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Wednesday, 06 October 2004

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BUSINESS STORY

Locking horns with dad's old firm - touch wood

26 September 2004

A former boss of Lockwood Homes is adding a new brand to the building market, writes Lesley Springall.

House builder Lockwood has a new competitor on the block - and it could be too close for comfort.

Touchwood co-founder and former Lockwood boss Corgi La Grouw said his firm might have a similar name and, yes, it might employ a solid wood building system like the business his father founded and his brother still ran, but no, he's not out to discredit the old family firm.

Corgi La Grouw sold out of the Lockwood family business more than five years ago when he and his brother Joe were joint managing directors.

The two had taken over the helm from their Dutch immigrant father Johannes (or Joe senior) who founded the Lockwood solid wood building system and the firm in 1951.

"You can't run one ship with two masters," said Corgi.

The sale agreement included a three-year restraint of trade barring Corgi from involvement in a competing business.

But two years after its expiry Corgi admitted he was now in the market to compete with Lockwood.

"We've done our own thing, with hard work and intelligence, and if someone says we're using (what we learned) at Lockwood, well yes, it's in our blood, we can't help that."

Corgi spent more than three years watching over the family holding company La Grouw Holdings - owner of the sawmill where Lockwood (and now Touchwood) sources its timber, and the Rotorua-based manufacturing plant contracted to make Lockwood's patented solid laminated locking pine boards.

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NEW BRAND: Corgi La Grouw sold out of the Lockwood Homes family business and is ready to start again at Touchwood. **KEVIN STENT/Sunday Star-Times**

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During that time he started to think up ways to improve on Lockwood's system. Also, the conventional house he was then living in, after moving to Auckland, was getting too "knocked around". He missed the durability of solid wood homes, he said.

Touchwood - named, said La Grouw, from the saying that if you want something good to happen you "touch wood", not as a reference to Lockwood - was born from discussions with fellow shareholders, former Lockwood franchisee and Rotorua builder Ivan Scott and Corgi's builder son Brooke. Scott's building firm Frontier Solid Wood Houses is the holding company for Touchwood.

Though Touchwood employs a solid wood building system like Lockwood, Touchwood's panels have been modified to reduce the processing steps needed to produce them and the amount of raw material wasted, said Corgi.

Their manufacture can also be contracted out to a range of suppliers, all saving costs, he said. Touchwood homes also employ conventional roofing and floor systems, unlike Lockwood, improving flexibility for customers not sold on the all-wood look.

The cost is about 5 per cent more than a traditional Gib-built home, but Touchwood homes have all the durability benefits of a Lockwood house at "significantly less" cost, according to Corgi. When pushed, however, he refused to quantify how much less.

Lockwood boss and brother Joe La Grouw, meanwhile, said it was meaningless to compare costs between builders or building systems. "How long's a piece of string?" It depends entirely on the quality of the materials and the quality of the building work, he said.

"We've had a lot of imitators in the past who have come and gone. We don't worry too much about them, we just carry on doing what we've always done."

With 140 staff and a turnover of more than \$35m, Lockwood has "withstood the test of time," he said.

The brothers wouldn't say whether Touchwood was a touchy subject at family gatherings, but admitted they no longer talked about business much.

Since building and selling their first Touchwood test home in Rotorua last year, 11 more Touchwood homes have been or are being built in New Zealand. The new firm is expected to

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complete another 50 houses in the next year, said Corgi.

The Touchwood system is being marketed by building franchise firm The House Company, which has eight offices in the North Island and two in the Tasman region.

A high-profile advertising campaign begins next month, to coincide with summer and capitalise on the "revitalisation of coastal housing" boom - in other words, buying up and redeveloping old bach sites, the hardy stomping ground traditionally associated with Lockwood.

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