

Office Furniture Industry gets 'Green' Makeover

by Ted Booker

Office furniture has been getting a makeover this year as "going green" is giving the industry a new look.

Kentwood Office Furniture, for instance, is undergoing a major trend towards selling used and remanufactured furniture. Matt Wieringa, vice president of marketing and sales, said that the standard for selling furniture this year has evolved significantly.

"Although [used furniture] has not been a historically popular choice amongst the many great products available from the major office furniture manufacturers, customer demand for green and more cost effective solutions is forcing the interior design and furniture industries to act differently," he said. "That said, there are many new developments from the major manufacturers both in terms of their products and in terms of their operating practices."

Wieringa also said the economic crisis has altered the dynamic of how companies are purchasing and selling furniture.

"The biggest stress for most companies right now is cash," he said. "Banks are not extending any new lending. In addition, many organizations that are still performing financially well are experiencing substantial reductions in their lines of credit. As a result, companies that need office furniture are looking to spend less. Those that may have traditionally followed strict manufacturer, type, and color standards are now looking at low cost solutions. Kentwood Office Furniture as a dealer has responded by enhanced marketing of both our remanufactured

workstations and used product. Our market research shows that organizations and individuals want office furniture environmentally sustainable; they just don't want to pay more for it."

He continued, "Remanufactured and used furniture is the highest evolution of 'green.' Many new products contain a percentage of recycled material; however, remanufactured and used product is totally reused. Kentwood has adopted the motto 'go green, save green' because we believe that you can have office furniture that meets your budget and is good for the planet at the same time."

Wieringa suspects that remanufactured and used furniture will have an increased demand in the future as companies endeavor to cut back on costs.

"One of the major problems for manufacturers of 'new' office furniture is that there is a glut of used office furniture available on the market right now," he said. "Even companies that benefit from the stimulus will be forced to deal with credit and cash constraints and will likely look to used and remanufactured office furniture as a prime solution. Office furniture dealers like Kentwood Office will likely shine because we have a business model and experienced team that focuses on acquiring used products across North American and supplying them to the market."

Mark Bonnema, principal sustainability engineer for Haworth, Inc., said that "going green" with office furniture means three things:

"First, understanding the materials used in the product, evaluating them for human and environmental health, and eliminating materials which present a health risk," he said. "Second,

designing the products so that the materials can be used in a closed loop, either recycling the 'technical' materials (aluminum and steel, for example) back into new useful products, or by returning the 'biological' materials (wood, cotton, wool) safely to the ground to become nutrients for biological processes. Third, power all processes by safe and renewable sources of energy."

Bonnema said that customers are paying a lot more attention to green furniture than they used to, which is beneficial for companies that specialize in green products.

"There is an increasing focus on the materials used in office furniture products from a growing number of customers," he said. "They are interested in what the product is made of, if all the materials are considered to be safe, and how much of the product is made from recycled materials. For companies like Haworth that have made the investments to improve their materials, this is a welcome change and actually a competitive advantage."

Furthermore, Bonner said that some big companies are now making environmentally friendly products a requirement.

"Among a growing number of companies, led by some of the major multinationals and some of the mid-size trailblazers, these are becoming requirements," he said. "The market is moving in the direction of preferring and demanding more environmentally friendly products, and it's no coincidence that some of our best selling products like Zody, Compose and Allways are the products that are on the leading edge of sustainability."