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# TOBACCONIST

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Recommending the right pairing

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# Commercial humidors

*building, expanding, getting it right*

Walk-in and cabinet displays are powerful marketing devices, but to merit the cost they must function superbly

BY WILLIAM C. NELSON

Many a cigar lover first became dazzled by the amazing art of cigar making on a first visit to a tobacconist's walk-in humidor. Most of us can recall the revelation we felt on first experiencing that unique environment. The sight of all those lovely smokes lined up on the shelves and the heavenly scent that washes over us serve as perhaps the most potent marketing tools contained in a tobacco shop. Properly appointed cabinets can present their own feast for the eyes as well. This kind of marketing allure—sensory, even sensuous—might be underappreciated owing to its very passivity. It's not the hard sell but rather the best and subtlest kind of pitch—made by virtue of mere beauty in product and presentation, no words necessary.

We called on a few commercial humidor designers to take a read of the state of the industry (from what we heard, humidor makers are thriving), to solicit best practices and helpful ideas you should bear in mind as you contemplate expansion—and to list for us some pitfalls worth remembering if you wish to invest in walk-in or cabinet space.

It is not entirely surprising that despite the uncertainties of the industry, tobacconists continue to show increasing interest in expanding and improving their humidor facilities. Cigars are still selling well and finding new enthusiasts, so businesses are adding humidor space in response.

## **Cigar sales in non-tobacconist venues are increasing**

More than once we heard it mentioned that not all of the businesses adding humidor space these days are tobacconists. Fabiola Karolewicz, co-owner of Wood Projections Inc. of Miami, tells us, "Despite regulations, cigar sales are still pretty hot, and cigars are being sold now in a lot of convenience stores and liquor stores—a lot of places where people actually walk in to buy something else."

Bob Staebell, owner of Staebell & Associates in Dallas, makers of Aristocrat Cabinet Humidors, sounded a similar note, saying, "We are seeing



a lot of growth in small walk-in humidors in the convenience industry.”

This can be viewed as disquieting news from the tobacconist’s perspective—the idea that less knowledgeable sellers are moving in on the tobacconist’s action. This always brings a danger that potential customers will receive suboptimal advice or poorly kept products and in despair turn to some other pastime. If tobacconists are facing pressure from different kinds of stores, that is all the more reason for tobacco shop owners to make their humidors special, of a quality that sets them apart as local attractions.

### **Golden Rule: Stick with Spanish cedar**

The most frequent caution we heard was that humidors should incorporate only Spanish cedar—not the cheaper American red cedar or other aromatic woods. Staebell says, “American red cedar is very inexpensive. But still, nobody wants their cigars to end up tasting like a gerbil cage. You’d be surprised how many people over the years have built using American red cedar.”

Staebell says that whenever a commercial humidor owner seeks his services, he asks for a current photograph of the facility so that he will know what he is dealing with. “About once a month,” he says, “I get a picture of American red cedar that was cheap, because that’s what some contractor suggested.”

The benefits of Spanish cedar are many and well-known, but they are probably worth repeating: Spanish cedar inhales and exhales moisture with famous efficiency, providing a large quantity of biomass to serve as a natural moisture reservoir in your storage space, helping to even out any peak-and-valley influences your humidity level might otherwise cycle through. Get a room or cabinet full of Spanish cedar stabilized at 70 percent humidity, and you will have a nice, all-natural moisture buffer built in place. Moreover, Spanish cedar is also known to help discourage tobacco beetles, and it imparts a much-valued, delicate scent to cigars without overpowering your expensive inventory.

### **Precise humidification is indispensable**

“Cigar consumers have become more sophisticated than they used to be,” Staebell observes. “They know when they pick up a cigar if it has not been stored well.” It stands to reason, then, that spending a bit more money on your humidification system is not a reckless investment. Still, too many cigar merchants continue to rely on consumer-grade humidification systems and controls, devices that were made for home use, with humidistats perhaps no more accurate than a range of 10 percent—far too wide a window for any commercial cigar application.

“Humidification is probably the greatest pitfall in designing a humidor—getting a properly sized



Photo courtesy of Newsham's Woodshop Inc.

humidification system, and getting one that will maintain accurate settings, whether it’s for a cabinet or a walk-in,” explains Staebell. “My opinion is, unless you have a good door seal and precision electronics, it’s just a pretty box.”

Staebell describes one option, costing about \$500, in which he takes an off-the-shelf humidifier, disables the control and mates it to a different \$250 control that is accurate to within 2 percent. He adds, “A big growth market I’m seeing is people tapping into their city water, putting in a reverse osmosis filtration system and using a wall-mounted ultrasonic humidifier. That’s a more expensive option. It runs about \$1,500 for the [reverse osmosis] system and the ultrasonic humidifier with a quality digital control. But it’s also the most maintenance-free.”

Tom Newsham, owner of Newsham’s Woodshop Inc. in Aldan, Pennsylvania, sees benefit in distributing humidification among several low-maintenance units. “Then if there’s a problem, you can dispose of just one unit instead of having to deal with an outage from a single multi-thousand-dollar unit,” Newsham says. “If you have a number of units running, and one breaks down, you still have the others going, so the cigars are never put in jeopardy.”

Karolewicz adds that another factor to look for is a machine that is built for continuous duty, “one with mechanisms that can be plugged in indefinitely and run reliably 24/7.” →





Photo courtesy of Newsham's Woodshop Inc.



Photo courtesy of Staebell & Associates



Photo courtesy of Wood Projections Inc.

## Walk-in or cabinets?

The great advantage of a walk-in humididor is that standing inside one unforgettably overwhelms the senses with pure pleasure. But wall-mounted cabinets bring distinct advantages, too. One of those benefits is that cabinets free the merchant from the hassles associated with construction: noise, mess, and (here's a biggie) permitting and inspection. Karolewicz says, "We are seeing a lot of customers who don't want to bother with construction, so they look to a humididor which is self-contained and comes fully equipped with humidification and vanity lights."

Another benefit that cabinets offer is increased security over walk-in rooms. As Newsham puts it, "The thing with walk-ins is that they bring a problem with theft—like 15 to 20 percent sometimes." The fight to stem that tide can obligate a tobacconist to spend more hours checking security tapes than he would wish to spend.

Newsham adds that in many installations, store space is limited, especially if there is a lounge and a lot of square footage dedicated to accessories. For these stores to, in effect, have it all, Newsham says, "A lot of the time we will recommend wall units surrounding the perimeter of the store. We can connect those together so that they look like a built-in. And then the merchant still has the central area for displays and sales, or for a lounge."

One other benefit to cabinets is that if there's ever a problem with beetles, if your humidity or temperature ever gets too high and eggs start hatching (it can happen to anyone—for instance, during a power outage), the problem will be isolated to one case and not affect your whole inventory.

Mold should theoretically not be a problem in a 70 percent humidity environment. All the same, Staebell advises, "If somebody is building a space from scratch I usually recommend they use greenboard as their substrate sheetrock. It's a little more water-resistant. Some manufacturers even put an anti-mold chemical on it." There's nothing wrong with an abundance of caution.

If you're planning for a walk-in of a size from 10' x 10' to 15' x 20', you can expect to spend \$5,000 to \$7,000 for the storage unit, plus another expenditure for humidification—\$500 to \$1,500, depending on space considerations and the technology you opt for. Karolewicz adds that, for a walk-in installation in a pre-existing room, "the process of building the humididor is a lot quicker and cheaper than if construction were necessary. In that case, a small walk-in—something maybe 8' x 10'—can run \$2,500 to \$5,000."

Newsham observed that "the humididor industry is getting better than it has been in eight years." The evidence points to more and more merchants upgrading their humididors. No one likes to contemplate unnecessary capital investment. On the other hand, what good is your so-so humididor if the liquor store up the road has a more spectacular one? ■