the people – glued as they are to their smartphones – want this too. •