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Nightingale - Quality begins with Integrity

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by [Rob Kirkbride](#)

In a spotlessly clean room separated from the rest of Nightingale's Toronto headquarters is a furniture testing lab with machines whose sole job is to destroy the furniture attached to them. The lab is constantly running -- 24 hours a day, seven days a week -- brutal cycle after cycle.

The fact that an office furniture maker has a testing lab is not newsworthy. Most of the major office furniture makers in the industry have one. Because of Nightingale's relatively small size, it is worth noting, though not surprising when you start talking to the company's management. Quality is on everyone's mind at the Canadian seating manufacturer. It is part of this company's culture and it starts at the very top.



After talking with executives at Nightingale it is clear: Quality is more than just making sure the furniture you build doesn't break. For companies that do it right, it is woven into the fabric of the firm. For Nightingale, that culture of quality is exemplified in a minuscule number. Four-tenths of 1 percent. That's the percentage of furniture that doesn't make the grade at Nightingale.

"It could be smaller," said Ed Breen, chief operating officer, half joking to Joe Paiva, vice president of operations, a 40 year employee who runs the plant and testing lab. "Once a chair goes out of this factory, it doesn't come back. We know it is right."

Nightingale was founded in 1928 by Buddy Nightingale in downtown Toronto. His wife Kathryn was a passionate designer and sketched a chair concept -- a high density stacker. Buddy Nightingale was an industrial engineer and he built his wife's concept into the XL Stacker, which has become the most copied chair in the world.

The Breen family purchased the business in 1991, though they always keep in mind Buddy Nightingale's design mandate to "create visually impressive seating with the highest quality standards that make people comfortable for long periods of time."



Bill Breen, the family patriarch who is semi-retired, but still plays an active role in design, quality and finance, said everyone in the company helps make quality top of mind in everything they do. "I'm a big believer in doing things

right the first time," he said. "It is one thing to produce a great product, but if the customer finds it somehow defective later, what's the purpose? When the (dealer or customer) get a chair, the last thing they want is a problem."

So instead of letting little problems fester into larger ones, the company believes in tackling quality control at every step of the process. The test lab isn't just for finished products. Nightingale tests all its components as they come in the plant. Gas cylinders go through several tests. Casters are put through the ringer. The testing not only helps Nightingale customers, it also builds relationships and the trust factor with its suppliers as well. The suppliers know Nightingale tests and demands high quality components. They know there is no cutting corners.

Nightingale tests well beyond BIFMA standards. Ed Breen said if a chair does not pass Nightingale standards, it does not leave the factory. That goes for every part as well. Each of the gas cylinders that are used for a Nightingale chair bear the Nightingale logo.

Quality control is found throughout the plant as well, even in the smallest parts. For example, it uses riveted T-nuts to attach its chair back to the frame instead of the smaller, weaker parts used by some other manufacturers. The chairs built by Nightingale are assembled as they go down the line. At the end of the process, they are partially disassembled and packed into a reinforced box. A cardboard box might sound like a simple and forgotten part of the packaging process, but not here. Each box has an internal cardboard scaffolding that keeps the chair from getting damaged. Assembly is easy for the installer and instructions are found on the flap of the box.



When you get beyond the near-obsession with quality, Nightingale has a broad line of attractive seating as well. The company's offering is anchored by its XO line, which includes multiple choices for any budget and need. There are top of the line task chairs with all the options like the CXO and workhorse task chairs like the WXO. But it is the company's new iC2 chair, launched last year at NeoCon, that is really changing perceptions about the company. Nightingale has always been known for its quality. Now chairs like iC2 are turning heads with its designs as well. iC2 is a sleek ergonomic powerhouse that can go head to head with any in the industry in terms of looks and performance.

Look for a slightly updated version of iC2 at NeoCon this year. Unlike many seating makers that launch new versions of chairs all the time, Nightingale believes in improving on its products -- much like tech companies release versions of software. This new version of iC2 will effectively be the 2.0 edition.

If the company has done one thing poorly, it might be promoting itself, though it is getting better at showing the world what it can do. Last year Nightingale took a permanent spot in the Merchandise Mart. And they hired industry veteran Brad Armacost just over a year ago to build the brand in the U.S. Again, that humility is part of the company culture as well. Ed Breen calls it a "quiet confidence." "We do what we do and we do it right," he said.

Though Bill Breen sold his medical device business for a huge sum, he has lived in the same modest house for 50 years. He has been married for more than 50 years. And he drives a car until it falls apart. When Ed Breen decided to join the family business after successful careers in the food and beverage industry, his father took him through the factory. They visited the factory every day for Ed Breen's first two weeks on the job.

Bill Breen introduced him to each employee personally, often noting their wives and children and telling his son a little bit about each person. "What is your job?" Bill Breen asked his son. Ed Breen said he rattled off an answer about sales, profits and other business related items. "No!" his father shouted and slammed his hand on his desk. "Your job is to make sure those people you met have a job."

While the fortunes of other seating manufacturers rise and fall, Nightingale has experienced steady growth, even through some tough times. That's how Ed Breen likes it. He wants the company to succeed, but he wants that success built on the bedrock of integrity, quality and design -- in that order.

"We don't owe a penny to anyone in the world, we are in a strong position and work with A-list dealers who are our partners and want to grow with us long-term," he said. "That is a great position to be in."

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