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A Cumberland comeback: Local manufacturer revives line of high-end office pieces

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**By Rob Kirkbride
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In the high-end executive office-furniture market, a strong name gets you into the board room -- figuratively and literally.

Brayton. Knoll. Hickory.

Grand Rapids office-furniture maker Scott Gilmore wants the Cumberland Furniture brand to once again stand with the other classics. Gilmore, who bought the name and catalog of the New York company out of bankruptcy five years ago, is hoping to revive the brand that once was a lead designer of executive office furniture.

"There's real value to the name and heritage of Cumberland," said Gilmore, whose 20-year-old furniture production-and-parts business near U.S. 131 and 28th Street bears his name.

Reviving the Cumberland brand was not easy, though.

The first step in breathing life into Cumberland was to stabilize the company and move it in-house.

The Cumberland catalog included hundreds of designs, many of them dated.

The second step was paring down the catalog and establishing a company focus.

Gilmore needed help. He called Gary Lee Partners, a respected Chicago design firm, to freshen up the line of high-end executive desks, chairs and tables. "They went through the whole catalog and weeded out everything old, everything that was dated," he said.

The result is a refreshed company, with a line of about 35 pieces.

Cumberland Furniture showed a new line, called Modo, at the NeoCon office-furniture show in June.

The addition of Cumberland Furniture could double or triple the size of Gilmore's company.

And despite the recession, Gilmore said the timing is good. "There's not a lot of new initiatives out there, so we've gotten a lot of people's attention that we wouldn't have gotten if the economy was better," he said.

Even with the recession, Gilmore said his company is on pace to grow by 15 percent this year.

"My goal has always been to design and produce my own line of furniture," he said. "It's nice to make furniture for others, but there's something exciting about making it for yourself."

The core business remains office-furniture parts supplies, but Gilmore said diversity can only strengthen the company. "We can't stake our growth on the success of other people," he said.

Reviving something old is in Gilmore's blood.

His father, John Gilmore, and brother, Greg Gilmore, are responsible for rejuvenating many area businesses and restaurants, including the B.O.B. downtown.

"In my family, there's always been a romance to buying old things and fixing them up," he said.