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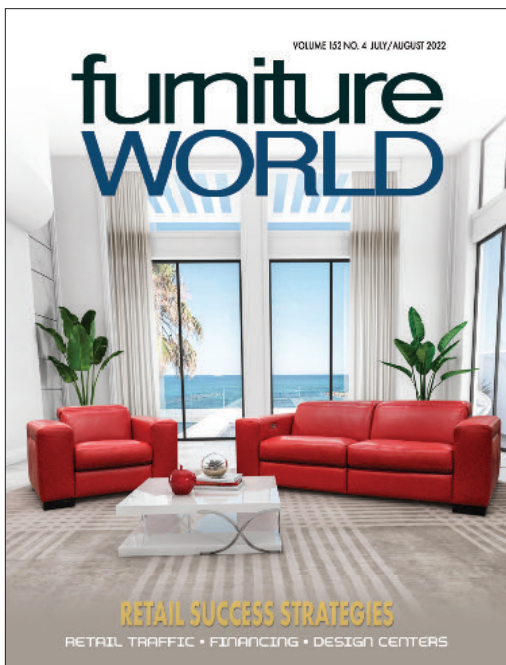


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Changing Times: Terriers and Weasels

In the fourth century B.C. Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu wrote: "You can break down walls with battering rams, but you cannot stop holes with them. All things have different uses. Fine horses can travel a hundred miles a day, but they cannot catch mice like terriers or weasels."

It occurred to me that in 2021 our industry used 'battering rams' to remove barriers to doing business and, like 'fine horses,' retailers traveled a hundred miles a day to keep up with demand. As for terriers and weasels, I've decided to withhold comment.

During COVID, many Furniture World readers used sets of tools for website development, lead funnel management and staffing solutions, among others. Now that the rush of consumer spending on home furnishings has reversed, additional sets of tools are being considered.

You may believe, as Bob's Discount Furniture's CEO Bill Barton (interviewed for this issue) does, that choppy economic times are an excellent place to be for your business. But, if you are concerned about slowing retail traffic, this edition of Furniture World offers useful suggestions.

Check out David McMahon's article that provides strategies for building traffic, including ways to skillfully use CRM systems, adjust advertising and refocus sales associates on honing their follow-up skills.

For those of you who are looking for ways to increase close rate and average sale from available traffic, Laura Khoury explains the benefits of using click data to reduce style choice indecision. Gordon Hecht suggests applying Dairy Queen's approach to present manageable choices on the sales floor to achieve those same ends.

Jennifer Magee continues her excellent series on store design, with a focus on what retailers are doing to improve design center areas; a proven way to extend brand appeal, boost store traffic and close sales.

One more thought. Back in early 2020, It never occurred to me that furniture retailers would look back fondly on the COVID years as a time of record sales and profits. And, right now, hardly anyone can see a quick resolution to current economic concerns. Is there still cause for optimism? Loren Bouchard, the creator of "Bob's Burgers" thinks so. "It's a choice," he recently observed. "It's not because you expect a good outcome. It's because to face the future with a pessimistic attitude is worse for you, no matter what comes." Is Bouchard a modern-day Chuang Tzu? Maybe not, but I believe that his observation is a valuable tool for times like these.

Good Retailing,

Russell Bienenstock
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MATTRESS FIRM HELPS UNJUNK SLEEP

Interview with Mark Quinn, VP Merchandising, Mattress Firm

Mark Quinn explains why it's so much more interesting and satisfying to be in the life improvement business than just selling mattresses.

Before joining Mattress Firm as its new Vice President of Merchandising, Mark Quinn already had a dynamic career in the mattress industry. Quinn co-founded luxury bedding manufacturer Spink & Co. USA, worked for Sherwood Bedding and served as Segment Vice President of Marketing for Leggett & Platt.

He's well known for his collaborations with Mark Kinsley, CEO at Englander. These include the Dos Marcos Podcast he modestly describes as "the galaxy's greatest bedding podcast," and the book, "Come Back to Bed: Attract More Foot Traffic and Make People Fall in Love with Your Store."

Furniture World asked Quinn to share his thoughts about the future of mattress retailing and his tenure at Mattress Firm.

"Coming to Mattress Firm has been awesome," he replied. "Our people are incredibly talented. Mattress Firm understands the value of branding and how to set itself apart from the rest. As the largest bedding retailer in the U.S., we focus on communicating the value of our products and the services we provide."

Quinn related his excitement at being able to help create messaging that explains the relevance to people's lives of what Mattress Firm does so well. "Much of that relevance," he explained, "comes from seeing ourselves as being in the health and wellness business."

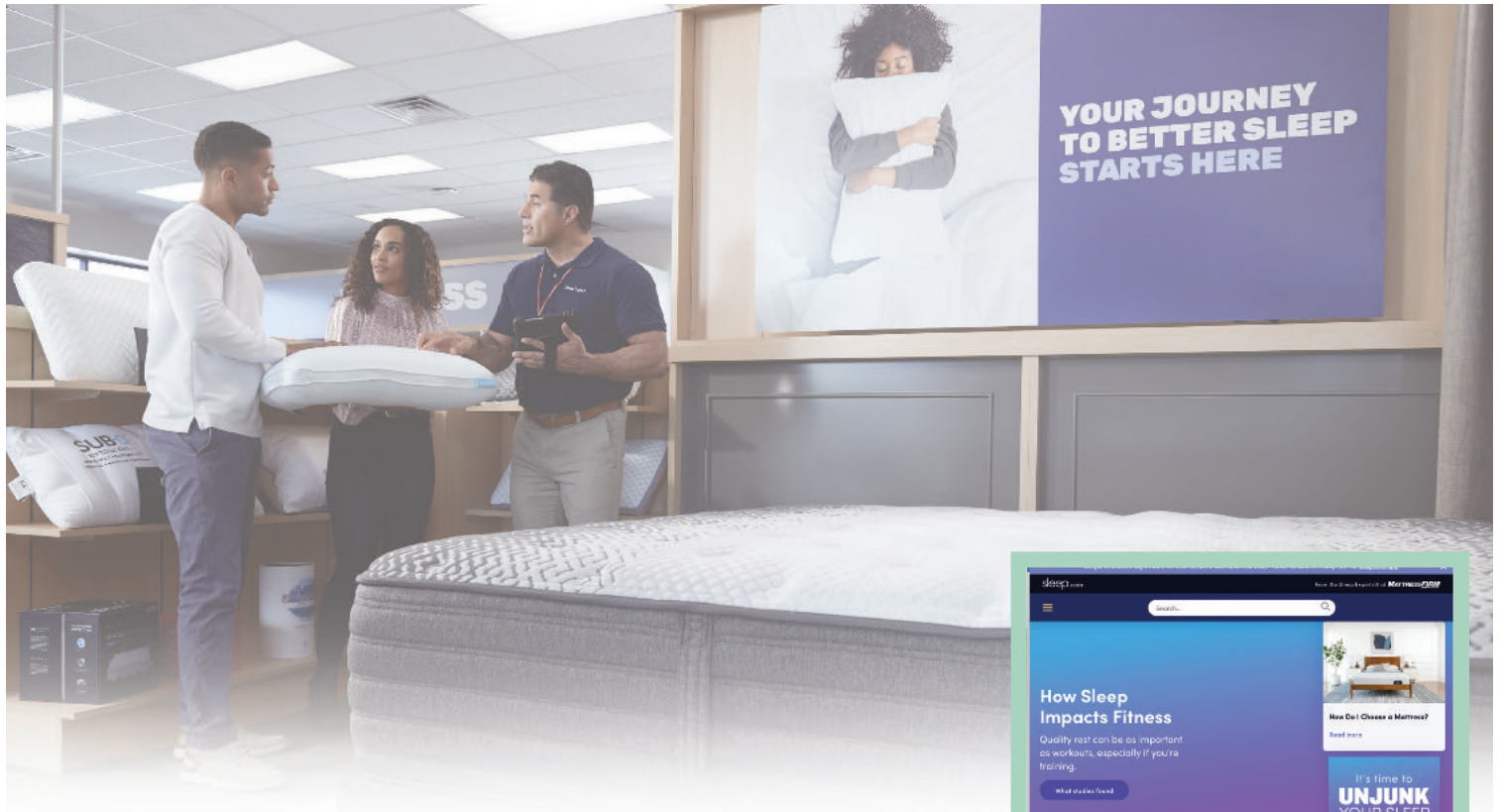
Need-Driven Purchases

"People don't shop for the new fall line of mattresses," Quinn continued. Mattresses are a need-driven item and a long-term durable good. Most folks would rather vacation in the Bahamas than spend \$3,000 on a mattress.

"One thing I want Furniture World's readers who sell bedding to understand is that Mattress Firm's focus is health and wellness and we are working hard to craft our messages to make that clear to our customers.

"When your purpose is driven by health

"Customers can tell within five minutes if a salesperson is just there to sell them a mattress. But when the purpose is to help solve a problem, human-to-human, they understand that focus pretty quickly as well."



Quinn says Mattress Firm does more than sell people mattresses. They help people ‘Unjunk Their Sleep.’ They push that message through www.sleep.com (right) that includes information about wellness, bedroom design, sleeping smart with the latest technology and travel.

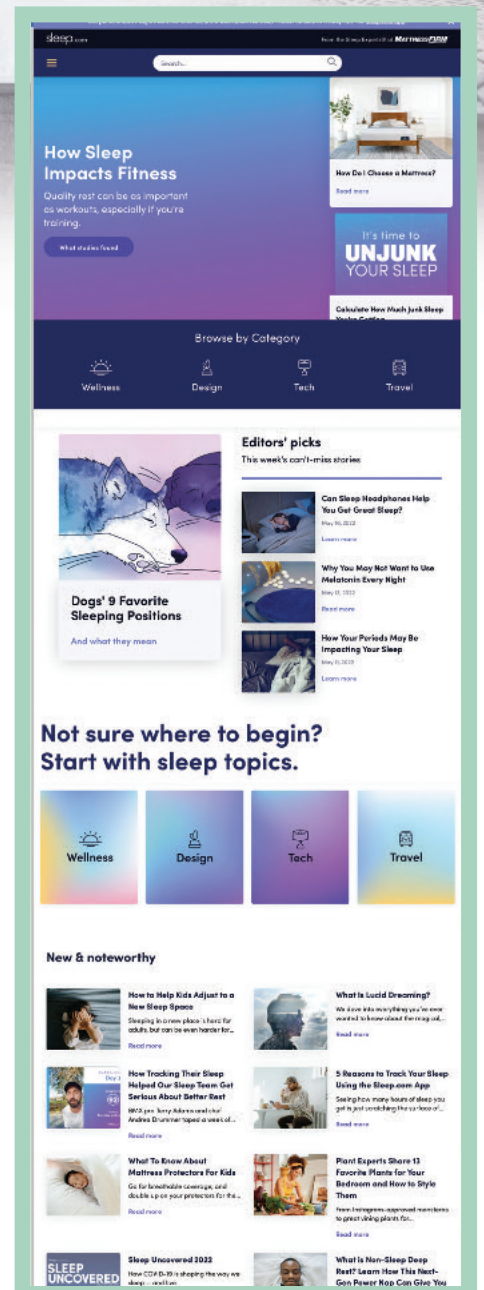
and wellness,” he said, “it requires a departure from product—price—promotion advertising in favor of focusing on the serious consequences of not getting enough sleep. It’s a message that just about everyone can relate to.

“Not too long ago, I gave a speech

“Follow the examples of great branding companies like Tempur-Pedic and Apple Computer. These companies don’t go on television promoting their sales.”

to 400 people at the National Bedding Federation Gala Awards Dinner in Telford, England. I asked everyone to look around and notice their competitors in the room. Then, I asked them to consider the idea that as an industry we are all riding out the same storm, just in different boats. That’s why we should be looking at how we, as an industry, can make ourselves more relevant to consumers. If we continue to talk about what we each do in terms of product, price, and promotion we will stay at the bottom of our customers’ shopping lists.

“Instead, we can do a better job of reorienting the conversation toward how our products help customers live their best lives by promoting health and wellness. These conversations can easily center around how better sleep can improve memory, contribute to better relationships, increase happiness, reduce anxiety, enhance work/school productivity and boost sports performance.”



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"Emotion drives every decision

in politics as well as in business. It is what inspires people to make decisions. If you want to beat out your competition, make customers love you by showing them who you are."

Promoting Brands & Price

Furniture World pointed out there is a long list of bedding and furniture store retailers already on board with this idea. So, why are others focusing almost exclusively on promoting brands and price?

Most retailers are better at product extension than innovation. They are creatures of habit who feel comfortable tweaking practices that have worked for them in the past. Good marketing is tricky because it lives at the intersection of science and art. Creative messaging —like the idea of talking about sleep and how it makes people feel—must be balanced with the practical business goals of convincing, converting and transacting.

"I'm not suggesting that mattress retail-

ers abandon price-off promotions," Quinn continued. "I am saying that it's important for mattress retailers to build value every single time they send marketing messages out into the universe to build their retail brands. Follow the examples of great branding companies like Tempur-Pedic and Apple Computer. These companies don't go on television promoting their sales. Instead, they focus on building value. Once you've established value, then it's okay to explain that everything is on sale, 50 percent off."

Get Customers to Love You

"Whatever you decide your message should be and how you want your customers to feel, it should be communicated at every opportunity on your website,

in social media, advertising and in correspondence with customers. Then grade yourself. That is what inspires people to make decisions. If you want to beat out your competition, make customers love you by showing them who you are."

Editor's note: For an excellent discussion of the value of emotion in branding see David Blair's article in the July/August 2022 Furniture world issue, "The Emotional Impact of Branding" at www.furninfo.com/furniture-world-articles/3993).

"Channel great home furnishing retailers who serve their communities, do excellent marketing and have fun with their customers.

"At Mattress Firm, we have some advantages of scale, but being a suc-

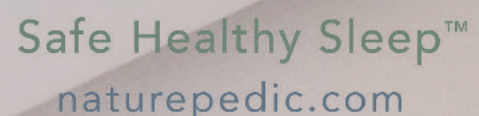


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The sleep.com website helps Mattress Firm's shoppers "Unjunk Their Sleep."

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successful community-based store has advantages as well."

Living in Mattress Limbo

"What differentiates one furniture or mattress store from another? For most I would say, not all that much," adds Quinn. "When pressed to explain the differences, an average store owner might say that their people are different, their service is better, or they stand behind what they sell. That's just what every other store says."

"Customers need to feel the difference between you and your competitors. Those differences should be highlighted in the way you position and market your company. If there aren't any compelling differences, then change or even transformation is probably necessary. W. Edwards Deming, the proponent of continuous improvement, once said, 'It's not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory.'"

"It's my view that retailers end up in

mattress purgatory when they don't stand for anything. Emotion drives decision. When consumers hate a product or a brand, there's no way they are going to buy. When they love a brand, they will either rush out and buy it or put it on their wish list. Anything in the middle that's 'sort of good' or 'kind of cool' isn't compelling at all from an emotional perspective. The middle ground lacks definition and is a type of purgatory for mattress brands and mattress stores."

Quinn went on to explain his view that "mattress brands that do it all from the bottom to the top in terms of price and construction risk falling into this middle-of-the-road category as well."

"Mark Kinsley always says that the riches are in the niches. I agree. As a mattress buyer, I'm less interested in purchasing products that are almost indistinguishable from those manufactured by other companies. I want to show brands that give me a better reason to buy from them."

"Finding a unique niche, technology

or purpose is challenging. But, to avoid slipping into mattress purgatory, retailers and manufacturers can work to stand for something, be bold in their approach to the market, define who they are and find ways to not be like everyone else."

"Anything in the middle that's 'sort of good' or 'kind of cool' isn't compelling at all from an emotional perspective. The middle ground that lacks definition is a type of purgatory for mattress brands and mattress stores."

"Most physicians

only get a few hours of training on sleep, sports coaches rarely talk about it, and although students learn about nutrition and exercise in health class, sleep isn't a covered topic."

Three Things (Fit For Print) That Excite Mark Quinn

Product Technology: "I am excited about how companies are integrating technology into mattresses and bases to prevent snoring, track biometrics and integrate advanced heating and cooling technologies. New product innovation drives growth and helps keep us front of mind with consumers. The problem is that we need more creative thinkers in our industry."

Data Intelligence: "Mattress Firm's strategic partnership with SleepScore Labs allows us to equip our highly-trained Sleep Experts™ with SleepScore's data and technology to help customers get the best night's sleep possible," said Quinn. "If a salesperson asks a shopper to try a pillow and it feels great, that's one way to sell. Another way is to let

them know what we've learned from our in-depth pillow fitting study which found that on average, participants slept 8.1 hours more per week when they were fitted for a pillow, compared to using their original pillow.

"It's an example of using technology to give consumers a better understanding of how products outperform. It's also part of Mattress Firm's commitment to educating customers during the shopping phase of their purchase journey, satisfying their curiosity and interest."

Credibility: Quinn observed that retailers need to be credible if they want their customers to feel comfortable accepting sleep and wellness advice from their salespeople.

"Customers can tell within five minutes if a salesperson is just there to sell them

a mattress. But when the purpose is to help solve a problem, human-to-human, they understand that focus pretty quickly as well.

"At Mattress Firm we call our associates Sleep Experts and back up that title with training. At first, the Sleep Experts title concerned me because it presents a high bar for salespeople. Then I considered that most physicians only get a few hours of training on sleep and sports coaches rarely talk about it. And, although students learn about nutrition and exercise in health class, sleep isn't a covered topic. Mattress Firm's Sleep Experts get over 200 hours of training so they can impart sleep wisdom to better serve their customers during in-store visits, via phone and online chat.

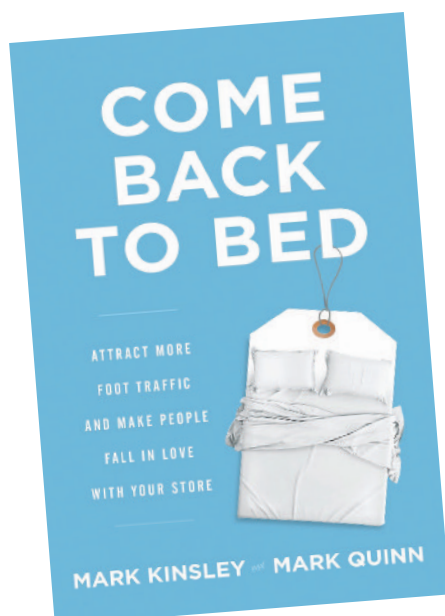
"Our Sleep Experts help shoppers find the perfect mattress and teach parents to have conversations with their kids about the importance of sleep. They help people understand sleep cycles and how substances like caffeine and lifestyles affect sleep quality. Mattress Firm does more than sell them mattresses. We help people 'Unjunk Their Sleep.'

"We also push that message through www.sleep.com which is a go-to resource for sleep and wellness tips, the latest in sleep technology and even bedroom design.

"It's a helpful tool for both our associates and our customers. It's so much more interesting and satisfying to be in the life improvement business rather than just selling mattresses. It changes the conversation and sets us up to add more value to our customer's lives."



Mattress Firm's Vice President of Merchandising, Mark Quinn and the book he co-authored with Mark Kinsley.



Trends, Themes & Stories

INTERVIEW WITH JULIE SMITH VINCENTI

Editor, curator and trends watcher Julie Smith Vincenti explains how she identifies and presents design ideas to retailers and designers in advance of the High Point and Las Vegas shows.

For this installment of Furniture World's Design & Designer series, we spoke with Julie Smith Vincenti, well-known in the home furnishings industry as the owner and editorial/creative director of Nine Muses Media LLC, a boutique media and communications company that specializes in custom content and trend forecasting. Smith Vincenti collaborates with International Market Centers (IMC) to produce trend content for their Las Vegas and High Point shows.

Back Story

Smith Vincenti's journey into design began with her parents, who were avid collectors of antiques, especially furniture. She and her siblings spent many days at shops, estate sales and fairgrounds. "We each had collections of our own," she recalled. "For me, it was antique salt-and-pepper shakers, and later, vintage linens and antique cameras—so we scouted for great finds and slowly developed our personal styles. I believe those adventures helped shape the work I do as an editor, curator, and trends reporter. My passion for fine art, especially painting and photography, is just as relevant."

Following graduation from the Syracuse University Newhouse School of Public Communications, Smith Vincenti

accepted a position as an entry-level editor covering the furniture industry. "I rose through the ranks to become the editor," she said, "and traveled extensively around the world for 14 years, combing trade shows for new and noteworthy products and trends."

In 2009 Smith Vincenti started her collaboration with Las Vegas Market. Each year since, the project has evolved and grown.

Today, FIRST LOOK and TREND WATCH are multi-channel programs

"The benefit of presenting trend ideas at strategic High Point and Las Vegas Market locations," said Vincenti, "is that retailers can see an overview of between 30 to 40 brands represented in our displays."



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By OW Lee



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"The broad stroke transformation

I most enjoy in the home furnishings space is the emergence of confident consumers who don't shop for what matches or what's predictable."

under the IMC Marketing team, led by Renee Loper-Boyd, IMC's Vice President of Marketing—Gift and Home. Included are webinars, CEU seminars, publications, at-market tours, and a series of product displays.

"The program charts a course for buyers and interior designers who source products at the Las Vegas and High Point Markets," she explained. "The biggest difference between TREND WATCH for High Point Market and FIRST LOOK is that the gift and housewares components at Las Vegas Market are reflected in the types of trends, themes and stories we tell. For High Point, we focus almost exclusively on home furnishings, zeroing in on a pattern, motif, texture or room type.

"We consider how home furnishings products will enhance consumers' homes' look and efficiency, reflect their principles, create a sense of comfort and offer meaningful value to them and their loved ones."

Benefit for Retailers

At Market, a priority for retailers is to work out programs with their current suppliers. That doesn't always leave enough time to source new companies and investigate trends. "The benefit of presenting trend ideas at strategic High Point and Las Vegas Market locations," said Smith Vincenti, "is that retailers can see an overview of between 30 to 40

brands represented in our displays. In High Point, displays are located near the entrance to IHFC's Green Wing, between Commerce and Showplace, and at Suites at Market Square."

The Process

Furniture World asked Julie Smith Vincenti to describe how she distills the myriad design trends and influences from among thousands of exhibitors representing product categories including furniture, rugs, wall decor, lighting, tabletop, gifts and more.

"About three or four months prior to each show we've already identified the themes, trends, and stories we want to

Purple Prose

Purples and reds set a stage for a range of sentiments and moods described by 'Purple Prose.' Referenced colors include these Pantone colors: Anemone 19-2033, Sparkling Grape 19-3336, Phalaenopsis 15-3216, Rose Violet 17-2624 and Very Peri 17-3938.

Julie Smith Vincenti said 'Overlay' captures nuanced details and captivating textures, such as linear patterns and bas reliefs. It features warm, especially gold metal, finishes. The referenced color is Sherwin-Williams' Woven Wicker SW9104.

Beach Bound is characterized by luscious pastels, revitalizing aqua hues and tropical mainstays. Referenced Pantone colors include: Aqua Green 15-5421, Porcelain Rose 17-1643, Atomizer 14-4514, Goldfinch 12-0737, Peach Pink 15-1530, Lilac Breeze 15-3720, Shell 13-1405.

Overlay

Beach Bound

Summer
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Themes



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Julie Smith Vincenti

Pictured are the themes for summer 2022 FIRST LOOK. The images reflect gift and housewares products featured at the Las Vegas Market. TREND WATCH, in contrast, focuses almost exclusively on home furnishings categories.

tell," she replied. "These are shared with tenants in all IMC owned buildings who are asked to submit imagery that meets criteria spelled out in design briefs. I recall that the high watermark for submitted entries was close to 2,700."

Theme Development Criteria

Smith Vincenti noted that the theme criteria is developed from multiple sources. "I look to industries outside of home furnishings to get inspiration for the sto-

"It's all done with the intent of telling stories that help retailers and interior designers connect the products they sell through good storytelling."

ries we want to tell. The apparel industry is one of these, though I feel that at times the home furnishings industry has become too dependent on apparel trends. I also follow the contract furnishings, housewares, gift and hospitality sectors, as well as consumer behavior, including their travel destinations. Other meaningful sources of information are home furnishings trade shows.

"Aside from domestic shows, the International Consumer Goods Fair Ambiente is one of my favorites because it offers a mix of textiles, a great assortment of tabletop, a European home furnishings aesthetic and covers emerging styles. The tabletop market is an excellent category I look to for both emerging patterns and motifs.

"It's my job to winnow the entries down to the assortment presented in our displays. It's similar to the work I did, as a magazine editor for a product and trend publication for many years, by identifying the different inspiration sources."

Smith Vincenti further explained that her displays often look at trends through the lens of a specific room type, the evo-

lution of an ongoing trend, or a place. "It's all done," she said, "with the intent of telling stories that help retailers and interior designers connect the products they sell through good storytelling.

"I often visualize a specific consumer as I build stories with the intention of having them resonate with the current moods, shopping habits and references that easily translate to retail environments. These can emphasize attributes, aesthetics and core values. Our 'She Suite' home office vignette, for example, was created at the same time the #MeToo movement was capturing headlines. Our 'Urban Alignment' theme looked at the convergence of both baby boomers and their children moving to the city at the same time, although each was at a different life stage.

"I also visualize 'place' for our TREND WATCH and FIRST LOOK themes. One good example was 'Las Islas Bonitas,' based on the concept of an island home that seamlessly mixed indoor and outdoor furnishings. It championed a feeling of ease, bringing materials to the fore. It's one of the first displays I did for TREND

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Tech met tradition in "Synthesis," a mix of textures, styles, surface treatments and finishes. Included in this TREND WATCH display were: Atelier Free Form Textured Bowl by Abigail's, the Breath on Truffle Pillow by Aviva Stanoff, the Sagar Side Table by Dôme Deco, the Troy Lighting Cecilia Chandelier by Hudson Valley Lighting Group and the Egg Designs Malta Chair represented by Ngala Trading.



WATCH when we started seeing the influence of tropical destinations— island living set in a modern context. Las Islas Bonitas is an oldie, but it's a goodie because we are still talking about tropical influences. Part of that has to do with an interest in renewable materials, woven materials and fast-growing plants like rattan.

"Our trend coverage also journeyed beyond our planet in 'Beyondaries,' a modern interior concept featuring surfaces, finishes and textures with higher shine and mirrored effects. Linear forms and abstract patterns that resembled a lunar or planetary surface were incorporated as well. The concept was born from products seen at trade shows combined with the idea of space travel as a timely inspiration, coinciding with news of the latest Mars rover mission."

Building on Themes

"Because this process plays out every three months for FIRST LOOK and TREND WATCH, we are constantly building on ideas explored in previous shows. It's an opportunity to tell design stories that develop over time, bringing up ongoing topics in light of what's currently going on in our business.

Design Confidence

Smith Vincenti has covered the furniture industry since 1996. "As in many other industries," she observed, "the changes are palpable. But the broad stroke transformation I most enjoy in the home furnishings space is the emergence of confident consumers who don't shop for what matches or what's predictable. I love layered design stories—room designs that speak to personal experience, incorporating mementos. The result is interiors that are interesting, but not too perfect.

"Here's another reason why I'm so excited about the ways we are able to talk about trends and design today," she continued. "There's been an increase in the ways consumers engage with and experiment with pattern, color and motif. That allows us to take a break from talking about coordinated furniture groupings and introduce concepts like maximalism as a design direction.

"We've been following maximalism as a trend for a long time. Interior designers can pull off some amazing maximalist interiors by combining bold colors and patterns. And while consumers have trended toward becoming more design confident over time, maxi-

malism is a tall order. In spite of this, the maximalist approach has filtered down to everyday homeowners who are passionate about the items they purchase for their homes. It's less about filling every inch of space and more about creating a curated experience. I call it a minimalist approach to maximalism. It's a livable and accessible approach.

"The concept of design confidence is reflected in the way we present FIRST LOOK and TREND WATCH. We hope that retailers will pick up these layered stories and present them to their customers by adding new resources and additional, previously unconsidered product categories. We believe that it is an opportunity for retailers to adjust their product sourcing accordingly, in interesting ways."

FIRST LOOK Displays for Summer 2022

"For Summer 2022," Smith Vincenti explained, "we will introduce three new concepts: Purple Prose, Beach Bound and Overlay. These emphasize color trends, especially palettes from PANTONEVIEW home + interiors 2023 and Sherwin-Williams' Colormix® Color Forecast for 2022."



Growth

The “Growth” display showcased brown neutrals and nuanced textures. Featured were a hand woven Area Rug in Beige-Brown by Exquisite Rugs, the Driftwood Lamp by Pacific Coast Lighting, the Lotus Table Set in Antique Brass by Regina Andrew Detroit, the Adkins Exposed Wood Chair by Sam Moore and the Mystic Forest Wallcovering by York Wallcoverings.

The power of color and positivity were on display in the “Elation” TREND WATCH display of upholstery, accent furniture, wall decor, accent rugs and more. Products included the Enara Sculpture Collection by Accent Decor, the Jessa 5 Light Pendant by Crystorama, the Chloe Media Lounger by Four Hands, the Melange Patrisha Bar Cabinet by Hooker Furniture and a Life Styles Lime Blue Throw Pillow by Nourison.



Elation

PURPLE PROSE: “The first featured trend is ‘Purple Prose.’ The name references Pantone’s color of the year in a way that looks at purples and reds that set a stage for a range of moods—festive and vibrant to regal and healthful.”

Pantone® describes its Color of the Year 2022, Very Peri, as a “warm, happy and empowering new shade.” “In practice,” observed Smith Vincenti, “this color has been a tough one for furniture manufacturers to feature. We will see how the accessory companies continue to work with that hue. Even in

housewares there’s been some resistance to using Very Peri in a big way.

“Purple Prose is relevant beyond just being Pantone’s color of the year. It has to do with the continued popularity of pastels and addresses the current interest in reds.”

BEACH BOUND: “Beach Bound,” said Smith Vincenti, “is a nod to what Pantone calls ‘saltwater healing’ and ‘mellow escapism.’ It also refers to a destination many consumers couldn’t enjoy during the recent pandemic. We describe

“The maximalist approach has filtered down to everyday homeowners who are passionate about items they purchase for their homes.”

Julie Smith Vincenti

Beach Bound's color palette as 'luscious pastels, revitalizing aqua hues and tropical mainstays.' Product categories for Beach Bound are outdoor dining and lounge furniture; textiles including beach towels, throws, all-weather pillows and area rugs; personal care products, fragrances and candles; accessories including beach bags, sunglasses and hats; hostess gifts; dinnerware and glassware; destination wedding essentials; stationery; and wall decor that evokes beach scenes, ocean vibes and atmospheric light effects. The Beach Bound theme speaks to outdoor living, spending more time with families outside, sunlight reflected on water, the juxtaposition of sand and water in texture combinations and linear patterns."

OVERLAY: “The final category for summer 2022 is FIRST LOOK’s Overlay. It’s a theme, much like an ‘Insta’ filter that lends softness to both cherished photos and casual snapshots. It’s minimalist maximalism that’s livable and reverential.” Smith Vincenti also described Overlay as capturing nuanced details and captivating textures, such as linear patterns and bas relief details. Product categories for Overlay are leather and fabric upholstery; accent tables and pedestals; shelving solutions; area rugs with lustrous effects; lighting fixtures; bar-

ware; and wall decor.

Other Current Trends

Additional trends Julie Smith Vincenti wanted to bring to the attention of Furniture World readers are:

- *Decorating with plants:* There are ways to take advantage of the fact that homeowners are loving to live with and care for living things. And so, it isn't a stretch to imagine more furniture retailers going a bit deeper into integrating decorative planters into displays. These are popular home accessories that are consistently gaining market share.
- *Lightweight, renewable materials.*
- *Sensibly sized homes with beautiful appointments.*
- *Pulling away from an 'it' color, in favor of an entire palette to convey personal expression.*
- *Handmade accessories.*
- *Continued used of florals.* Rather than enjoying popularity for a season or two, designers are exploring

additional ways to use florals in terms of scale, color and pattern.

Conclusion

In her concluding remarks, Julie Smith Vincenti mentioned her passion for mentoring the next generation of interior designers and visual merchandisers. "I'm really proud," she said, "to share that we have invited UNLV to bring aspiring designers from their Interior Design program in to be part of IMC's display setup process for 2022. We are happy to give them this hands-on experience. They will work closely with me and FIRST LOOK's visual merchandiser, Addie Jones of Greensboro, NC-based Twine & Twill. Students will view the home furnishings and gift market up-close, gain professional experience and see their efforts realized in the Summer 2022 displays."

FIRST LOOK and TREND WATCH have grown to include publications, webinars, seminars, displays and tours, but being able to help a new generation of aspiring designers is especially gratifying."



"Las Islas Bonitas is an oldie," said Smith Vincenti, "but it's a goodie because we are still talking about tropical influences. Part of that has to do with an interest in renewable materials, woven materials and fast-growing plants like rattan."

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BEST BOB'S EVER

*Interview with Bill Barton,
CEO, Bob's Discount Furniture*

Bob's Discount Furniture's CEO shares his thoughts about strategic planning, team building and plans for growing the 159 store chain "coast-to-coast and border-to-border."

Bill Barton, President and CEO of Bob's Discount Furniture joined the fast-growing retail operation in 2020 at the height of COVID. "I showed up at the corporate office and it was just the guy at the front desk and me," he recalled. "The next 120 days were spent visiting stores and all five distribution centers."

Prior to joining Bob's Discount Furniture, Barton served as CEO of California Closets. At first glance, California Closets' model of custom manufactured and professionally installed closets seems dissimilar to the Bob's Discount Furniture model. Bill Barton disagrees. "California Closets and Bob's both fall into the big-ticket consumer discretionary category. Whether we look at furniture, automobiles or expensive master closets, consumers have bought into the integrated multi-channel experience which people refer to as omni. The owner of Bob's Discount Furniture, Bain Capital, understood this when they brought me in. I had a home goods background, big-ticket and omni-channel experience. There were operational similarities as well.

"That's why I made the leap. There's a huge opportunity at Bob's to reach so many more lives by providing quality furniture at everyday low prices to Bob's customers.

"About a year ago, we engaged with a leading strategic consulting firm to help guide us through a planning exercise. First, we reaffirmed our business model: everyday low-price, great merchandise, high availability. Then, we reaffirmed our values, which are honesty, integrity and transparency. The goal was not to disrupt Bob's successful model. It was to clarify how we think about the customer journey. Specifically, to make sure Bob's customers are at the center of everything we do and that their transactions are transformed into relationships.

"The management team at Bob's reexamined every stage of the customer journey including the creation of what we call 'The Best Bob's Ever.' It's a ten-year road map that includes 20 different initiatives with the intent of keeping customers for life," said Barton.

What Customers Say About Bob's

As one important guide, the top-10 furniture retailer used net promoter scores. "I'm a huge aficionado of using net promoter scores," Barton continued "as a way to build long-term relationships with customers. It's what drives great brands. Fred Reichheld, the author of

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'The Ultimate Question,' says the score is one thing, but the most valuable feedback is what your customers tell you in the verbatims, which are the exact words used.

"What customers say about Bob's lets us know our strengths and opportunities. We studied customer feedback at every point along the journey to identify opportunities to ratchet up their experiences. Product as well as experience have to flow through that journey. At the end, we expect to hear customers say, 'I'm never buying furniture from anywhere other than Bob's.' That was the impetus behind our strategic plan.

"Data analytics is another big part of it. One recent example is our omni-channel shopping cart. Bob's customers can put items in their shopping cart when they visit www.mybobs.com. When they visit a local store, their carts travel with them. Any sales associate can open up a cart, then add, change or delete items to complete the customer's room.

"At that point the customer can either close the transaction or, should they leave without purchasing, think about it, talk with their significant other and complete the purchase at home. It's an

omni-channel solution that travels with the customer through various channels. It's been a huge unlock for our sales associates, helping them recognize a fuller concept of the customer journey. This is just one example of the type of technology investments we continue to make to create seamless experiences."

Affluent Customers?

How can Bob's keep customers for life should they, at some point, face upward mobility and seek out higher-end goods not typically found at Bob's Discount Furniture?

"We know our niche. However, our data shows that more affluent consumers often shop at Bob's. I'm always amazed at how many BMWs I see in our parking lots. It might be that they're buying furniture for children who are setting up a first apartment, or for a vacation home or rental property. Whatever price point we decide to bring to the market, the one thing our customers can count on is that it's going to be an extreme value. If you

check out our website, you can find our Milan sectional. It can be configured at a five thousand dollar price point which is pretty high for Bob's. It's only been available for a few weeks and is already a top-ten best seller."

Company Culture

Barton told us that before he joined the company, the values of honesty, integrity, and transparency were already deeply rooted in its corporate culture. "It wasn't a heavy lift here at Bob's. However, the introduction of 'The Best Bob's Ever' strat-

"One of the challenges of having such an iconic founder as Bob Kaufman, was the transition from featuring Bob the person in our creative to Little Bob the puppet."





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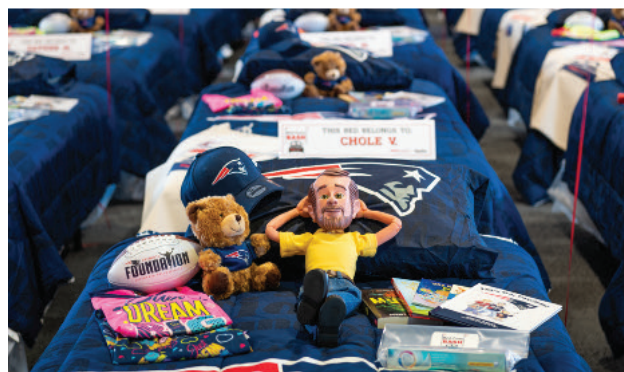
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Executive team at the opening of a 622,230-square-foot distribution center in Piscataway.

Little Bob resting (below) on mattresses donated to kids in need through a partnership with the New England Patriots.

Bob's Charitable Foundation along with Bob's Outreach provides aid to hundreds of organizations and individuals. Over 2.75 million dollars in gift certificates and monetary donations are distributed each year to social service agencies, charities, group homes, community fundraisers, children's charities, schools and community service groups. Each store includes a Bob's Café where customer donations with a 100% match are donated to a different charity each quarter.



egy helped our people realize that even if a shopper doesn't buy today, they are likely to become a future buyer if the right relationship is created.

"I'll give you an example," he contin-

"The management team at Bob's reexamined every stage of the customer journey including the creation of what we call 'The Best Bob's Ever.' It's a ten-year road map that includes 20 different initiatives with the intent of keeping customers for life."

ued. "We charge separately for delivery. Sometimes we have to explain this policy to customers so that they understand that we don't hide the cost of delivery inside the cost of our products. As I mentioned before, honesty, integrity and transparency are key values here at Bob's. We don't mark up to mark down our everyday low prices. We've never had a sale and will never have one."

Pricing

Even as just about every furniture industry observer advised retailers to hike prices during the pandemic to compensate for surcharges and wage inflation, Bob's took the opposite approach.

"Our pricing department," noted Barton, "was constantly talking to our vendors about how we could reduce prices to bring even greater value to our customers. We've actually reduced prices this year on some articles.

"It's no doubt that size mattered over the past couple of years and our manufacturing partners have certainly been helpful. They know that when Bob's com-

mits to a new item, we buy a lot of it so that they can manufacture with confidence."

Developing Winning Teams

Furniture World asked Barton about his approach to developing winning teams and retaining exceptional talent. He let us know that the first step is to ask, "Why?"

"To answer that 'Why?' question for Bob's Discount Furniture," he explained, "we had to back that train up a few stops and ask some questions.

Question: What do we believe?

Answer: The answer that came from our people was, we believe that everyone deserves a home they love.

Question: Based on our belief, what positive role can we play in their lives?

Answer: Bob's can help people turn the places where they live into homes they love by delivering value without compromise.

"The most powerful teams

are built with people who deeply believe in the 'Why?' of an organization. Value without compromise is something everyone at Bob's can buy into."

"As soon as the words 'value-without-compromise' were expressed," it was a light bulb moment for everyone," Barton recalled.

Getting back to the question of talent acquisition and retention, he noted that it has not been a problem at Bob's. "For our corporate teams, distribution center and delivery employees, as well as associates at the store level, employment has been stable. We've not participated in the great resignation like many other retailers.

"I've been in business a long time in a number of different industries and one of the things I've learned is that the most powerful teams are built with people who deeply believe in the 'Why?' of an organization. Value without compromise is something everyone at Bob's can buy into.

"When I visit Bob's stores, I ask our employees what they're hearing from customers. We've all experienced elongated delivery dates in this industry for the past couple of years and it's been painful. Even so, our people feel good about the jobs they do and they're sticking with us.

"One of the wonderful things about being a fast-growing and profitable company, opening 14-20 stores each year is that it opens up opportunities for staff to move into management. Most of our store managers are internal promotes. We pay competitive wages and benefits, provide tuition assistance, mentoring programs and diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives. It's a great place

to be, it's a great place to work."

Advertising

Bob's Discount Furniture has done a lot of television advertising over the years, making Bob Kaufman, the company founder, their celebrity pitchman.

"One of the challenges of having such an iconic founder like Bob Kaufman, was the transition from featuring Bob the person in our creative to Little Bob the puppet," said Barton. "Steve Nesle, with our marketing creative department did a masterful job creating playful messaging

Maple Grove, MN,
store opened in 2021



"Can we get this business to \$10 billion?"

There's no doubt about that. Could it go higher? Maybe. I do know that there are lots of consumers out there who love the value Bob's provides."

that continues Bob's advertising legacy. We recently brought Bob Kaufman out of retirement for a series of TV commercials featuring celebrities that included Little Bob, Vanilla Ice (whose real name is Robert Matthew Van Winkle), Rob Schneider, the painter Bob Ross, and a few other notable Bobs. The transition to Little Bob has given us the flexibility to continue to get our messages out in a memorable way."

Pictured below is Bill Barton, CEO, Bob's Discount Furniture in the 622,230-square-foot Piscataway, NJ, Distribution Center opened in 2021, along with an aerial view of that DC (bottom right). Also shown is an interior shot of Bob's Maple Grove store, one of 164 stores open by September 2022.

The Future

In a time of price inflation, increased geopolitical uncertainty and possible economic slowdown, Furniture World asked Bob's Discount Furniture's CEO to look into his crystal ball as we approach 2023.

"Consumers in times like this," Barton observed, "move towards value brands. Walmart recently said that they are seeing customers move from branded products to house brands to save money. That could be good news for Bob's because we don't sell branded items in our stores other than our Bob-O-Pedic house mat-

tress brand, which delivers tremendous quality and value at a fraction of the cost of our competitors.

"In every prior economic downturn, we've seen that offering great values at low prices is an excellent place to be."

Barton added that customers have various attitudes toward financing. "The younger generation, for example," he observed, "have been attracted to buy now, pay later, and four pay plans. But right now, we're doing everything we can to enable consumers to buy what they need in these times.

"That's why we recently launched our first ever 60-month financing program.



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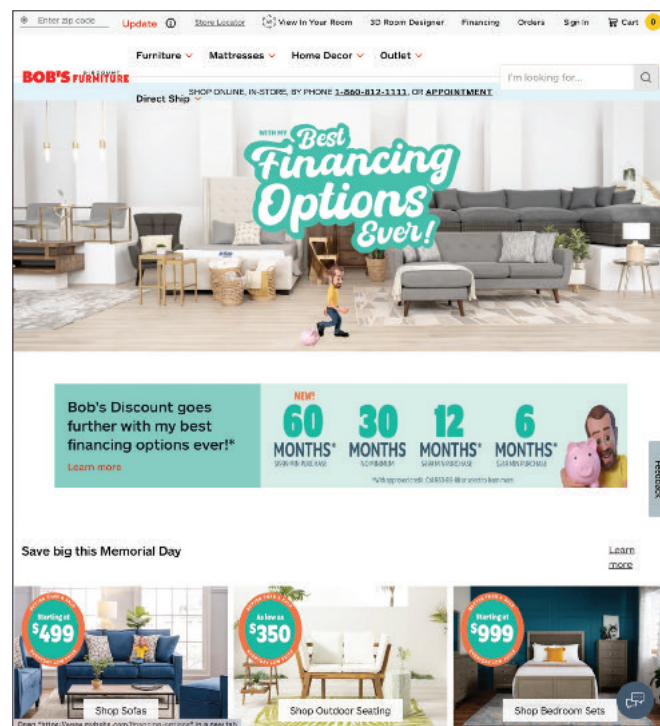


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"We're doing everything we can to enable consumers to buy what they need in these times. We recently launched our first-ever 60-month financing program. Prior to that the longest financing Bob's offered was 30 months."



Before that, the longest financing Bob's offered was 30 months.

"Financing will, of course, continue to be important. One ad we ran recently, offered to 'Furnish your home for \$99 a month.' That offer included an adult bedroom set, a dining set, sofa and loveseat. So, we're going to continue to do what we can to bring value and make purchases at Bob's affordable for people going forward."

Ultimate Plan

"Our ultimate plan," Barton concluded, "is for Bob's to grow coast-to-coast, border to border. We are currently opening 14 to 20 stores each year with plans to double that pace as part of our longer-term strategic plan."

"We have entered choppy economic times, so we plan to be responsible operators and invest our capital wisely."

Can we get this business to \$10 billion? There's no doubt about that. Could it go higher? Maybe. I do know that there are lots of consumers out there who love the value Bob's provides.

"Going forward, we will continue to focus on omni-channel and technology while offering low prices on great products available through all the modern channels in an authentic way, with enthusiasm and transparency."



Bob's employees...

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Outside of the Taftville, CT, distribution center.





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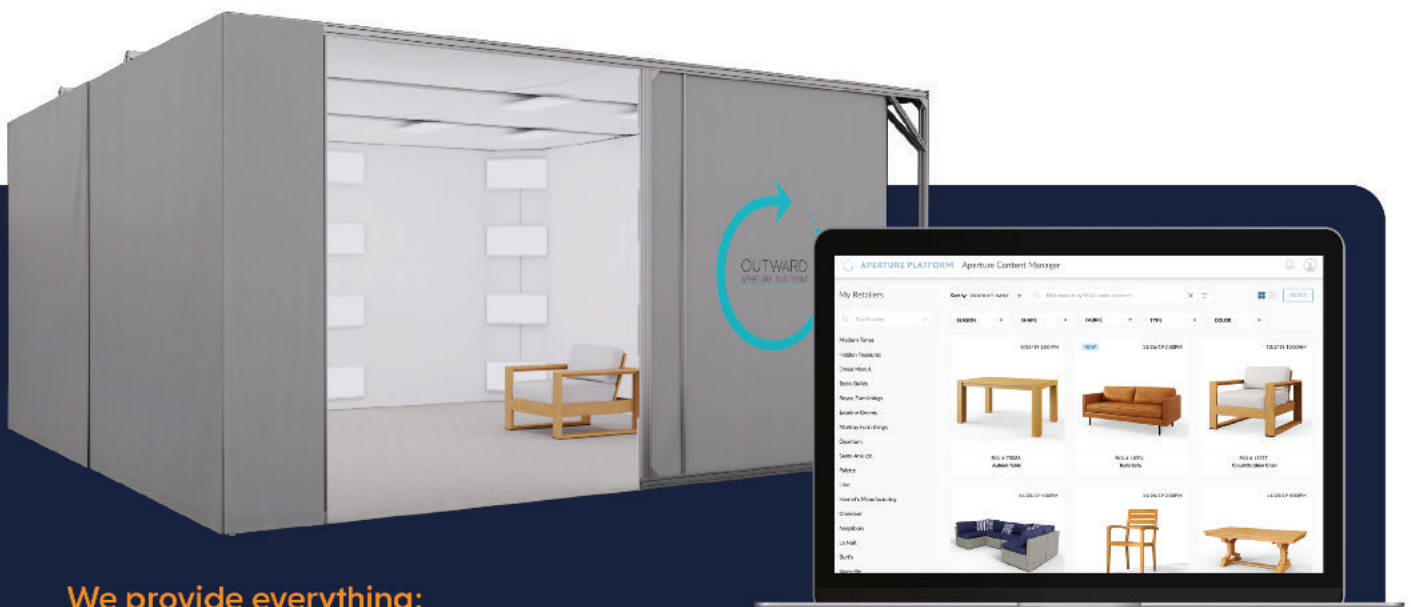
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IN-STORE DESIGN CENTER TRENDS

by Jennifer Magee - Part 1

How to make design centers a bigger part of any in-store shopping experience and further differentiate your retail operation.

Designing beautiful rooms with the help of an interior designer was once a luxury reserved for the rich and famous. Today, however, all types of consumers want home furnishings retailers to step up with professional and personalized design advice as part of the retail purchase experience.

If you want to attract customers who value design, or convince average shoppers that you can help them to make excellent design decisions, you need to strongly communicate that message. That's why having a prominent and well-configured Design Center is so important. It helps demonstrate that your store takes design seriously and that you offer design expertise as part of a package of services. Without this, you are just another furniture store selling product and offering nothing more.

Many furniture stores have communicated a shift towards design and customization through rebranding. By adding the words "home," "design" and "decor" to their names, they extend their brand appeal to a broader audience. Examples are Schewels Home, Miller Waldrop Furniture & Decor and Mathis Design Studio.

area that tells people you offer design services. It should be centrally located, easily visible from multiple locations and, ideally, positioned in the middle of your customizable upholstery department. Adding a Design Center to the heart of your store as part of a central customer service area or next to an in-store cafe are other good options to create more engaging and interactive shopping experiences.

While the visibility of a centrally located Design Center helps customers notice that you offer design services,

"At the 'Best' end of the market, customers expect a more sophisticated, separate and tailored experience. It signals that you understand and value design and provide experts to meet their individual needs."

Location, Location, Location

It is critical to have a designated



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POTTERY BARN: Mainstream retailer Pottery Barn is adding Design Studios (left) to their stores to provide customers with free one-on-one design consultations.

LIVING SPACES: Living Spaces' centrally located open, colorful and engaging Design Studio is near the cashiers' area in its 185,000 square foot, Grand Prairie, Texas, store (below).

INTERIORS HOME: Interiors Home placed the Design Center (pictured bottom left) at the heart of their Camp Hill, Pennsylvania store.



some retailers prefer to meet with clients in closed-off destination spaces. These are often located at the back of stores or in upstairs areas. They may be behind glass doors, with consultations offered to customers by appointment only.

Accessibility

Although an exclusive approach is still valid for some clientele, many furniture retailers benefit from offering free design services to a broader range of their clients. Providing design services at no additional cost entices customers who

might otherwise fear designer fees or off-putting prices. La-Z-Boy, for example, has invested in educating shoppers about the cost of DIYD (do-it-yourself-design) versus using their free "La-Z-Boy Interior Design Program."

La-Z-Boy gives all interested customers free access to an accredited interior designer. They say it will save their customers \$5,000 versus the cost of hiring an independent designer. They also offer to work within customers' budgets, provide complimentary design plans (with options) and allow customers to walk away at any time. This program puts customers in control of the design

process and helps them to feel comfortable with their investment in quality home furnishings.

A Good-Better-Best Approach

Large-scale furniture stores often struggle with where to place a Design Center and how large it should be. The concern comes from the possibility that it might:

- Be located too far away from floor displays.
- Overwhelm customers in a large space with too many choices.



LA-Z-BOY: Like many retailers, La-Z-Boy's Interior Design program is offered as a free service that provides a no-risk option that works within customers' budgets.

- Not attract enough attention if it's not sized correctly in relation to the rest of the store.
- Seem either too elite and exclusive or not memorable enough.

Therefore, some large furniture retailers have installed multiple Design Center experiences to meet the needs of different customer groups. The approach is similar to the way that retailers group and sell merchandise according to good, better, and best categories. For retailers that operate 75,000-square-foot stores and up, it is important to create a customization experience that appeals to each level of clientele.

Good Design Service: At the "Good" end of the spectrum, just having custom fabric swatches displayed adjacent to

furniture sets is helpful.

Better Design Service: For "Better" upholstery and dining sets, carving out an area to showcase a manufacturer's displays make a stronger statement. Flexsteel, for example, provides a very well-designed and simple fixture that can be re-purposed for any brand's swatches. Smith Brothers, Daniel's Amish,

Amisco and others are also well-known for their easy-to-order and well-organized customization displays.

Best Design Service: At the "Best" end of the market, customers expect a more sophisticated, separate and tailored experience. Creating a Design Center that appeals to this type of customer is valuable. Offering this level of expertise

"A prominent and well configured Design Center helps demonstrate that your store takes design seriously and that you have expertise in this area. Without this, you are just another furniture store."

"Mathis also offers private all-glass meeting rooms. However, they have found that most clients just want to be in the central Design Center space, not separated off in a fishbowl."

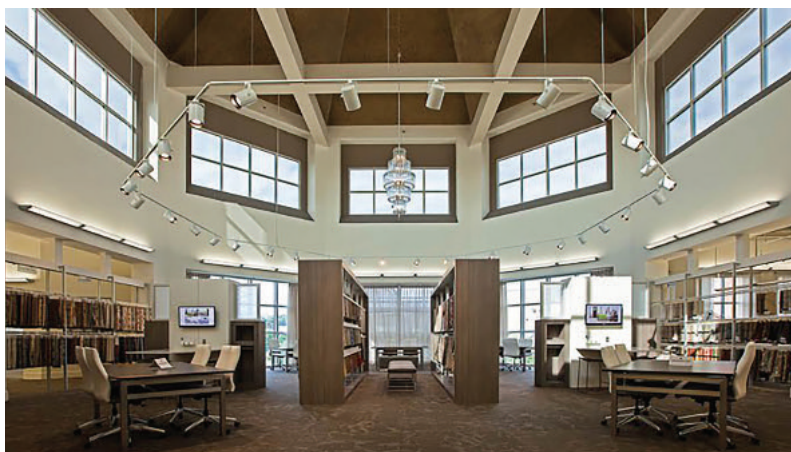
also increases average tickets.

Mathis Brothers, for example, understands that their "Good, Better and Best" customer types require a unique shopping experience. For their "Good" customers, they offer an Ashley store or Mathis Outlet experience that has customization options offered directly

on the sales floor next to room sets. Their "Better" customers are offered the traditional Mathis Brothers Furniture experience. This includes vendor displays with custom options for Jonathan Louis and La-Z-Boy that appeal to mid-range customers.

"Best" customers get a unique, high-

end "Mathis Brothers Design Studio" experience. Customers meet with an interior designer of their choice by appointment only. The Design Center, located next to their Cafe & Bistro, is over 2,000 square feet. In this area, designers meet with clients at tables (up to 12 feet in length) that offer



FURNITURELAND SOUTH: Because 90% of its business is custom order, Furnitureland South opted to create a single large-scale Design Center (left) offering thousands of fabrics and finishes.

SMITH BROTHERS: Smith Brothers is well-known for providing simple yet elegant rod and hanger displays for its array of fabrics (pictured below).



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DESIGN CENTERS

ample surface area to make presentations. These are surrounded by built-in fabric, hardware and accessory displays. Mathis also offers private all-glass meeting rooms. However, they find that most clients prefer to be in the central Design Center space, not separated off in a fishbowl.

"Many retailers position Design Centers at the heart of their store, adding it onto a central customer service area or next to an in-store cafe."

Next Issue

In the September/October edition, the second part of this two-part series will delve into:

- *Amenities to include in Design Center areas to make customers feel more comfortable.*
- *Ideas for creating raised staging areas to show products for more impact.*
- *Ways to incorporate natural lighting and help customers to view colors as they will appear in their homes.*
- *Display techniques that allow retailers to showcase expanded custom product categories.*
- *Recent design center trends that include customization outposts, style centers and new technologies.*

About Jennifer Magee: Magee is an architect and designer who has over 15 years of experience in the home furnishings industry. She has designed over three million square feet of retail space. Working almost exclusively with furniture and mattress retailers, Magee has an in-depth knowledge of how to lay out stores to create better customer flow, improve the way the merchandise is presented and increase sales.

She is the founder and owner of Retail in the City, a boutique design firm offering a full range of retail design services from storefront design to interior design, branding, space planning, visual merchandising, signage, new store concepts and more. Her talented team of architects, interior designers and renderers create exterior and interior design packages so retailers can become more competitive in their home market or expand into new markets.

Questions about this or other Furniture World articles on store planning by Jennifer Magee (found at www.furninfo.com/Authors/Jennifer_Magee/86) can be directed to her at 917-533-4372 or email at jennifer@retailinthecity.com.



DWELLINGS: Dwellings in Barbados prefers to have a separate, room (left) at the back of its store so that high-end customers can meet with designers privately.

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WHAT A DIFFERENCE A YEAR MAKES

Interview with Mike Rittler

Thoughts about what retailers can expect as we transition to a less favorable credit environment.

When Furniture World last spoke with TD Bank's General Manager of Retail Card Services, Mike Rittler, in 2021, his optimistic predictions for furniture sales and credit turned out to be spot on. What a difference a year makes! Looking at what's likely to happen as we approach 2023, he paints a less rosy picture.

Predictable Slowdown

"At TD Bank," said Rittler, "we are seeing a predictable slowdown in furniture store credit applications as other categories like travel and entertainment ramp up. This year has been a record year for furniture retailers, so a flat growth scenario would be a very good outcome this year. Factoring in inflation, even if business turns out to be flat, it will mean fewer units sold. That's what we are seeing month-on-month from our major retailers."

Effect on Consumer Financing

"Inflation puts pressure on lending, so shorter-term financing options will

probably be more attractive to retailers. As financing durations shorten, monthly payments will increase. Stated another way, if the duration goes from 48 to 36 months, a customer's monthly payment will be larger. That's not even considering the effect of price inflation on furniture purchase prices. These factors are likely to contribute to the flattening of demand this year.

"The job financing companies always have in front of them is to provide options that make purchases more affordable and realizable for consumers and their retail partners.

"It's been a really favorable credit environment for quite some time with record levels of liquidity fueled in part by stimulus payments."

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“Between a great product selection and low rates, this partnership has added value to our bottom line and customer satisfaction. The partnership from both Furniture First and TD would be an advantage to any furniture retailer looking to grow and expand.”

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"It's been a really favorable credit environment for quite some time with record levels of liquidity fueled in part by stimulus payments. Now that's all reversing. In May 2022, consumer debt hit a new record high. I try not to forecast credit losses, but experience tells me that the further down the credit spectrum you're lending, the higher rates go, and they rise faster and sooner than in the prime space."

Challenges

Last year, long lead times for sold products created challenges for retailers as authorized financing transactions were delayed until furniture was delivered. Furniture World asked Rittler if this was still an issue.

"This problem created challenges when shipments were split and charged on different cycles," he recalled. "If a customer financed a full living room of furniture and half of it was delivered immediately, with the

remaining half delivered four months later, the purchase was recognized on different payment cycles. This created confusion for some customers from a credit perspective. Retailers and financing companies that did a good job of communicating with customers helped alleviate this confusion. Now, this issue is mostly behind us.

"In certain product categories like custom furniture, delivery timelines are still longer than pre-COVID. The good news for retailers is that if those products are just coming in now, financed sales will be recognized in future months. It will be nice for a lot of retailers to have an inventory of backlogged sales."

Consumer Demand

"It's interesting that even as inflation has risen and the spending categories have shifted a bit (as of mid May), consumer spending hasn't slowed down much yet," observed Rittler. "Where it will go from here is a bit of

an unanswered question right now.

"Usually, consumer demand follows consumer confidence. Unemployment is still very low, wages are at record highs and job opportunities are still out there. It's a mixed picture. But at some point, should confidence wain that's when we're really going to see some downside issues."

Millennials' Purchases: "Research we did about a year ago showed that millennials expected to continue to make major purchases.

"Thirty-one percent of consumers we surveyed said they use buy now—pay later financing. Forty-five percent of those respondents were millennials who prefer shorter-term financing options with installment features. So, if millennials get squeezed beyond what we expect," mused Rittler, "it could result in faster contraction from an engagement standpoint and flatten demand from this vitally important home furnishings group.

"Anecdotally, millennials choose

"Anytime there's uncertainty in the political environment, it's another factor that's going to increase the volatility in consumer confidence."



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what I would call less risky products. Before they engaged with credit, they were much more likely to use a debit card than a general-purpose credit card or a private level credit card.

"When they moved into actual borrowing, they started to favor installment loans because they are closed-ended. The attraction is that they know what the payments will be and the duration. It's easy for them to plug those numbers into a budget and make it work.

"They also like Pay in 4 types of financing products that flip the script on the traditional lay-a-way model so that purchasers get delivery upfront

and pay in four equal installments. It's a good financing product when used responsibly by consumers."

Still, commenting on millennials' likely purchasing behaviors, Mike Rittler noted, "Another interesting thing is that there are a lot of people shopping for furniture who are experiencing their first market downturn. This adds some uncertainty when trying to predict the confidence level of younger demographic groups going forward."

Additional Uncertainty

"Speaking of uncertainty," Rittler continued, "with the midterms coming

"If millennials get squeezed beyond what we expect, it could result in faster contraction from an engagement standpoint and flatten demand from this vitally important home furnishings purchasing group."

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FINANCING

up, followed by the presidential cycle, it's going to get interesting. Anytime there's uncertainty in the political environment, it's just another factor that's going to increase the volatility in consumer confidence.

"It's been a long time since we've seen rates jump at 50 basis point increments. Right now, we are in an unstable rate environment that will definitely have an impact on financing.

"Retailers need to make sure that they have financing products that make sense to the specific customer groups they sell to. So, taking time to understand what their customers want, how they engage, and offer financing products that speak to their needs is more important than ever.

"For a high-end luxury furniture retailer, a buy now, pay later loan

may not be attractive to many of their customers. Breaking one large payment up into four large parts doesn't help them that much. Generally, for furniture retailers, the value of revolving accounts cannot be overstated because it establishes ongoing relationships with customers and provides opportunities to re-engage to build future business. But sometimes, a revolving loan is not the right fit either. It may be that a closed-end installment loan with a four-year life will be a better option," explained Rittler."

Omni Channel Financing

"Whether an omnichannel experience is being delivered online, in the store, or over mobile," Rittler concluded, "shoppers need to understand

what's available from a financing standpoint. They want easy access to it and to be able to get the same decision no matter how they shop. Retailers can facilitate this by allowing customers to scan a QR code to get an application and fill it out before making a store visit. The online experience should mimic the in-store experience. So, if shoppers buy online, it's easy. And, if they decide to shop in-store, they already know what financing options are available. Make shoppers feel more comfortable about the whole process and you will be sure to win the moment each time you interact with a customer who is considering financing."

Questions about this article can be directed to Mike Rittler care of editor@furninfo.com.

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SEVEN TRAFFIC SOURCES

to bring in more traffic & avoid sales slowdowns

by David McMahon

There are seven sources of retail traffic, but only four of them are pillars of traffic that can be managed to get positive sales results over short time frames.

The furniture industry is coming off one of the biggest “promotional events” in its history: two years where consumers spent more time at home, encouraged to do so by health officials, the press and the government. In 2021, many furniture retailers experienced record increases driven by purchase-motivated customers. They had higher traffic, better close rates, increased profitability and cash flow. Also, higher average sales resulted from price inflation. During the period following mandated shutdowns, salespeople were just trying to keep up with the volume of traffic coming through the front door.

It was inevitable that this externally influenced retail traffic generating phenomena would come to an end. Salespeople, who were too busy in 2021, are now complaining that business has softened.

2022 Sales Metrics

Comparing the average sale and close rate numbers for our retail clients in 2021 vs. 2022, we found that these two metrics remained similar for many businesses. That leaves traffic decreases as the sole culprit for sales declines. Smart retailers we work with have decided to try to address this issue in a number of ways.

Seven Sources of Retail Traffic

The rest of this article will present seven sources of retail traffic along with methods by which this traffic can be maximized. Retailers who implement these methods will achieve greater sales in the coming months.

One of these traffic sources is uncontrollable, two are semi-controllable and the remaining four are pillars of traffic that can be managed to get positive results over shorter time frames.

The Uncontrollable Source: The uncontrollable source of traffic is the economy. Most retailers are hostages to external factors within their regional economies. During economic upswings everyone looks like a great business operator. It's the downturns that separate truly

“There are four controllable customer traffic sources that can act as pillars to strengthen the foundation upon which you can improve sales.”



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SEVEN TRAFFIC SOURCES

great operators from all the rest. Great retailers focus more on what they can control rather than what they cannot in any economic cycle.

Two Semi-controllable Sources: Retail locations and operating hours are additional sources of traffic. Hours of operation can be extended to capture more business. If you cut your hours during COVID, extend them to pre-COVID levels. Location is, of course, hard to control in the short term. If you are considering opening a new location or relocating an existing store, search for the best possible location and budget for recessionary traffic levels to ensure profitability.

Four Controllable Sources: The following four controllable customer traffic sources are major levers retailers can use to increase sales in the coming months. The stronger each of these pillars, the greater your sales will be in any economy.

1. The first pillar of traffic generation is advertising. Retailers typically send the same ad campaign to a broad audience using a mix of TV commercials, direct mail/print, radio spots, email broadcasts, mass texts and websites with popup CTAs (calls-to-action). Messaging may be promotional or branding type. Either way, mass communication advertising is the most expensive of the four controllable sources, usually 5 to 10% of total sales. In slow traffic times, it may be higher if you need to stick to a fixed marketing budget.

When traffic trends down, most retailers are inclined to use mass promotional campaigns. The logic is that these campaigns can 'buy' traffic. If that were always true, the solution would be simple, and no businesses would ever experience a sales slump. Keep in mind that there are diminishing returns on using the same ad messaging over and over again. That's why every retailer should

look for better ways to manage and improve mass communication advertising and mix. Here are a few ideas:

Track it! Track metrics that lead to results. Over 100 years ago, the retailer John Wanamaker famously said, "Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is I don't know which half." That is an excuse that competent retailers can no longer use. If you don't know if it works, drop it or devise a method to track it. Tracking methods for traditional campaigns may include QR codes on print material, text codes on TV or radio commercials and measuring digital traffic after a non-digital campaign. Email and SMS broadcast campaigns are more easily measured by open and click rates.

Switch it up. If your advertising is not producing the desired traffic, try something different in terms of message or media. Depending on your budget, some choices may not be attractive. For example, if your budget is too small for effective broadcast television advertising penetration in your area, find a more targeted approach. Or, if you compete head-on with a much larger competitor, using the same messaging and media choices, that may not be the best use of funds.

Be creatively promotional. Give peo-

"A CRM is not a POS or inventory and accounting management system. It is a system that specializes in customer and prospect communication that exists alongside your POS system."

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"Also referred to as follow up

or prospecting, this second pillar can be a significant source of return customers or be-backs. Over the past two years, many retailers have not had to focus on doing this."

ple a reason to visit you, make it fun and celebrate something. Retailers typically run promotions over standard holiday weekends. When every retail business in your trading area has a holiday promotion, your message can get drowned out by all the noise. Consider promoting at non-traditional times like over Easter, Cinco de Mayo or around the Superbowl.

Use an ad agency. There are a number of industry-specific marketing agencies that have the experience, creative talent and the ability to track important metrics. If you find the right fit, these businesses can help you stay on task, free up management time and get better results.

"Of the seven previously described traffic sources, focus on the four controllable traffic pillars with the necessary effort and leadership. Do not do it alone."

2. The second pillar of traffic is salespeople. This traffic consists of past customers or prospects who are re-engaged by sales associates. Also referred to as follow up or prospecting, this second pillar can be a significant source of return customers and be-backs. Over the past two years, many retailers did not need to focus on this pillar. Even before the pandemic, only true professional salespeople consistently used prospecting and follow-up tactics to generate leads. The best writers in our industry produce over \$2 million per year, while the upside for an average writer is around \$800,000. Since both top and average writers usually work similar hours, the difference is how they conduct themselves. Here are some examples of how true sales professionals generate traffic:

- They follow up with customers who did not buy.
- They provide consistent updates on open orders.
- They follow up before and after delivery.
- For prospects who do not buy on the first visit, they get customer information for follow-up. This information is more than just a name, phone and email. It includes the details of the prospect's situation.

- They touch base with past customers.
- They follow up on quotes.
- They notify past customers and hot prospects of upcoming events and advertisements. When the business has a promotion, most potential customers never know. They don't see it on TV, look at a mailer, or read the e-blast. However, if the customer gets notified by their salesperson or designer, they may come in if they are still in the market to buy.
- They post on digital channels.

The challenge with getting significant salesperson-generated traffic is that salespeople usually won't follow up to the fullest extent, even if a manager asks them. Another issue is that some sales managers are so fearful of losing their salespeople that they accept a poor level of prospecting. If you want to build more traffic from this source, more management effort has to be invested in the following areas:

- Tracking all completed follow ups.
- Tracking the sales effectiveness ratio: $(\text{Close rate} + \text{traffic with proper follow up}) / \text{total traffic}$. This should be at least 60% for most businesses.
- Set and require standards for follow-up, prospecting, be-backs and digital postings. Mandate that these



standards are followed, especially for non-top writers.

- Discuss these points with your sales team every day so the message sinks in.

3. The third pillar of traffic is CRM. CRM (Customer Relationship Management) is technology and workflows that enable targeted, tracked and automated communication with prospects, current and past customers across all digital and physical touchpoints. A CRM is not a POS, ERP or an inventory

and accounting software system. It is a web-based system that specializes in customer and prospect communication that exists alongside your POS system. Outside the industry, CRMs are common. However, in the furniture business they currently exist primarily in larger or more innovative businesses. Here are some examples of how CRMs can generate traffic:

- They can automate communications.
- They can be set to send specific and relevant messages from sales-

"When traffic trends down, most retailers are inclined to attract traffic using mass promotional campaigns. The logic is that these campaigns can 'buy' traffic."

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SEVEN TRAFFIC SOURCES

people to their customers. Examples are: thank you messages, quote follow-up, order follow-up, delivery notification, past purchase follow-up, and loyalty programs.

- They enable appointment scheduling for hot leads.
- They are connected to the website, allowing leads from digital visitors to be captured. This can be done via chat, CTAs (calls-to-action), contact forms, surveys, service ticketing, contest entry, and item inquiries to name a few.
- They measure the full customer journey from a digital lead to an in-store visit, through delivery, service, and beyond.

There are many benefits to installing a CRM system, however, implementing a CRM must be treated with the respect it deserves. Similar to a POS system, it is not an app that can be downloaded and will just work by itself. This innovation requires commitment and support at the very top level of the organization, and a committed and organized project manager. With these two you will win, without them, you will lose.

- 4. The fourth pillar of traffic is networking.** Networking involves creating partnerships and mutual agreements with people and organizations in your business region. Those companies that execute these programs properly and continually work on sustaining relationships generate additional traffic. Examples include:
- Builder programs.
 - Realtor incentives.
 - Charity organizations.
 - Chamber events.

- Store use for partner events.
- Interior designer relationships.

Conclusion

Of the seven previously described traffic sources, focus on the four controllable traffic pillars with necessary effort and leadership. Make sure your team is onboard, ensure that project managers in your organization have their marching orders, and find committed partners to assist in your growth.

David McMahon: David McMahon is the founder of PerformNOW Inc., which has three main products that help home furnishings businesses improve and innovate: These are: PerformNOW CRM (Contact Management systems and processes), Performance Groups (Owners, Sales managers, Operations), Furniture business consulting. See all of David McMahon's articles at www.furninfo.com/Authors/David_McMahon/6. He can be reached with questions at david@performnow.com.

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GAMIFYING DESIGN CHOICE

Interview with Laura Khoury

The language of furniture styles has become nuanced and complicated. This presents a challenge for furniture retailers.

From 1960 through the early '90s Furniture World published many thousands of "History of Furniture Styles" sales training guides for furniture retailers. These 16-page inserts categorized furniture designs into traditional, transitional and contemporary categories, then further, into styles including Chippendale, Sheraton, Empire, French Provincial and others. This made sense at a time when purchasing matching sets was the norm, and when so many people owned Early American or Queen Anne-styled dining sets.

Since then, the language of furniture styles has become nuanced and complicated. Some customers shop to find products that reflect their own personal style. Others have eclectic tastes or can't tell the difference between style categories that often incorporate subtle design influences.

This presents a challenge for furniture retailers who need to collect information on shoppers' style preferences, either online or in-store.

Fortunately, when shown a product image, furniture shoppers know whether or not they like it. This reality presented an opportunity for Laura Khoury who founded Shoptelligence, a product selection tool that helps shoppers identify furniture items and make suggestions based on relevant click data. Furniture

World spoke with Khoury to get her views about how retailers can help their customers put together rooms that meet their needs.

"Most furniture shoppers start their purchase journey online," Khoury explained, "and every item a shopper clicks on leaves evidence of what their style preferences are."

Seven Foundational Styles

In 2015 Khoury decided to leave her big corporate job to found Shoptelligence. It was a project she'd been thinking about for several years.

"Earlier in my career," she recalled, "I focused heavily on B2C strategies, using

"The objective is to show them more appropriate choices and fewer items—that they probably won't be interested in—to narrow the selection field."



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"The object of the game

from the consumer's standpoint is to achieve their objectives. This is difficult for people as they scroll through websites that present hundreds of SKUs."

the internet to generate leads, drive shoppers into stores, retain them and grow customer lifetime value. From there I became an attorney. It was a short detour into practicing corporate and technology law before going to work for KPMG, heading up their advanced solutions practice.

"The idea for Shoptelligence grew out of a terrible experience I had shopping for apparel. I was pre-judged by a salesperson and it occurred to me that

their opinion of what I should purchase had no relevance to my personal style preferences or shopping objectives."

From that spark of inspiration, Khoury and her team started to look at ways to combine consumer behavioral analytics with style reasoning to produce home furnishings purchase suggestions. Khoury explained that defining furniture styles in a useful way was challenging.

"At that time," she recalled, "furniture styles seemed to be so much more intangible and unstructured than data. We brought in a team of designers to get their thoughts on what differentiates the look and feel of a traditional style from contemporary or rustic.

"Thankfully, in almost all verticals there are foundational styles. For furniture, we found seven: contemporary, transitional, traditional, mid-century, rustic, craftsman, and industrial.

"There are derivatives of these seven styles. Farmhouse chic is a blend of contemporary and rustic. Many styles are related. Today, retailers might be selling farmhouse chic. Tomorrow, a derivative style might be sold as farmhouse glam. It's just another combination we call a secondary style.

"Decorating with furniture is complicated," she added. "Furniture can be

mixed and matched in various creative ways. A rustic-styled room may include contemporary or craftsman-style pieces. Furthermore, retailers may merchandise an accent chair as a living room item that may also work well in a bedroom or a home office setting."

To be useful, any algorithm needs to be able to identify furniture and accessories that are appropriate suggestions for individual shoppers. "That," she said, "required the tracking of relevant product attributes independent of style. The last piece of the puzzle we had to address was the most complicated. Our algorithms had to be trained to output correct combinations based on how products are used, the styles and inventory a retailer has available, and the attributes of each item."

A Million Choices

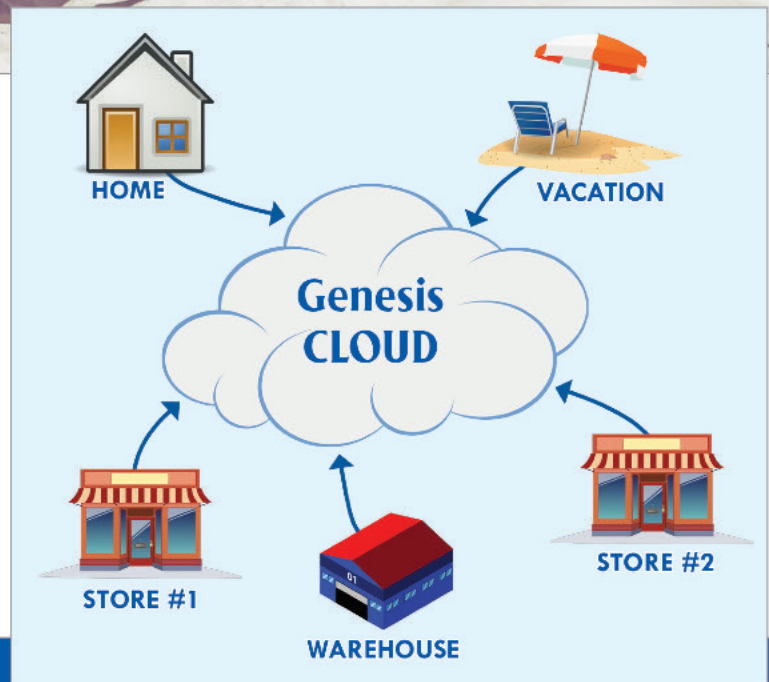
"The goal for any retailer," Khoury said, "is to make decisions simpler for consumers by helping them to visualize multiple items altogether. That by itself helps drive up consumer engagement and yields as much as a six-time increase in engagement plus 30 or more percent increases in average order value. Imagine trying to show a million products, one by one,

"Thankfully, in almost all verticals there are foundational styles. For furniture, we found seven: contemporary, transitional, traditional, mid-century, rustic, craftsman, and industrial."

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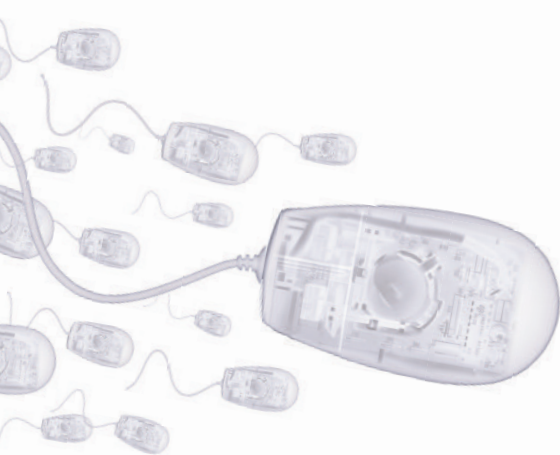
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"The beauty of looking at

consumer preferences by offering choices and keeping track of where they click is that a consumer profile can be created."

it would never work. But if you can show them six, 12, 18, 30 products at a time, in an engaging way, where it's gamified, it becomes fun.

"The object of the game from the consumer's standpoint," Khoury observed, "is to achieve their objectives. This is difficult for people as they scroll through websites that present hundreds of SKUs. Let's say a shopper wants to purchase a chair, rug, sofa, coffee table, lamp and a piece of wall art to put above that sofa. If there are 10 selections in each category, they end up with a million choices (10 to the sixth power). That's why consumers are so overwhelmed when shopping online for furniture.

"If a shopper searches for farmhouse style online, there will absolutely be a bias as to what items they're clicking on," she explained. "But when considering the style or look of an entire room, there is a chance that something from another style category will work perfectly to complement the design. And so, it's in a retailer's best interest to initially expose that shopper to more farmhouse styled items, but along the way, suggest additional pieces that work together in the context of the room that the shopper wants to create.

"The beauty of looking at consumer preferences by offering choices and keeping track of where they click is that a consumer profile can be created. This profile can take into consideration every click a shopper makes, and all of the product attributes associated with each

item a shopper looks at. The objective is to show them more appropriate choices—and fewer items that they probably won't be interested in—to narrow the selection field." This process mirrors what creative design associates might do when working with clients in stores to put together rooms.

Style surveys are highly effective at engaging shoppers who want to collect personal style information and move shoppers forward into an online or digital sales funnel. "But," Khoury said, "retailers run up against limitations when presenting lifestyle images. These can inspire, but what happens when items go out of stock? It becomes more like a magazine experience than an interactive digital experience.

"No matter how a retailer approaches the issue of choice, the goal is to help move the shopper down that funnel, from 'I don't know exactly what I'm looking for in this room' to 'I found one item,' and then to, 'I found everything else I need to finish that room,' whether it's one more item or 10 more."

Getting Them Into the Store

A primary goal for most furniture retailers is to engage shoppers on their websites to get them to either purchase online or convince them that it's worth visiting a brick-and-mortar location. "The idea is to increase average order value on-site," said Khoury, "and capture lower funnel leads to get shoppers engaged with

products enough to provide retailers with an email address for follow up." Another goal is to convert store traffic into sales.

"Information collected from website interactions where consumers share information on style preferences via surveys or for those retailers who use click data, can help sales associates to make more relevant suggestions. The better that retailers understand their customers' style preferences and serve them in the way they want to be served, the greater the likelihood of success."

Omnichannel

The advantage of offering interior design services to dramatically increase close rates and average sales is well

"Imagine trying to show a million products, one by one, it would never work. But if you can show them 6, 12, 18, 30 products at a time, in an engaging way, where it's gamified, it becomes fun."

documented. Furniture World asked Khoury if making design suggestions online can work against stores that work hard to offer these in-store services.

“Even if a retailer with an established clientele has designers on staff, the concept of omnichannel is still relevant,” she replied. “Home furnishings are the third largest purchase in a person’s life behind housing and automobiles. It’s high-ticket and therefore high consideration. Whether or not a customer is working with a designer, they want to go online and be able to do research, experiment

and interact with products outside of the in-store experience.

“While many retailers have started to adopt omnichannel practices, others have fallen behind. Omnichannel creates a seamless experience throughout the entire consumer journey across all channels. Not only does it allow retailers to serve their customers in a convenient and effective manner, it is individualized, leveraging consumer behavior as well as style data and analytics. This can be used to serve up more recommendations to increase average order value and

engagement. It also allows retailers to fully understand where each consumer is along their purchase path so tools and marketing efforts can be applied when they make the most sense.”

Post COVID

“During COVID, there was more demand than there was supply. So instead of just merchandising what looks best, we were able to add a bit more weight to show items that were in stock.

The Changing Role of Digital in the Customer Journey

BEFORE

Inspiration

Shoppers with intent seek third party sites and in-store shopping.

Search & Browse

Search for a retailer and the item. Browse on the retailer’s site.

Retailer

Retailer reviews dominate.

Products

The focus is on buying individual products.

Store Visit

Necessary to touch and feel the product in person.

Store Required

Financing and point-of-sale is only available in-store. Disconnected website and store experiences.

Sales Associates

Focus is on converting in-store ups and high-value in-home design shoppers.

INSPIRATION

SEARCH & BROWSE

RESEARCH

SELECT

VALIDATE

FINANCE & PURCHASE

ASSISTANCE

AFTER

“Inspirtainment”

Browsers with no specific need seek discovery and entertainment.

Assisted browsing

Go from inspiration to a retailer’s site directly to continue the experience.

Product

Product reviews dominate.

Rooms

The focus is on decorating a room easily. Create and visualize products in the actual room virtually.

Virtual Demo

Trusted sales associate virtually demonstrating the product is sufficient.

Portable Interactions

Financing choices and transactions are seamlessly available on all channels.

Omni-Ambassadors

Focus is on providing value-add product and design assistance in any channel.

GAMIFYING DESIGN CHOICE

Now, as the economy is swinging back and people are talking of a possible recession, the situation has changed.

"It is time for retailers to focus on getting the most out of every shopper in terms of closing sales and raising average tickets. And that's true for first-time shoppers or returning customers.

"Retailers that are still looking at their websites as online brochures are at risk, frankly, because the consumer is expecting more."

More Suggestions From Khoury

Sales Education: When a consumer visits a store, they may have already spent hours online looking through different products and weighing the pros and cons of each. Be aware that shoppers are often more informed than sales associates regarding information found

on their store's website. It's important for retailers to stop treating their websites like separate businesses, almost completely siloed and sometimes a second thought.

Not only does omnichannel help sales associates understand where each shopper is along their journey, continued sales education will ensure that shoppers are given the right information, in the right place and at the right time.

Product Data: Many retailers need to put more focus on updating their product data. It doesn't have to be perfect, but at a minimum, every item needs to have at least a couple of lines of well written copy.

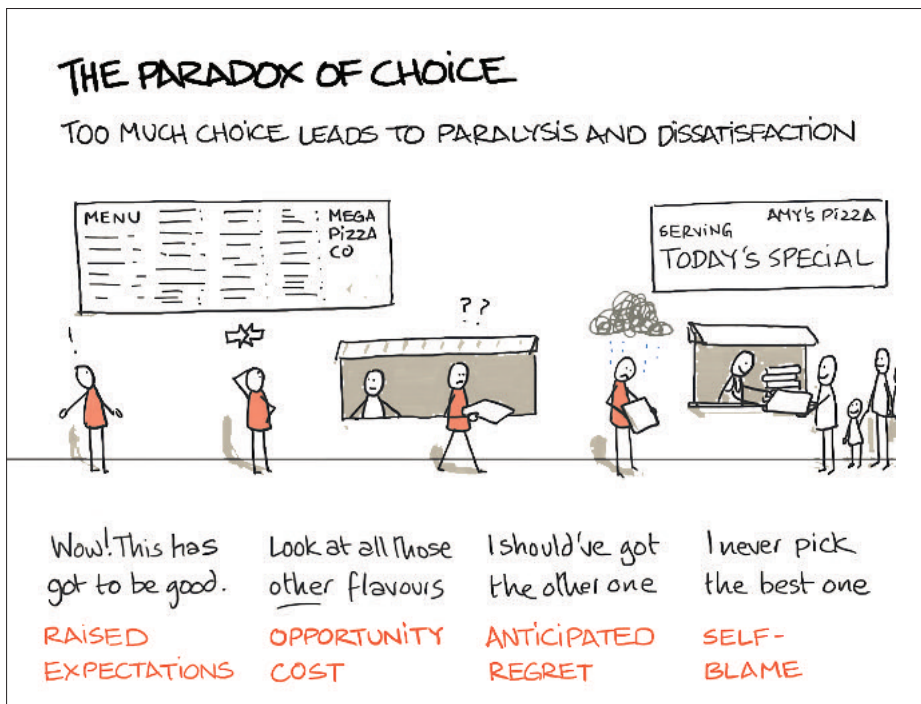
Lead Data: Make sure there is an email capture on every website page. Collection of email addresses and phone numbers, whether or not a shopper purchases, is increasingly important.

Shoppers won't randomly give you their email addresses; there has to be a quid pro quo. For example, if an undecided customer decides to leave the store without purchasing, the sales associates might ask, 'Would you like me to email you a report of the items we looked at together that you showed interest in today?' That's a value-add exchange that recognizes that the shopper isn't just shopping in one channel. They want that portability, which can and should be built into the sales process.

Other Data: Third-party cookies will become almost irrelevant going forward. The emphasis has shifted to collecting first-party data through cookies. It's the only way retailers can get demographic insights about shoppers who visit their websites.

Access to high-quality data has become increasingly important for every home furnishings retailer. Consumer behavior analytics offers better visibility into shopping trends and preferences. Using it wisely improves customer experiences, increases sales and boosts customer loyalty.

Questions about this article can be directed to Laura Khoury care of editor@furninfo.com.



The Paradox Of Choice cartoon (left) is reprinted with permission from www.sketchplanations.com. This sketch was inspired by the book, "The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less" by Barry Schwartz. Check out his TED talk at <https://bit.ly/3xLXSD2>. One of the repercussions of offering too many choices identified by both Schwartz and Laura Khoury is paralysis.



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Focus on DESIGN

OW Lee

The new padded sling offers the durability of sling fabric with the added comfort of Dacron fiber padding. It's available in the Avana, Marin, Pacifica, and Studio Collections.

Contact information on page 96.



Bellini

Made in Italy, the Escape motion sectional has a full-grain Italian leather cover, adjustable head-rests and one power recliner.

Contact information on page 96.

Country View Woodworking

The Henderson Dining Set highlights one of CVW's newest leg styles. The leg's modest curve blends perfectly with the roll of the back on these comfortably upholstered dining chairs. The solid top table is available in sizes 38" x 38" and larger.

Contact information on page 96.



Norwalk

Jamacia is a riff on Mid-century modern design. Its broad wooden frame floats the seat and back and ends in a dramatic backward slant.

Contact information on page 96.



Legends

Inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement, Branson is a unique two-tone collection with strong lines and dramatic details. Features include Mahogany Solids and Pine Veneers, a two-tone Rustic Buckeye finish, ball-bearing slides, USB ports on both sides of headboard and dark antique brass hardware.

Contact information on page 96.

Omnia

The appealing tufted design of this sofa from the Ryan Collection features American craftsmanship combined with reclining comfort options.

Contact information on page 96.



Focus on DESIGN

Capel

This Verve collection design has great vitality, energy, and liveliness. Unexpected design accents provide a fresh approach for Oushak patterns in this collection.

Contact information on page 96.



Simply Amish

The Addison Bedroom Collection combines sharp angles with unexpected details.

Contact information on page 96.

Arason

The Brussels style Creden-ZzZ cabinet bed comes in three finishes: white, charcoal and ash. This elegant cabinet holds a queen size mattress.

Contact information on page 96.





A&L Furniture

Featured in white HDPE, this poly mission-style twin hanging daybed comes in 14 color options. It is available as shown with a four-inch thick outdoor cushion plus pillows. It is also compatible with standard twin mattresses. Ships KD, small parcel within 10 business days.

Contact information on page 96.



Furniture of America

The Gottenberg dining table's top features natural wood knots for a feeling of rawness and simplicity. Uninterrupted lines and rectangular panels with narrow open shelves recall mid-century influences.

Contact information on page 96.

Moe's

The Appro dining table is constructed entirely from White Oak with a natural finish. Sculptural, slanted legs create a sense of grounding and its shield-shaped tabletop is spacious and playful.

Contact information on page 96.



Focus on DESIGN

Liberty Furniture

The Heartland Decorative Panel Bed is crafted from Rubberwood solids, Oak and Birch veneers. The bed features an antique white finish with heavy artistic distressing. Antique ceiling tile panels encased in picture frame molding on the headboard complement the top crown molding and raised panels on the footboard.

Contact information on page 96.



Craftmaster

Bold and dramatic describe the handsomely tailored Maeve sofa from the new Traditions collection. It features wide track arms, loose box-border backs, and plush blend down seat cushions. The arms and base are elegantly trimmed with double rows of small nail heads.

Contact information on page 96.



American Woodcrafters

From the Wiltshire Bedroom Collection this dark brown bedroom is a fresh take on the popular Campaign style. The collection features ample storage options and gold accents.

Contact information on page 96.



Nourison

This abstract rug from the Prismatic Collection features shades of green with hints of blue to create a foamy ripple effect. Brilliant carved orange accents add layers of dimension. Prismatic is handmade from a blend of New Zealand wool and silk-like Luxcelle™ fibers that beautifully capture lighting changes.

Contact information on page 96.



fiVO Design

Modular has been redefined with this collection featuring patent pending Infiniti® Joinery. The signature MOD5 is a five-piece modular table that's height adjustable. It assembles/disassembles in less than one minute without tools.

Contact information on page 96.



Klaussner

Designs in Trisha Yearwood's Hometown Collection are constructed from hickory veneers with custom, antiqued hardware and a gently distressed espresso finish. The 28-piece collection has a cozy, lived-in look. **Contact information on page 96.**

Focus on DESIGN



Geniemode

Occasional tables and accessories from Capiz by Geniemode, a home lifestyle brand that focuses on designing beautiful pieces—keeping in mind multi-functionality and adaptability for different aesthetics.

Contact information on page 96.



AICO

The La Rachelle Upholstered Panel Bed, a bedroom centerpiece combines warm champagne tones, shimmering fabric and brushed brass accents.

Contact information on page 96.



Stressless

Flora features French seams for a precise look and elegant wood detail on the armrests, available in many different colors.

Contact information on page 96.

Ti-Amo

The Doll House Pink Loft by Bivona & Company can bring a child's dream to life. There's plenty of space to host tea parties, sleep overs or simply cuddle up with a favorite storybook. Available in a durable hand-painted petal pink and bright white finish.

Contact information on page 96.



Estro Milano

The Cartesio sofa with its gunmetal legs, belt and buckle design surrounding ample armrests, use of contrasting colors and relief stitching combine to create a revolution of lines, shapes and design.

Contact information on page 96.



Whittier Wood

The Ellison Bedroom Collection queen adjustable storage bed shown in Ridgeline finish fuses contemporary grace and urban elegance. The adjustable bed has a slightly reclining headboard with height adjustability built in. It is crafted from certified sustainable American Alder hardwood.

Contact information on page 96.

The Multiple Choice DAIRY QUEEN DILEMMA

by Gordon Hecht

Reducing product selection to chocolate, vanilla and a two-flavor twist will combat customer indecision when choosing furniture and mattresses.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I may have grown up in a rough neighborhood. When we heard the ice cream truck ringing its bells in the summertime, we would stand on the corner and sing:

*I scream, you scream
We all scream
The cops show up, and we get arrested!*

Deciding which flavors to choose was easy back then. There were a half-dozen options priced from a dime to a quarter. Most ice cream decisions were financially based depending on how many coins we had in our pockets.

I'm still an ice cream fan. Our town has three national chains offering that frozen treat: Baskin-Robbins, Hershey's, and Dairy Queen. Because I feel it's my responsibility to do onsite "market research" for this column, I visit fast food and ice cream retailers several times each month.

It seems that the line at DQ moves about three times as quickly as Baskin-Robbins or Hershey's. That means three times more customers being served and triple the cash register rings. The people at DQ have made flavor selection easier! While all three shops have multiple dessert options, DQ limits their ice cream flavors to just three choices: chocolate, vanilla, and a twist of chocolate and vanilla (for indecisive patrons).

Our Baskin-Robbins—just like yours—features 31 flavor choices. Hershey's Ice Cream one-ups them with a whopping

40 flavors listed on their wall-mounted menu. On my last trip there, a soccer team (who hip-checked their way past me to the front of the queue) read all the flavor names and tasted three or four samples before making their decisions.

There's no BEST choice. When it comes to ice cream, the worst I've ever had was pretty good!

Making Choice Manageable

It's probably not a lot different in your furniture or bedding store. When it comes to merchandising, you can't just offer chocolate and vanilla products. People expect to see a wide selection. Unlike your local scoop shop, however, you can create a selling process to slim down the choices to a manageable level. That alone will ease the stress of decision-making for shoppers. Part of that process means reducing your customer's choice to a manageable level—just like Dairy Queen does—to create

"The choices become a selling process when you develop discovery questions to help shoppers understand their needs."



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Just like a sundae, they offer more satisfaction for your shoppers. Protectors, pillows and sheets are the sprinkles, hot fudge, and whipped cream toppings of our industry."



an easier pathway from the showroom to the cash register.

It's fairly easy in the mattress world and a bit harder, but possible, with other home furnishings items. A typical 30-bed selection provides a myriad of triple choice options:

- *Technology: Memory Foam, Innerspring, Hybrid.*
- *Comfort: Soft, Hard, Medium.*
- *Base: Foundation, Adjustable or Platform (no base).*
- *Size: Adult-King or Queen, Youth-Full or Twin.*
- *Budget: Premium, Mid-price, Budget.*

- *Payment: Bank Card, Finance, or Cash.*

The choices become a selling process when you develop discovery questions to help shoppers understand their needs. Explaining that memory foam provides a passive (sink-in) support feel, inner-spring an active (push-up) support, and hybrid, the best of both, makes for an easier choice. Asking shoppers about their sleeping and waking positions, as well as their pain points, enables sales associates to recommend comfort levels that suit your shoppers.

Finding out if there's a television or laptop in the bedroom or if reading helps your shopper wind down can lead

to easier triple-base decision-making. Mattress size is a given because most shoppers will purchase based on their headboard and room size.

Most likely your shop displays comfort and support feels in multiple price ranges. Once you determine your shoppers' comfort level, have them test-rest three price point levels starting with the premium (it's like a super banana split and far fewer calories).

Don't forget the extras. Just like a sundae, they offer more satisfaction for your shoppers. Protectors, pillows, and sheets are the sprinkles, hot fudge, and whipped cream toppings of our industry. Payment terms are the cherry on top that closes the sale.

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Bonus Information: Here's the scoop on 31 flavors. Forty-eight percent of Baskin-Robbins' sales come from four flavors. A report from last year showed that chocolate, vanilla, chocolate chip cookie dough, and Cookies n' Cream comprised almost half of all purchases. The remaining 52% of sales were split among the other 27 flavors. I'll bet you a triple decker cone that the sales in your shop aren't far off that ratio!

About Gordon Hecht: Gordon Hecht is a business growth and development consultant to the retail home furnishings industry. You can reach him at Gordon.hecht@aol.com.

Retail Performance Tip #12

From David McMahon at PerformNOW

“DO NOT let people in your organization torpedo innovation and change because they say that they are uncomfortable or that they don’t have time. Success and growth requires leadership commitment, support for innovation and smart, motivated, organized project leaders.”

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NEXT LEVEL TRAINING

Sales-Type Coaching

Part 6— by Scott Morris

Knowing the positive and negative qualities of these seven sales types will help you to be a better coach or mentor.

There are as many different furniture “selling styles” on display in any furniture store showroom as there are salespeople.

That is why, from a sales management perspective, it is useful for coaches and mentors to become familiar with the basic types, each of which has intrinsic value as well as weakness.

The Decorator

You may have people on your sales team who have a flair for decorating. They delight in taking their customers on treasure hunts to locate that perfect pair of lamps, pillows, or area rug. Decorator personalities emphasize visual aesthetics and gravitate toward looks that really pop! They tend to effectively cultivate relationships with nearly all of their clients and excel at building tickets. However, there are downsides to this approach as practiced on most retail floors. First, a time-consuming treasure hunting approach can cost them the sale should a time-constrained shopper need to leave before consummating the deal. Second, the main driver of furniture store purchases is furniture! These need to be 100% locked in before accessory items are considered. Failing to do this

first can cause shoppers to have second thoughts.

The Super Bonder

Some members of your team have the talent to create instant chemistry with shoppers that keep conversations flowing. Once they read a client, they intuitively steer conversations toward personal topics like kids, pets, sports, etc. Personal relationships become the “X” factor driving their sales. These individuals tend to have high close ratios. Though, in many cases, their cancellation rate may also be the highest in your store. That’s because they spend so little time addressing customer needs or justifying purchases.

“When it becomes necessary to ‘TO’ customers, Closers are almost always the ideal people for the job.”

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"There is a big difference between the Designer and Decorator sales-types. Decorators have accessories as their focus. Designers, however, are interested in the total feel or personality of their clients' rooms."

The Pro Presenter

Great trial lawyers and superior salespeople share a common trait. They have a special knack for turning boring facts into strong emotional appeals. Emotion is a powerful motivator when it comes down to convincing shoppers and closing sales. Since it often requires decades of practice to become a pro presenter, this sales-type usually has lots of experience. They can be great teachers and add lots of helpful ideas during store meetings. Their downside? Although great at upselling, they often fail to focus on building tickets by adding accessory items or helping customers create total looks that pop.

The Closer

Someone who is a genuine closer spends much of their time concentrating

on the back end of the sale. Their laser-sharp focus centers on trial closing, isolating the true objection and overcoming it to affect customers' decision-making processes. When it becomes necessary to "TO" customers, Closers are almost always the ideal people for the job. They can single-handedly increase a store's close ratio. However, some closers also burn through a lot of customers, sacrificing the store's public goodwill, just to make a quick sale.

The Designer

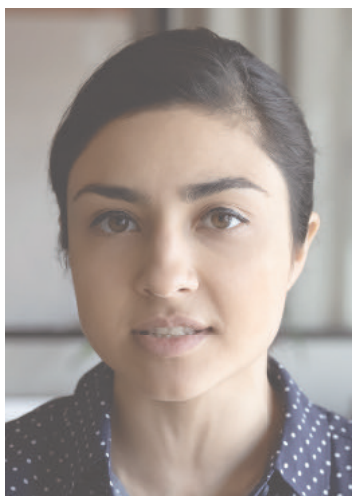
There is a big difference between the designer and decorator sales-types. Decorators have accessories as their focus. Designers, however, are interested in the total feel or personality of their clients' rooms. A decorator may pick out accent pieces to make a piece of furniture look better. A designer wants to

know if the furniture and accent pieces will create the total room feel their customers are looking for.

Designer types consider the big picture and do the best job satisfying customers' long-term needs. They don't just sell things. Designer types build trade for stores and generate the highest average tickets. So, what downside could possibly be associated with this sales type? Although great with fabrics and aesthetics, they sometimes don't spend adequate time explaining the quality construction of items. The more the customer spends, the more comfortable they want to feel about the true quality of items they are considering.

The Storyteller

You may not come across this selling style very often, but it is extraordinarily



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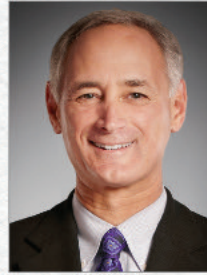
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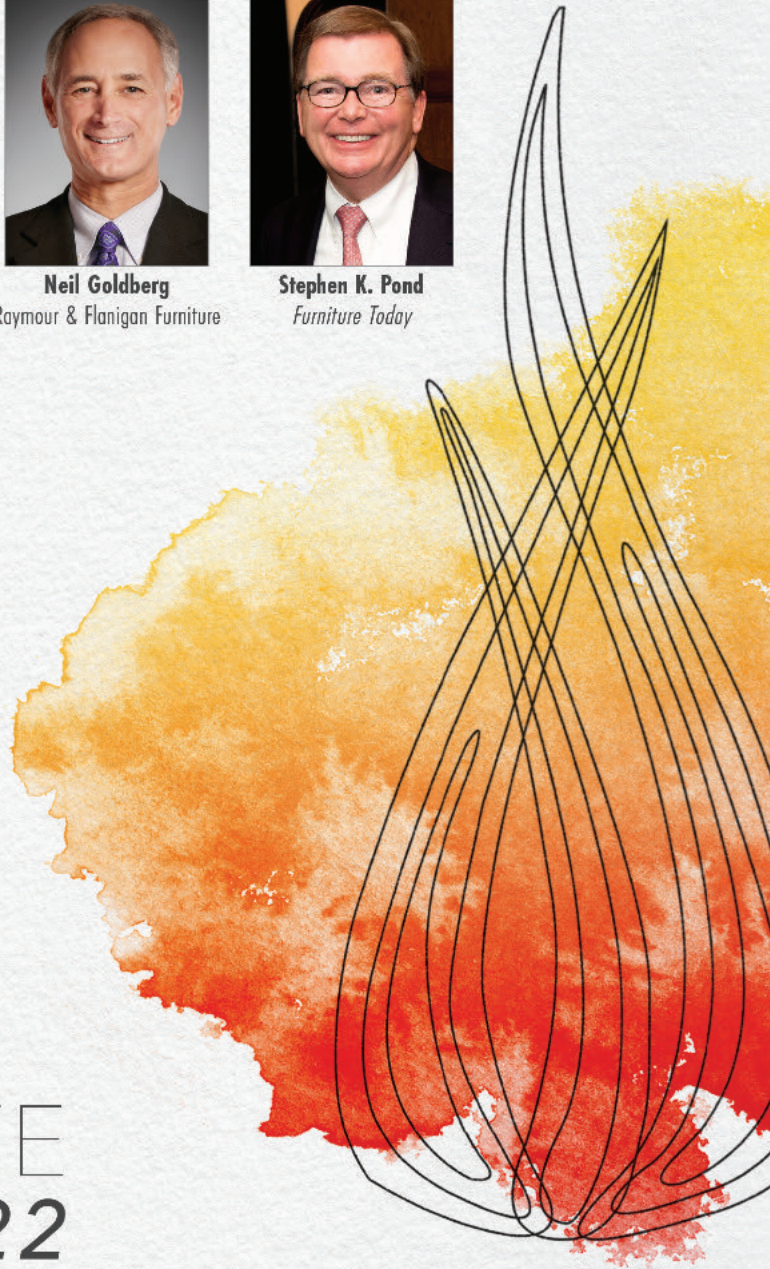
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SALES-TYPE COACHING



ly effective. It is said that Abe Lincoln always had a good story to tell. Even when pressed by detractors, he would spin a disarming tale to win them over. I

"These individuals tend to have high close ratios. In many cases, though, their cancellation rate may also be the highest in your store."

read that some folks considered Lincoln's approach frustrating because it was almost impossible to argue with him.

Telling great stories is an art form. Cass, a salesperson I once encountered, was probably as good a storyteller as old Abe. Once he started, it was just minutes before his customers would begin to lean in, their eyes got bigger, and ultimately, their jaws dropped! Once he got to that point in his story, his customers developed "lead bottoms." What I mean by that is that they hardly ever left without buying.

So, just what kind of stories would he tell? Unfortunately, we don't have the time or the space to go into it right

now, but if we ever get a chance to talk sometime, be sure to ask me about those magical stories! What could be the only downside with this sales type? All your other salespeople may need a session or two with the company psychologist to address issues of low self-esteem. Just kidding! However, when an individual like this dominates the sales conversation with a narrative, some of the proper and necessary customer questions may not get posed, resulting in the customer's true needs remaining unknown.

The Conversation Driver

Unlike storytellers, conversation drivers

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ask questions and control conversations with their customers. Controlling the conversation leads to controlling the sale. You no doubt have heard there is a good reason we are born with just one mouth and two ears! Really great salespeople are always good listeners. In fact, anyone at the very top of their chosen profession has become an expert listener. People like to be listened to. That is true when they buy furniture or visit a medical doctor. If a salesperson asks appropriate questions then listens intently to the answers, it makes them seem smarter, shows obvious concern and tremendous professionalism. Such is the power and lasting impression of asking the right questions!

Most customers don't shop for furniture that often and need guidance along their journey. Many times, they haven't even begun to think about many of the essential considerations that should be driving their decision-making. That's when the conversation driver sales type is needed the most.

There are actually many different types of questions that should be asked. These include more than just asking about a client's merchandise preferences. Questions should address room considerations, decorating inclinations and a dozen or so specific to the type

of room customers are looking to furnish. The conversation driver sales type is extremely helpful to shoppers who have very little experience, keeping them from making costly mistakes. What might be this sales type's shortcoming? Customers can become alienated if they feel like too many questions are being pushed on them or in a rapid-fire manner. Every question must flow naturally during a friendly and engaging conversation.

Sales Meeting Suggestion

Present the information in this article to your sales team during a scheduled sales meeting. Ask each sales associate to identify their own personal sales type, or combined type. Then ask them to comment on how they might be able to minimize the downsides of their present style or cultivate additional styles' skills to enhance sales performance. Open up the meeting at the end to brainstorm as a group.

About Scott Morris: Scott worked for the four largest furniture retail chains in America in various positions. He is the owner of HSM Publishing. His mission is to stop the high sales associate turnover rate within the industry. He has written and published six books, plus produced

the empowering "Sales Questions" Laminate, and publishes the advanced level, 10-Hour sales training course titled, "The Best Furniture Sales Training Ever!!!" He also produces a package of "12 Insightful Customer Handouts" to aid in the in-store selling process, and to give to the 75 percent of all shoppers who leave without buying!

His newly produced 2-Hour "Sales Closing Academy" is geared to closing today's unique shoppers. He may be reached at: hsm7777@att.net or visit www.TheBestFurnitureSalesEver.com

"When an individual like this dominates the sales conversation with a narrative, some of the proper and necessary customer questions may not get posed."

Government Regulations

by The Home Furnishings Association



The STURDY Act: One Step Closer to Full Senate Consideration

The Senate Commerce Committee unanimously approved a revised version of the STURDY Act on May 11, moving it one step closer to full Senate consideration. The STURDY Act would require the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) to adopt a mandatory safety standard for clothing storage unit tip-overs. Stakeholders from varying positions, including furniture retailers, manufacturers and consumer and parent safety groups, agreed to language that would mandate the adoption of an updated voluntary standard (currently ASTM F2057-19) that meets certain metrics, including:

- Tests simulating the weight of children up to 60 pounds.

- Objective, repeatable, reproducible, measurable tests that simulate real-world use that accounts for impacts on stability such as placement on carpeted surfaces, loaded drawers, multiple open drawers and dynamic force.

The process of updating the current ASTM voluntary standard to address these concerns is well underway. In recent years the CPSC has recalled several clothing storage units that do not comply with the existing voluntary standard. This mandatory standard will advance safety efforts that HFA and its members have supported for many years.

The HFA looks forward to working with this stakeholder coalition and congressional champions to get the STURDY Act enacted into law this year.

legislative filibuster in the Senate, which requires 60 votes to move forward with debate on the Senate floor. However, the Senate can approve legislation via unanimous consent, meaning one Senator could hold up that process. In many cases, the opposition is not connected to the underlying issue. If there were opposition to moving STURDY through unanimous consent, it would need to be attached to another legislative vehicle under consideration, like a government funding bill.

Tax Laws & Supply Chain

In May, HFA Government Relations Action Team gathered in Washington for its annual DC Fly-In to discuss the STURDY Act face-to-face with key leaders. Other legislative issues critically important to the home furnishings industry were covered as well, including tax laws and supply chain issues.

Possible Roadblock

There is great fanfare surrounding the

About HFA: To learn more about how the Home Furnishings Association is working on behalf of the interests of the furniture industry, visit go.myhfa.org/advocacy.

The HFA Government Relations Action Team gathered for their annual Washington, D.C. Fly-In to meet with lawmakers regarding the STURDY Act and other critical issues.



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Retail Benefit Plans

Tracy Jackson, SPHR, SHRM-SCP, HFA Chief HR Strategist



Crafting the right benefits packages is good for business

Every HFA member-retailer wants its employees to feel appreciated and valued. They also want to be able to attract and retain the best available talent. These goals cannot be achieved without a competitive comprehensive benefits package. That's because although competitive pay is an essential element of any compensation program, benefits packages are of equal or greater importance for many workers. In fact, they are a key differentiator for just about every potential and current employee.

"Providing options for employees to take time off from work for planned or unexpected reasons, shows you value them and the work they do in your organization."

Healthcare

Health coverage and accessibility to care were the number one concern during COVID for people across the nation.

This was especially true for front-line retail employees who did not have the option of working remotely. Workers wanted to feel cared for and know that their income and jobs were protected if they or their loved ones were to get sick. These issues continue to remain top of mind.

A well thought out employee benefits package is one of the best ways for a home furnishings retailer to demonstrate its commitment to the health and well-being of its workforce. Great benefit plans lead to higher morale, higher levels of employee engagement, lower attrition rates, and better attendance. And, when generous enough, they give talent acquisition teams a necessary edge in today's tight job market.

Many candidates will decline an offer if they have to change health-care relationships; it is THAT important to them. So, consider offering var-

ious types of coverage like Preferred Provider Organizations (PPO) and Health Maintenance Organizations (HMO) with different networks. Other options such as Health Savings Accounts (HSA) or Flexible Spending Accounts (FSA) allow workers to set aside pre-tax dollars for out-of-pocket expenses, co-pays, deductibles and prescriptions. These accounts can be used for other health-related expenses as well, like dental work, glasses or contacts, and braces. Specialty FSAs allow for the use of pre-tax dollars for dependent care and commuter/public transportation expenses. All have some limitations and drawbacks, so work with your benefits broker to make the right decisions for your organization.

Mental Health

The pandemic placed a spotlight on mental health and well-being. Employees don't want to feel stigmatized, should they need help coping with difficult times. Consider offering a wellness plan that includes an Employee Assistance Plan (EAP) providing mental health-care

Employee Benefits Package

Summary of Benefits

support to employees. Usually, an EAP includes free and confidential access to local mental-health professionals who can support employees through life's challenges.

Time-Off Plans

Providing options for employees to take time off from work for planned or unexpected reasons is a safety net that shows you appreciate them and the

"Providing options for employees to take time off from work for planned or unexpected reason shows you value them and the work they do in your organization."

work they do. The value of having the ability to continue to support themselves and their families, should a family emergency arise cannot be overestimated. Time off accrual rates should increase throughout an employee's tenure and higher-level employees should accumulate at a higher rate than those who are entry-level, which is especially important for retention purposes.

Retirement Planning

Retirement planning is another key element of a comprehensive benefits package. Most workers today do not believe that Social Security is sustainable, nor that it will provide adequate support for their retirement years. Designing a retirement plan that includes a match is an excellent retention tool.

Rewarding & Recognizing

There are many other ways to reward and recognize employees, such as:

- Volunteer programs that provide

paid hours to volunteer in the communities you serve.

- Leadership development programs.
- On-site kitchen facilities for workers to store and enjoy meals.
- Business casual or a relaxed dress code.

Conclusion

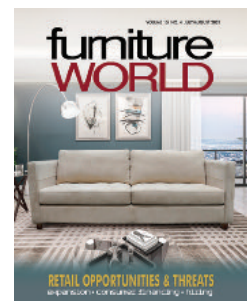
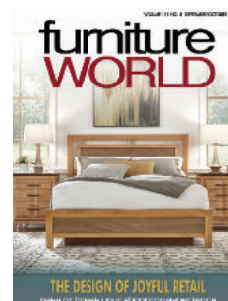
The bottom line is that workers want to be proud of the company they work for, know they are cared for and feel valued. There is no better way to do this than having a benefits package incorporating health care, time off, and other perks. And, don't forget to offer discounts to your employees on the products and services you provide. Grown-ups love new furniture and appliances.

Stop by space B1050 during Las Vegas Market to learn about HFA Healthcare Solutions, now offering sole proprietor coverage. Visit hfahealthcare.decisely.com for details and a free quote.

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