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THE BUSINESS OF THE CONTRACT FURNISHINGS INDUSTRY



A Classic Turns 50

Showrooms Bloom

More and more manufacturers in the industry are opening new showrooms across the country and around the world. **By Rob Kirkbride**

When Haworth Inc. set off to create a new image in 2004, it started with its showroom at the Merchandise Mart in Chicago.

The stunning showroom had the desired effect, leaving many to wonder as they left after visiting it: "Is this the showroom of the conservative company in Holland, Mich.?"

Like Haworth, more and more manufacturers in the industry are opening new showrooms across the country and around the world to show customers how their furniture works in a living, breathing office.

When it comes to new showrooms, Haworth is leading the way. In addition to the Chicago showroom, the company opened new spaces in Los Angeles, Washington D.C., Dallas, Calgary and New York. Internationally, the company opened showrooms in Frankfurt, London, Prague and Moscow. It also has showrooms in Kuala Lumpur, Tokyo, Beijing and Melbourne. The company will open a new Toronto showroom in January.

And the company's largest and most impressive showroom -- within its sparkling new headquarters -- will open to the public in May.

"The number one reason we've created all these showrooms is brand alignment," said Kurt Vander Schuer, the company's corporate brand director. "We're more of a workspace company now, whereas before, we were a furniture company."

The company's old showrooms did a good job showing off Haworth's line of furniture. But they did little to promote its architectural walls and raised flooring products. They were also a bit, well, dull.

Led by Chairman Dick Haworth and Italian-born Chief Executive Officer Franco Bianchi, the new showrooms have a European feel with clean, simple lines, elegant amenities and striking new furniture.



Chicago's Merchandise Mart will be home to numerous new showrooms by NeoCon

Its Chicago showroom, which since 2004 has been remodeled yet again, has won several design awards.

The new showrooms are giving Haworth a new reputation as well. With design at the forefront, the company is beginning to be recognized as a design savvy company.

And the showrooms are driving sales as well. Vander Schuer gives an example:

An architecture and design firm had a very design-conscious technology company in Los Angeles. The designer convinced the company they needed Knoll furniture. The client asked the designer to see other furniture examples before they made a decision.

The designer set up a tour of Haworth's Los Angeles showroom. "In the designer's mind, it was a courtesy call," Vander Schuer said. "The designers had made up their mind already."

Apparently, the client had not. When the clients stepped into the showroom,

they turned to the designer and said: "This is not how you described Haworth."

"They awarded us the contract for their new office for 400 people," Vander Schuer said. "Our showroom helped us win that sale."

"If you are shopping for a new house, you want to go see an example of it to see if it is in line with your expectations. If we have clients that think Haworth isn't a design brand, but something like a good solid Buick, they might go to one of our new showrooms and say, 'Wow, I see a little BMW there.' This is what we are about today. We are a global player."

The new showrooms have helped Haworth retain key members of its sales team, strengthen relationships with its distribution network and prompted the design community to see the company in a different light.

"Our showrooms have become resource centers," Vander Schuer said.

"People are coming to the spaces to learn, network and share knowledge. All of them have large meeting rooms and they might be used by the local chamber of commerce, AIA, U.S. Green Building Council or someone might bring in an expert or ergonomics in the workplace, for example.

"There's a lot more knowledge sharing going on. People come to see things, come to learn things and come to network. That's what's been fun for us. And traffic in our showrooms has gone up a lot."

There's also a practical purpose for Haworth's showroom building boom. Over the years, Haworth has acquired so many companies, it found itself with a glut of showrooms, none of which reflected the company's changing personality.

Some showrooms were shut down. Many were consolidated. New ones were opened.

Each of the Haworth showrooms have a unique personality, depending on the location. The company works with Per-

kins + Will on a market study to tailor the space to the community.

For example, the company's Santa Monica, Calif. showroom has a water garden and green elements, reflective of the lush landscape and nearby Pacific Ocean. The company's Washington showroom, which is close to the Capital, has a more stately feel by using marble. In Dallas, Haworth used cowhide in its lounge area and fossilized stone for the walls.

"The idea is to incorporate the Haworth brand with strong local elements," Vander Schuer said.

Still, there are common themes in the showrooms as well, said Ken Brandsen, Haworth's manager of facilities design and management.

Showroom visitors will find a seating gallery; a wood salon where the company talks about veneers and finishes; a sustainability lab; raised floors with clear glass tiles to show how HVAC and electrical can be used under the floor; and architectural walls with cut-aways

to show how the movable walls tie into fixed elements of the building like the electrical closet.

Although Haworth is leading the charge in building new showrooms, by no means are they alone in the industry. Many companies have added new showrooms in recent years, including Steelcase, Allsteel, Global, Herman Miller, OFS, Kimball and National, to name a few.

KI also has added new showrooms, said Shawn Green, vice president of product management.

"It's difficult for a customer to envision what our products will look like in a space," he said. "As furniture becomes more of a commodity, manufacturers are trying to differentiate themselves.

"Customers want to see the furniture along with the architecture and the space. Gone are the days where you might show a customer a sample file and sell it that day. There's a higher need to have a physical way of showing that product." ▸