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COVER: Statements about current fashion trends rarely contain the word "traditional." Middleton from Legends Furniture makes that statement without words. Its casual nod to the styles of yesteryear reflects the relaxed lifestyle it emulates. For more information about Legends see page 33 in this issue or visit https://www.legendsfurniture.com.

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I don’t need to remind most of you that there is some good, some bad and some downright ugly out there in the world of furniture.

At retail, furniture sales are up (good), retail technology is being fast-tracked (good), retail strategies such as appointment-only have worked well (good), it’s hard to find workers (bad), our supply chain is broken (ugly), and some retailers will face cash flow issues as a consequence of not setting aside sufficient cash to cover special-orders (potentially ugly).

I count three goods, three bads and two uglies. Let’s leave social unrest, politics, wildfires and meteors (see David Benbow’s article) for a future issue.

Another negative—according to High Point based Smith Leonard Accountants and Consultants—the consumer confidence index “based on consumer’s short-term outlook for income, business and labor market conditions decreased sharply recently…”

Despite all these negatives there is some surprising good news. Millennials are reaching their peak home-buying age. Add to that, low mortgage rates and a lack of cash-spending alternatives during the pandemic—and—voila! we find ourselves in a housing boom. Who could have predicted that?

“Millennials are emerging as a dominant force relative to driving the purchase market forward in the next few years,” said Ellie Mae’s chief operating officer, Joe Tyrrell. “Our data indicates…the true boom is just starting.”

Recent home sales figures bear this out. The most recent Smith Leonard “Monthly Furniture Insights Report” noted that existing home sales “are on a strong, upward trajectory,” and that “new house sales were up considerably in all four regions of the country compared to July 2019 sales.” Likewise, housing starts showed strong gains.

This bodes well for those of us who have what it takes to get through to the other side of this mess. I hope that the excellent content in this issue will assist in that regard.

Good Retailing,

Russell Bienenstock
Editorial Director/CEO
russ@furninfo.com
HOME TRENDS & DESIGN

FURNITURE FOR GOOD

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In recent months our customers have spent more time at home than ever before. This has caused a demand spike for merchandise and services related to working at home. Grocery, home entertainment, home fitness, hardware, comfort clothing, building supplies, home spas, electronics, appliances, and home furnishings have benefited.

Thus far into this crisis, home furnishings retail has been a recipient of a diversion of consumer disposable income. How long this will last is uncertain. In my opinion, spending on furnishings is fragile. Unlike the home entertainment industry (video streaming, gaming), there is little that our industry has done to stimulate long-term demand. Likely, our consumers will continue to spend more on their homes until either their lives return to a more normal pre-pandemic lifestyle or their spending power diminishes. If demand falls off, some regions will be affected more than others, as happened in the recession that began in 2008. At that point, businesses that weather current challenges well will likely continue to prosper—similar to the most recent recovery period we experienced from 2010 until 2019.

**Demand vs. Supply**

Shifts in demand are fairly common, the result of wars, natural disasters, man-made environmental problems, terrorism, and other unfortunate circumstances. These can cause the demand curve to move “to the right,” or increase, in some industries and “to the left” or decrease, in others. Generally, a sudden event causes more (or fewer) consumers to be in the market for certain goods. Following April 2020 we’ve seen the home furnishings demand curve move to the right, while the airline travel demand curve moved to the left. With these sudden shifts, shortages and excess supply occur. I believe that the demand curve for furniture is more price inelastic right now. That means that consumer buying behaviors are influenced less by price and more by availability. As

It is highly likely that retailers will need to do more with less in the coming months, especially in the areas of staffing and securing inventory. Here are 16 strategies to help you cope.
What Does Designer Gary Inman... say about High Point’s Bienenstock Furniture Library?

Furnishings and interior designers can explore all the wonderful aspects of design history at the Bienenstock Furniture Library. Great design minds and extraordinary furnishings are represented here in 5,000 significant volumes on furniture and interior design, ornament and architecture. It’s a place to connect with their ideas and creative spirit.

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home furnishings product shortages have occurred, more consumers have been willing to pay more for home goods.

**Shortages**

The two biggest challenges facing retailers right now are product and people shortages.

Product shortages have resulted from factory shutdowns, unavailable factory workers and supply chain disruptions.

Prior to the pandemic, when unemployment was at historic lows, finding and developing quality people was a top challenge. This situation has gone from bad to worse as fear of COVID-19 infection, increased unemployment benefits, low retail wages, and the perceived undesirability taking some retail furniture store jobs have made workers scarce.

**Doing More With Less**

Let’s examine a number of practices that can help you to weather the storm by doing more with less.

1. **Buy deep vs broad.** With a smoothly flowing supply chain, a just-in-time, inventory replenishment strategy works well. You could buy “broadly” across all your merchandise categories and replenishing only when needed. However, with the erratic supply, all bets are off. The best bet may be to buy “deeper” across your very best SKUs. If you follow this strategy, ensure you have proven data on which items your customers want now. This strategy could backfire on you if you invest in untested product.

2. **Err on the side of over-inventory.** Greater lead times equate to higher inventory levels. If your cash situation and warehouse capacity are such that you can carry a greater inventory percent to your sales volume than normal—you should do so provided you are buying the right merchandise. Do not make the mistake of over-investing in new product.

3. **Separate product into these two categories.** Customers and salespeople will benefit from knowing what items are available today—either floor samples or product in your warehouse (the ‘available now’ category). Customers who want something customized, or a fresh item (the ‘factory order’ category) may choose a factory order subject to available production lead times. Ensure that after your greeting, you understand your customers’ reasonable timeline. For customers who choose to order new from the factory, be clear about lead times. Avoid giving delivery date ranges. To under promise and over deliver (UPOD) is generally a better practice. Instead of saying, “It’s going to be eight-ten weeks,” say, “Due to the current situation, to manufacture these new items for you, completion is maybe greater than two months.” You may also want to add a third product segment, “on-order” available to reserve.

4. **Continue selling after the sale.** The sale begins when you write up a ticket, but that should not be the end. Whether you made an available-now sale or a new factory order, follow-up multiple times and re-sell. (Three proactive follow-ups at the minimum). To save everyone’s time, call your customers before they call you.

5. **Rethink markdown pricing.** If you have a limited amount of inventory available to take home now, consider selling “drop” items (undamaged and visually like-new) at regular margins. Place a “take me home today” price tag on these items. Price, especially in an environment of product scarcity, is not the biggest factor with respect to consumer purchasing decisions.

6. **Seek balance in your vendor relationships.** When the pandemic hit, some vendors were able to react fast, recalibrate their operations and ramp up production. Many have been struggling to react to the change in

"Consumer buying behaviors are influenced less right now by price and more by availability."
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It is more important than ever to focus on building quality relationships while at the same time cultivating new sources of supply.

1. **Guide your in-store traffic more efficiently.**
   For those of you who believe that conducting business by appointment only is too radical a step for a brick and mortar furniture retailer, work to better control floor traffic. Continuous improvement in this area should be the goal of every showroom sales manager. To increase sales with fewer salesperson resources, managers must match customers to salespeople who are currently focused on other conversations. They must walk the fine line of moving salespeople between customers without causing frustration. Use technology to assist. Radios or app-enabled Bluetooth communication is necessary in most cases. Consider employing greeters (as opposed to CSRs) to direct customers to appropriate areas of the showroom if you often find yourself in open floor situations.

2. **Use price tags to tell a story.**
   Price tags are not only about the price. They inform customers and remind salespeople about product and service options. Consider creating tags that show availability, additional product options, financing and services such as protection and delivery. With current technology it is simple to place a QR code on tags that link to product information, additional options and video. QR codes can even prompt a salesperson to come for assistance. This is already a reality in other industries, why not furniture?

3. **Direct virtual traffic more effectively.**
   In the “New Front Door” article (July/August Furniture World), I explained how to capitalize on customer lead traffic. Doing this well helps you accomplish more with fewer people resources. Your objective should always be to make a meaningful connection with a prospect, then schedule a date and time to meet in-store. This way, your homework can be done in advance of a physical meeting, leading to a higher close rate, higher average sale and a happier customer.

4. **Leverage resources for follow-up.**
   To do more with less, think about using automated emails, sending personalized text messages, and...
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12. Overstaff delivery and pay them well.
In-home furniture delivery is a tough job. Arguably, compared to a UPS delivery person, furniture delivery is more physically and mentally demanding. Both compensation and staffing levels should be high enough to ensure that this vital function is performed well. Back-end DC positions are directly related to the speed of revenue in retail organizations.

13. Practice LEAN internal merchandise flow.
LEAN practices are now more important than ever. The nature of LEAN is to do more with less by constantly improving processes. Observe the ways in which you currently conduct activities such as receiving and delivery. Figure out what slows you down, then devise and document improved processes. If you can increase the throughput of merchandise via leaner activities, you make better use of your peoples’ time.

14. Leverage technology for service issues.
Reverse logistics, also known as “customer service problems after the sale,” can be time consuming and disruptive. A major strategy to do more with less is to control the work, rather than being controlled by the work. For example, using customer service technologies to make it easy for customers to enter their own warranty or protection claims on your website can enable a quicker and more productive response.

15. Grow these two important close rates.
Close rates from virtual leads and from in-store traffic are calculated as follows. They are indicators of your success at doing more with less.
• Virtual lead to in-store appoint-

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ment close rate = # of virtual leads / in-store appointments produced.
• In-store close rate = # of visual traffic captured with door counter / # of sales.

16. Review options for outsourcing roles. Here is a list of some of the roles in a typical home furnishings operation that can be outsourced: traditional marketing, digital marketing, content development, CFO / financial operations / accounting, HR, payroll, customer service, warehouse / delivery and repair. Outsourced partners should be specialists and be able to adapt to your business model. As with employees, an outsourcing partner can be successful or unsuccessful depending on their level of commitment, skill, personality, and desire to do the work properly.

Conclusion

From the time that this crazy ride started, many of us are just hanging on. It is complicated. It is exhausting. Take a moment, slow it down, look at your business, and consider how you can do more with less. Be honest with your situation and be open to trying new practices that give your employees and customers what they want. If you try, you might just get what you need. Enjoy your ride through this storm; surf well, so that when you break on through to the other side, you are ahead of your competitors.

About David McMahon: David McMahon helps retailers grow sales, profitability, and cash flow. He directs industry performance groups for owners, sales managers and operations managers. He also operates PerformNOW, Inc., a performance consulting and accounting firm for home furnishings retailers. For more information or to connect with David, visit david@performnow.net, https://www.linkedin.com/in/davidwmcmahon or https://performnow.net. See all of his articles at www.furninfo.com/Authors/David_McMahon/6.
In this installment of the Design & Designer series, Erika Hollinshead Ward, founder of Erika Ward Interiors shares her views on design, trends and how to effectively reach today’s consumers. Her design firm specializes in what she describes as a contemporary-meets-classic interior design aesthetic.

Erika is a long-time High Point Style Spotter who has been featured in Home and Décor, Jet Magazine, House Beautiful, Traditional Home, The Washington Post and her own popular blog, where she relates design news, gives expert advice and writes about renovations, entertaining and travel. Her practice serves design clients nationwide, but is rooted in the Atlanta area. She’s also worked closely with national brands as a spokesperson and brand ambassador.

“Beautiful & Practical”

Erika’s designs are beautiful and practical.

“My clients are typically busy successful professional people who call me after realizing that their decor doesn’t reflect all the things achieved in life, nor does it nurture them. All of a sudden they want something good to happen and happen fast.

“I suppose that my background in finance,” she explained, “lends a practical aspect to the designs I create for them. Rooms that are over the top need to be refreshed more often. At some point people grow tired of them and they may wonder, ‘Why in the world did I let that design firm do what they did?’ So, I always design keeping in mind classic, timeless longevity.”

She told Furniture World that people are used to buying individual furniture pieces or a room full of furniture at a furniture store. “When they hire a design firm, the investment adds up real fast. And so, if somebody entrusts me with $100,000 or $200,000, I make sure that they get designs they will love and that will last. If I become a steward of their money, it’s more likely that they will have good thoughts about me later, and will think, ‘I’m so glad I called her.’ A lot of my clients are left-brained, analytical, so this emphasis pulls at their heart strings!

“Good interior design is not just about creating a look, but really getting people to do a little bit of self-discovery without going to a therapist. It’s an opportunity to get them to focus inward to discover what they want, what they need, and really cater to those desires.
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Questions Retailers Should Be Asking

How might Furniture Retailers address the spirit of good interior design?

“Right now,” she explained, “retailers should be asking about their customers’ feelings. Questions such as ‘How do you want your new room to feel,’ and ‘what does that mean for you?’ How can we get you to fall in love with your house again?”

“Selling furnishings used to be about how consumers wanted their purchase to look. Did they like boho, something really modern and chic, or farmhouse?

“Our customers want to feel safe. They want to feel accomplished, successful and comfortable. A big part of our brand message at Erika Ward Interiors is to make client’s homes feel like sanctuaries. These sanctuaries can be for themselves, for their families or for guests who visit their newly designed homes.

“For our customers who have children, there’s always been a tension between having the family they always wanted and preventing their homes from looking like a romper room.”

Erika knows a lot about this. Her business persona is closely associated with her family and her ability to balance a growing design business with the responsibilities of tending to her family, which includes five school-age children.

“How can we help a client’s family life coexist with their desire to live a chic life?” she continued. “How in the world can that work? There are many ways that design-oriented furniture retailers can address these needs if they ask the right questions and listen. This includes finding out what customers already have in their homes and suggesting that they invest in performance fabrics and rugs.”

Erika says that’s a shame because the observations of forecasters and influencers can limit choices.

Style Spotting

“Many furniture stores present as a little lackluster. They can feel lifeless and even a little boring. The same goes for their websites that can be item focused, lacking attractive lifestyle content and outdated. Retail websites don’t often have a lot of design personality, so it’s more difficult for shoppers to picture pieces of furniture in their homes. Appealing to the masses has its place, but sometimes a niche marketing approach is better.”

When asked, based on her experience as a buyer and Style Spotter, what retailers can do to improve this lack of design excitement, she suggested they prepare by thinking about what’s missing in their product selections. “Ask their salespeople to keep track of what customers are asking for that’s not represented on their floors. What items can they purchase that will be unique to them and their brand? How might they increase excitement and complement what they already have on their
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floors to make it even better?"

Erika also suggested that buyers, while at Market, take more time to collect detailed information and stories about the products they purchase. "So many people today want to know the stories behind the designs," she explained. "They repeat that story when they have guests in their homes and on social media. That makes the pieces they purchased special and different from anything that anybody else has, or at least it can be made to seem that way.

"Collecting this information from manufacturers is time well spent. People don’t mind spending more money on something if a story helps them to feel good about a purchase and better understand its value.

"I always look to see what’s new at High Point. I don’t just visit the people I already do business with. Markets are there to explore, find out what brands—especially international brands—have created that we are not yet seeing here. In that way I can incorporate some of that excitement into what we do to stand out at Erika Ward Interiors."

From Finance to Design

"My path to becoming an interior designer started with a desire to become an architect, just like my grandfather. Instead, he encouraged me to study finance. Back then, I always did what I was told! Coming out of the University of Georgia, I worked for a full-service design, build, architecture and engineering firm as a project accountant.

While doing financial reporting for the Georgia Aquarium, the largest aquarium in the world at that time, I developed a burning desire to do interior design.

"And so I started doing small projects for family and friends, eventually making the transition in 2009 to founding the full-service design firm,
"For our customers, there’s always been a tension between having the family they always wanted and preventing their homes from looking like a romper room."

Erika Ward Interiors.”

Like a number of other prominent designers, Erika found her voice in home furnishings through blogging. "I wrote about clients’ design projects and shared information about projects I was working on in my own home. At the same time, I attended industry events, at first locally in Atlanta. These also found their way into my blog http://erikaward.com/blog. That in turn, helped me to earn a reputation for having a finger on the pulse of home furnishings design trends.

"The interior design industry allowed me to scale my business to accommodate family duties. In the very beginning, I did more consulting work, providing customized design services for core clients. Over time, this generated a huge referral base of people who had a good experience. They shared these experiences with friends, family and neighbors—across the operating table, at the golf club and on the soccer field."

Ward’s popular blog (left) shares design news, expert design advice, plus advice about renovations, entertaining and travel.

"For our customers, there’s always been a tension between having the family they always wanted and preventing their homes from looking like a romper room."

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Designers in Retail Stores

Are there opportunities for retailers to integrate interior designers into their business models? Erica thinks, “Absolutely! There are a lot of sole proprietor interior designers who have talent and just want to design. I’m not saying that these creators aren’t good business people, but they often end up doing more administrative tasks than actual design work.

“Working with a furniture retailer can be the perfect solution. Retailers take care of administrative tasks and designers spend their time doing what they do best.”

She says that this can change the nature of the retail conversation. “Instead of trying to sell that sofa or chair, the focus changes to which of these pieces best suit the client. It can be a beautiful collaboration.”

The Future

Before the pandemic hit, Ward had plans to expand into retail, but now these plans are on hold. “I opened a showroom that clients and potential clients can visit. It’s not arranged like a typical furniture store. When they walk into our showroom, it feels like they’ve walked into someone’s home. There is an entryway, living, dining and kitchen areas. Also, we created a closed-off bedroom, wet bar, study, as well as a resource room, a couple of bathrooms and space to make presentations. I had plans to expand into small retail, but had to scale back because of COVID-19. So, it’s appointment-only until next year.”

Ward is also designing a wellness room in Seasonal Living Magazine’s 20,000-square-foot modern luxury virtual designer showhouse—the first luxury designer showhouse, both tourable and shopable from the comfort of home. Unconstrained by the real world concerns of budget and product availability, participating interior designers have complete creative control to showcase sponsoring brands with a focus on wellness and sustainability. Built entirely in the virtual world, with no real world counterpart, it sits on a 20-acre estate in Malibu, California, with beautiful views of the Pacific Ocean. “I’m super excited about this opportunity,” she concluded.

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The last time Furniture World spoke to Ron Becker, one of the founders and general manager of The Great American Home Store, it was 2014. At that time GAHS operated two full-line stores—their original location in Southaven, Mississippi, a second location in Memphis, plus a free-standing sleep shop. At the time, Becker was in the midst of planning his first foray into eCommerce. He says the rollout didn’t go smoothly. “We would maybe take a step forward and then fall back a step. There were challenges, mostly having to do with systems integration.”

Jack Wells Jr., Great American Home Store’s marketing director, who was in charge of implementing eCommerce told Furniture World, “At the time our website was excellent, but it was mostly set up for presentation. It wasn’t set up for selling online, for true interactive marketing, and for interacting with shoppers the way we do today.”

“We went from roughly an 11 percent conversion rate to between 25 to 29 percent from online leads, and this return continues to improve as we add more resources.”
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years of spinning our wheels trying to get our website integrated with our point-of-sales system we realized that wasn’t going to work. So, we made the tough decision to switch site platforms. We spent most of last year working on that project to make the conversion.” That preparation was good timing for GAHS after COVID-19 hit.

**A New Front Door**

“PERQ provides our lead generation and other ways to engage customers.” Bowen elaborated, “There’s a lot of information coming in through our website. We have two dedicated staff members who sort through leads and qualify them. Then, they coordinate with our in-store sales and support staff as needed. Ever since we made the change from having our in-store staff doing this work, the benefits have been huge. We went from roughly an 11 percent conversion rate to between 25 to 29 percent from online leads, and this return continues to improve as we add more resources.”

The in-store staff uses a web-based application called Crisp, an online, omni-channel platform to communicate with customers. "If a shopper or existing customer sends us a message via text, email, Facebook messenger or chat,” said Bowen, “that information is transferred into Crisp. It’s a great fit for us for a number of reasons. Crisp is extremely well developed in terms of its feature set and has a single inbox so our entire staff is able to see every conversation. This helps with transparency. If somebody drops the ball, someone else can pick it up without an individual having to forward it from their personal inbox. Forwarding is what we used to do, and it did not work well.”

Justin added that fragmented communications resulting from information coming in from different channels can be hard for retailers to manage. “Crisp helped us unify those different online and in-store channels in one place to make sure that both leads and customers get taken care of in a cooperative process.”

The result is that GAHS has the ability to put information into Crisp to let salespeople know that there’s an available lead they can follow up on. “Everyone including manag-
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www.LegendsFurniture.com
ers, sales, support and service staff have been trained to work the system, Bowen concluded, “everybody knows how to use it.”

“Crisp is working out real well for us,” said Jack Wells. “All of our people are tied to it and we can review their conversations with customers. Customer service people can be brought in when needed as well.

“The front door to our physical stores is not the first entry point. It is now our website. My guess is that 99 percent or more of the customers who visit our physical store have been to the GAHS website first.”

Ron Becker agreed, “I would say it’s almost 100 percent. Once shoppers begin to have conversations with our staff through Crisp, and get comfortable with our question and answer sessions, they move to the next step and come on into the store. That process takes anywhere from 24 hours to 10 days.

“Shoppers have a choice of how to communicate on the Great American Home Store website. It can be via text, email, or a phone call. Once a conversation gets started, we check off a box, so to speak. Then it’s our job to make potential customers feel comfortable enough to visit the store.”

“Salespeople have plenty of time when they are not up on the floor, said Wells. “They can be much more productive if they go into one of our kiosks, get online and talk to customers. That’s how we are growing our business.”

“We identified 20 salespeople who had the credentials, qualifications and abilities to work from home and sell online using tablets supplied by GAHS.”

“We were up about eight percent before it hit,” Wells added. “Then all of the sudden everything went south. We stopped advertising and closed down for about six weeks. The company lost almost a million dollars over that six week period.

“But our eCommerce business went up 1,200 percent. That was on top of the previous 33 percent increase because we were already moving in that direction. As the store opened up to floor traffic we didn’t maintain that level, but year to date eCommerce sales are up almost 300 percent. That doesn’t include sales we can track back to conversations that started online.”

More Challenges

Jack Wells, who has worked in a number of other industries told Furniture World that the furniture industry is probably the most backward industry as far as technology usage he’s ever seen. “Operations like Wayfair and Amazon have a good grip on how it should be
These reports allow us to compare our advertising buys, stations, time slots and creative so we can make better buying decisions.

done. We’ve watched these guys and learned, but furniture manufacturers are just now starting to work hard at it. They’ve been slow to grasp what’s going on. Stores like us need their support. We need furniture brands to develop and supply decent marketing and web tools we can use.

“Another big challenge for many furniture retailers is getting their people to engage with new technology—especially salespeople. In the beginning, some of our top salespeople who were getting on up in years didn’t grasp the technology.

“For example, we could hardly get one of our best salespeople to read his email before the pandemic hit. But when our stores shut down he figured out quickly that he could sell furniture using the technology.”

“The gentleman Jack is talking about,” Becker chimed in, “needed a push in the right direction. I went into the break room one morning before the store opened up, and let him know, ‘While we’re shut down, you have to figure out a way to earn your keep. And, I strongly suggest that you use the Crisp program so you can sell some furniture while we’re shut down!’ He sold over $100,000 that month.”

Advertising

After cutting out all advertising when the store was closed for six weeks during the pandemic, GAHS started with radio, plus standard 30-second and one-minute television commercials to help customers feel safe about coming back into GAHS stores or buying online and using touchless curbside options.

The average ticket for an online sale at Great American Home Store during the first months of the pandemic was about one third of their normal average in-store sale. “At that time,” noted Becker, “customers were just buying the items they needed right away—items that they could pick up in their truck, horse trailer or flat bed.”

When asked if that changed once things started opening up, Jack Wells explained that the store was “up 13.26 percent over last year, at the end of August.”

Lead Metrics

Advertising metrics generated by the LeadsRx application are an important element in Great American Home Store’s strategy.

Digital manager Justin Bowen observed that “The buying cycle has gotten so complex it’s become necessary to view it as touch points that...”

Great American Home Store uses LeadsRx to track the trend of website interactions over time following the airing of an advertising spot. Pictured at left is the curve for total broadcast spots run from January through May 2020. Reports can be generated for conversions, performance, return on ad spend and other metrics.
push shoppers further in the funnel to get them to take the next steps. Over time we’ve added more digital advertising and marketing channels. What LeadsRx helps us do is put together a more complete picture of the effectiveness of our television, radio, website, social media, blog, Google ads, YouTube and other digital channels.

“It creates a profile for web visitors and tracks advertising effectiveness using television and radio post logs of when people are coming to our website within a certain defined period after viewing an ad. Let’s say an ad runs at five p.m. on a Monday. LeadsRx can look at an eight-minute window after that ad aired and measure any spike in website traffic above a benchmark average. The program generates reports that allow us to compare our advertising buys, stations, time slots and creative so we can make better buying decisions.

“When we got into the COVID-19 situation LeadsRx helped us reduce our broadcast budget initially by 50 percent and then 100 percent. Ever since then, we’ve stayed at a reduced budget while making informed decisions about what spots to keep in order to generate the most traffic and conversions. On the web side we can see how well traffic is converting broken down to the UTM level and the referral level.

“Pretty much any way we want to slice it and dice it, we can.

“We’ve noticed that before COVID, it took a lot less time for people to buy. Right now, it’s taking almost twice as long. It takes more interactions, research and questions asked to get to a sale. We’ve also seen a big up-trend in people using the site—a 60 percent increase in the number of website visitors locally compared to last year. It’s a much more considered purchase now.

“We’ve also started working with a company called Zaius, for in-depth customer data and email marketing.

“I am surprised how much business we are doing even though we are, at this time, struggling to get inventory back into our distribution centers.”
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They held our hand and helped us to get up and running with the platform very quickly. It’s helped us to implement a lot of automated campaigns we had never been able to do before.”

**GAHS Going Forward**

“I’m shocked at how much business we’re still doing on a daily basis,” said Ron Becker. “I am surprised by how much business we are doing even though we are, at this time, really struggling to get inventory back into our distribution centers.

“The industry is having difficulty getting their workforce to come back and to put their hands on raw goods to build product. God has looked over us,” said Ron.

“I’m an optimist by nature but I’m fearful that we still face a lot of challenges going forward, like 20 million people unemployed, a workforce that is afraid to go back to work, school systems that may or may not open, not to mention the extra $3 trillion in government debt, with more to come.”

**Location, Location**

Furniture World asked Ron Becker

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"When we build in inner cities, I’ve found we’re only good for five, six, or seven years. These areas change as people move to another hot location."

if he has expansion plans beyond eCommerce. “I think that we will do both he replied. We’re actively looking at two markets, both within 250 miles of the Memphis area. We will always continue to look to expand into our brick and mortar capabilities. Our online sales, if we continue to give it the necessary attention and resources, will lead to a revenue stream equal to one brick and mortar.”

“Right now,” Jack added, “is a good time to buy commercial real estate. Ron likes to build his buildings and keep them as investments for return later on.”

“Building a showroom and warehouse together on one side of an interstate should give me 25 years of growth potential, and a market,” Becker observed. When we build in inner cities, I’ve found we’re only good for five, six, or seven years. These areas change as people move to another hot location. Then, a retailer can be left sitting in a dead area. Interstates leading into or out of a community are good for a longer period of time. And that’s this old man’s philosophy.”

Another advantage Great American Home Store gets from locating along interstates is advertising exposure. Jack Wells points to the impressive and visible facade. “It’s our brand, a highly visible landmark along interstates that people refer to when they are giving directions to others. We are not just investing in a building. It’s a huge billboard that can last for 25 or 30 years.”

In closing, Ron Becker shared his thoughts about founding GAHS. “When we started the Great American Home Store I was 52 years of age, and I think, up until that point in my life I was too afraid to do something of this magnitude. Of course, I wouldn’t have shared that thought with anybody back then, but the reality of it is, when I am up late at night and I think back on my life, that is the truth.” Today GAHS operates five furniture and mattress stores in Mississippi and Tennessee. For sure, his suppliers, employees and customers are glad he found that courage.

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I don’t know how anybody else feels, but I think it would be interesting to know what is going to happen for the rest of this year. The more uncertain the times, the more everyone looks to “wise people” for guidance. Right now, the predicting business has never been more popular.

The problem with predicting the future, however, is that even experts just about always get it wrong. Predictions are based on what we think we know now, not on what we might learn tomorrow. So often the day after tomorrow is radically, completely and unpredictably changed by unforeseen events. It’s a circular dilemma; “We can’t predict the future because we can’t predict the future.”

That being said, where does that leave those of us in the bedding (and furniture) business who need to make business decisions about tomorrow, today?

The Way We Were

In February 2020, other than the usual political disputes, life seemed to be proceeding fairly smoothly for most furniture and bedding store owners who adopted best practices. Even so, in January clouds of concern appeared on the horizon as rumors of a dangerous virus started to circulate.

In August 2016, nobody saw an SUV-sized asteroid speeding along at 29,000 mph toward the earth. It missed hitting earth by only 1,800 miles! With COVID-19 we were not as lucky. As usual we didn’t think it would happen to us. Also as usual, we were unprepared for a pandemic to develop as fast and furiously as it did.

We surely don’t know how this mess we are in is going to turn out, but If you are prospering, keep focused. Do what you do well and prepare for everything!

What Happened!?

The retail world effectively came to a halt on March 14 (day one, year ZERO), when general lockdowns were ordered. The stock market dropped—portions of the economy collapsed and grocery store shelves were wiped clean (no toilet paper pun intended). Businesses closed their doors and six million people filed for unemployment in one week!

We discovered a new socio-economic phenomenon that I call the...
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"In August 2016 nobody saw an SUV-sized asteroid speeding along at 29,000 mph toward the earth. It missed hitting earth by only 1,800 miles! This time we were not as lucky."

Covid Effect. Side effects include:

- General fear and anxiety (and fear of leaving home)
- Massive unemployment
- Supply chain disruptions
- Governmental controls
- Steep drop in consumer confidence
- GDP collapse
- Potential fracture of our social fabric
- Surge of internet sales, particularly for home goods
- Cancellation/postponement of social mixing events
- School closures and cancellations
- Olympic Games canceled/postponed
- Disneyland closed!

What the U.S. Government did next was find multiple trillions of dollars and poured them rapidly and directly into the economy. The mandate was “get money into the hands of consumers (since the U.S. is a consumer-driven economy) as quickly as possible. The plan was to worry about the consequences later. As of this writing, it seems to have worked fairly well. Even though a recent government report showed a 32.9 percent decline in GDP, the U.S., for the most part, has not devolved into a depression economy as might be expected with those GDP numbers.

Yes, there has been suffering, and many firms have gone out of business. But, we haven’t seen the soup kitchens and bread lines of the 1930s. Plus, a lot of businesses have flourished. The stock market, after the March 14 lows, staged a recovery.

Why hasn’t the U.S. fallen, so far, into the maw of economic disaster? I can only guess that the “stimulus” has a lot to do with it.

What Happens Now?

Do we really need another stimulus? Time will tell. As I write this, the unemployment rate is hardly sufficient to sustain vigorous economic growth. But sales of furniture and bedding have been surprisingly robust. Initially, people forced to stay home spent money, much of it from stimulus funds, online. In-store traffic more recently has been surprisingly resilient.

We don’t know what the future holds, but if the rebound falters, should we flood the U.S. with money? Why not? Sounds great, doesn’t it? It might be the right thing to do depending on how you interpret economic theory. But, can it go on forever without having serious consequences, such as hyper-inflation and systemic dis-employment?

It’s a Dangerous World

We are in a critical balancing act right now; trying to get the world back to normal while battling a pandemic that just won’t go away. Since much of the initial recovery was directly driven by printed money. A sudden deceleration of the money supply could cause marginal businesses that survived by a thread to close, thus laying off newly re-hired workers. We could be sent back to March 14, or worse.

To be truly optimistic, you have to hope that the virus will be brought under control, either by a cure, a vaccine or herd immunity. What happens if nothing changes, or
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"Cardinals and Blue Jays in my neighborhood are chirping their protests, and not very peacefully. They are not very unlike home furnishings customers who are already chirping due to delays in promised delivery times."

things get worse in the next six months?

Is This the New Normal?

I hear people asking the question, “Is this the New Normal?” My response is, “Is there anything about life, business and the world normal to begin with? American civilization has been fortunate to live in an unusually stable, safe, and prosperous era since 1945. It is the normal we take for granted. The thousands of years prior to 1945 are the real normal; centuries that featured the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse riding into town every so often to spread “the Sorrows of History.”

Business as Usual

Some days we hear cheering news of progress and other days stories that are surprisingly depressing. So, it’s too early for me to make any predictions that would probably be wrong anyway.

In the meantime, what should mattress and furniture store owners do? My advice is to be prepared for anything.

Contingency Plans

After Hurricane Harvey hit in 2017, I wrote the article “Preparation & Response To Disasters” that can be found at www.furninfo.com/Authors/David_Benbow/37. It includes ideas that retailers can use to plan for weather and fire-related disasters. The specifics differ from our present situation, but the message is the same. Retailers need to outline potential business challenges and come up with “what if” plans to cope. You almost certainly have a plan in place should a number of your employees come down with COVID-19. Expand this list to account for possible situations including cash shortages, further supply chain disruptions, inventory outages, social unrest, hyper-inflation and meteors!

The Good News

The good news, for the moment anyway, is that the home furnishings industry is an OK place to be. Expenses that usually go to travel, business clothes and eating out, have been re-directed into home improvement, including furniture and, especially, new mattresses.

The jury is out on whether or not the trend towards working from home will persist, but right now we are seeing an exodus from inner cities for a variety of reasons. Perceptive mattress retailers might think about focusing some extra advertising on this segment of the population with creative messaging.

What Else?

Your time will be well spent if you check out David McMahon’s article in this edition of Furniture World on how to “Do More With Less.” Also check out his article from July/August Furniture World on “Customer Journey Management.” It explains how to make the most of lead traffic that originates from your website, social media, email, phone calls, etc. And while you are at it, don’t miss the article in this issue on The Great American Home Store, which put these principles into action just in time to grow it’s business during the pandemic.

What About Training?

No matter what may happen, the basic principles of selling have not changed, and will not change. That is one prediction that I am not afraid to make! All Retail Sales Associates must know the “Five Groups of
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"Serious mattress and furniture retailers must keep a lot of backup stock. It’s harder to do when the supply chain is cracked, but don’t pass up any chance to build inventory."

Knowledge” and the “Steps of the Sale.” Don’t allow the stresses of the pandemic and the other horrors of Year Zero to cause you to forget the basics of the business.

Care for your Supply Chain

We sometimes forget how long and tortuous the supply chain for consumer products is. A while back I wrote about the “weakest link” in the supply chain. At that time I perceived it was retail sales associates, the last link in the chain. That was before the Covid problem took a wrecking ball to the entire furniture and bedding supply chain. Manufacturing plants can once again shut down for weeks because of a virus outbreak. Every industry in America is having this experience. The other day I couldn’t find bird seed, of all things, in the stores. Needless to say, the Cardinals and Blue Jays in my neighborhood are chirping their protests, and not very peacefully. They are not that unlike home furnishings customers who are already chirping due to delays in promised delivery times. What do you do about supply chain disruptions? Well, for starters, don’t over-promise on delivery.

One of my biggest gripes about RSAs and retail stores in general, is their tendency to tell customers what they want to hear. If you know your mattress arrival is two weeks out, don’t tell the customer it is coming in tomorrow. Some, if not all mattress manufacturers are having supply problems and this could get worse.

Over-Inventory

Serious mattress and furniture retailers must keep a lot of backup stock. It’s harder to do when the supply chain is cracked, but don’t pass up any chance to build inventory. Consider instructing RSAs to not show SKUs that are out of stock. And, if you have to order something, explain that there might be delays up front. Remember, nobody can predict the future. A critical link in the supply chain could close tomorrow without notice. Most customers will understand that if you explain it to them up front.

Follow Up!

Following up with customers is more important than ever. Any customer who purchases product that needs to be ordered must be provided with regular, frequent status updates. Customers hate being left hanging on pins and needles, espe-

Conclusion

This article just lays out a few ideas to consider. I surely don’t know how this mess we are in is going to turn out, but if you are prospering, keep focused, do what you do well and prepare for everything!

About David Benbow: A twenty-eight year veteran of the mattress and bedding industry and owner of Mattress Retail Training Company, David offers retailers guidance from small store management to training retail sales associates. His years of hands-on experience as a retail sales associate, store manager, sales manager/trainer and store owner in six different metropolitan areas qualifies him as an expert in selling bedding.

He is the author of “How to Win the Battle for Mattress Sales, the Bed Seller’s Manual,” a complete text book for mattress and bedding retail sales associates, beginner and experienced professional alike. It can be purchased online at www.bedsellersmanual.com or www.mattressretailtraining.com. Questions can be sent to him at dave@bedsellersmanual.com or by phone at 361-648-3775.
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Country View Woodworking

Pictured is a casual dining group with 42” square table and swivel bar chairs. The top and seats are finished in Rustic Cherry combined with a Brown Maple/Black Rub pedestal. Available in multiple sizes (38” to 60”).

Contact information on page 82.

Norwalk

Rooted in traditional design, the Columbus sofa has been updated for today’s homes with a tall bowed-back rail. Its clean, mid-scale rolled arms add a slimming design element. This sofa has a slanted back design that allows it to float in the room, perfect for a den or casual family room.

Contact information on page 82.
Be OUTSPOKEN
This turquoise and cream hide is sustainably sourced and hand-picked in Brazil. This large hide is 79” W x 93.5” top-to-bottom. The Choose To Shine signature design is a limited-edition numbered piece.
Contact information on page 82.

American Woodcrafters
The Aurora entertainment console is available in rustic finishes with a transitional design perfect for today’s homes. This piece has abundant storage.
Contact information on page 82.

Whittier Wood
The Bryce Panel Storage Bed, 70”W Low Dresser, Slim Wall Mirrors, 5-Drawer Chest and 3-Drawer Nightstand. This chic modern look features slender brass trim and accents, an eye-catching counterpoint to the naturally rich grain of American Black Walnut. Solid American Alder block legs and drawer pulls in a darker finish accentuate the modern look.
Contact information on page 82.
Best Selling DESIGN

Horizon Home
Everest Occasional Tables feature Natural onyx stone tops and solid metal gold-tone bases to create an upscale look.
Contact information on page 82.

Nourison
A garden captured at the moment of perfection provides the inspiration for this classic Persian rug from the Infinite Collection. Big, bold, stylized blossoms tease the imagination, while the thick, plush texture creates a luxurious hand feel. Artfully faded in soft charcoal tones for the vintage look of an antique rug.
Contact information on page 82.

Simply Amish
Art Deco Adeline Dining Collection is a salute to a bygone era of Jazz, platinum cuff links, and network radio shows. Imagine Charlie McCarthy asking W.C. Fields: Are you eating a tomato, or is that your nose?
Contact information on page 82.
Legends
Montrose, with clean lines and subtle curves, features Poplar Solids and Mindi Veneers. Scaled hardware on a Griege finish add the finishing touches to this suggestive, very current group.
Contact information on page 82.

Estro Milano
Verso is a high end quality crafted leather sofa Made in Italy. It features metal legs and inserts available in either chrome or gunmetal finishes. Also available as a corner sectional, with optional dual-power recliners and headrests. Can be special ordered in over 200 different leathers and fabrics.
Contact information on page 82.

Omnia
The Venus features power reclining seats and headrests. Available with lumbar support and in numerous configurations the Venus is covered in top grain leather. Proudly made in America.
Contact information on page 82.
Craftmaster
The M9 collection is a new division of Craftmaster's Design Options program focusing on smaller scaled pieces and more affordable price points. With over 30 pieces to choose from and 16 different style components, customers can mix and match to create custom looks using over 800 fabrics and 17 finishes. A few highlights of the M9 collection are a new tight back option (shown here), a new metal leg option and a six-piece custom ottoman program.
Contact information on page 82.

KAS Rugs
Aura is a collection for brick and mortar only, of machine-woven abstract traditionals with pops of metallic. These unique designs make a statement. Made in Turkey of polypropylene with shrink polyester.
Contact information on page 82.

Null
Small scale and big style are apparent in the 1019-01 rectangular cocktail table, part of a four-piece collection new this Market featuring fired granite top inserts and titanium metal legs.
Contact information on page 82.

Cozzia
The new Cozzia Qi XE has everything your customers need. Features include a no-touch voice control command system and a massage track that covers the neck to the glutes.
Contact information on page 82.
Moe's Home Collection
The Shubert accent chair features beautifully patinaed top-grain leather set on an industrial iron frame for a modern laid-back look. Bonded leather support straps and foam filling create a seating experience like no other.
Contact information on page 82.

Twin Star Home
The Galileo TV Stand with ClassicFlame® Electric Fireplace supports TVs up to 65 inches or up to 90 pounds. It adds warmth and ambiance as it heats up to 1,000 square feet.
Contact information on page 82.

Furniture of America
A unique fabric with a pronounced cross stitch design adorns Briana, a sturdy American-made sofa with nailhead trim. Pillows included.
Contact information on page 82.
Arizona Leather is a specialty retailer operating 14 stores in California, Arizona and New Mexico. The chain boasts the largest selection of “fashionable leather furnishings in the United States, from the classics to contemporary to ultra-modern.” Jim Riedl, CEO, shared his insights about selling made-in-America leather furniture sourced from a limited number of suppliers. His remarks also touch on his experiences during the pandemic and trends he sees in leather furniture sales.

Getting Started

"Arizona Leather got started when my ex-partner went shopping for leather sleepers and recliners for an RV business,” explained Jim Riedl. He found Omnia Leather, a cut and sew operation that wasn’t making sleepers or recliners at that time. “We developed an idea for a factory-direct store with Omnia as our main supplier. That was the start of Arizona Leather.

“Our first store location wasn’t great. It was difficult to get into, but it did have freeway frontage.

“We looked for a better spot for our second location. I recall speaking to a leasing agent who had an English accent. ‘Arizona Leather is going to be big,’ I informed him. We are going to take over the leather furniture world!” He replied, ‘Sorry mate, RELAX THE BACK’s got that space, but give me your number in case things change.’ About eight months later he called back. RELAX THE BACK decided to pass on the spot, he confessed, ‘It’s gonna be a jewel box, mate.’ And he was right.

“We started unloading trucks into the parking lot at 7AM at the second location on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, not knowing if we would get our C of O to open. The certificate of occupancy came through at noon and the store was all set up that night, ready for business. We went home, enjoyed Thanksgiving, then opened up for Black Friday. Over that long week-

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end we wrote more business in three days than had in a month at our first store. From there our business took off.”

**Special Events**

“As a specialty retailer we do business differently than full-line furnishings retailers. When we open a new store, we do offer discounts on certain covers or styles. But Arizona Leather appeals to a smaller percentage of the furniture market,” Riedl observed, “our customers don’t show up looking for bedroom, dining or home office furniture.

“Back in 1996,” he recalled, “we ran a grand opening sale, advertised heavily and offered free hats, hotdogs and Snapple. We put it all out with fixings for the hotdogs—chili, kraut, onions, relish, everything. We ate more hotdogs that weekend than in our entire lives. We wrote some business, but basically it was not the crowd we hoped for. That was the only big grand opening event we ever ran.”

**Product Selection**

“Omnia Leather is our major upholstered furniture supplier. Arizona Leather also carries IMG and Natuzzi. We promote ourselves as the leather experts. Our website is not populated with prices or accessories, but when shoppers visit, they see that our stores are highly accessorized. We show customers how good the upholstered furniture will look when they get it home accompanied by a nice rug, occasional tables, lamps and more.”

**Sniper Advertising Approach**

“We are a local fixture in Southern California. In the early years we advertised like crazy in every newspaper in every market. That was the MO back in the day. That’s where our competitors were, and there were many. It seemed like everyone was opening a leather store in Southern California.

“In 2008, when the economy hit the fan, we had no choice but to cut our advertising in half. And guess what happened? Not much!

“Sure, we went down in sales from 2008 through 2011 by 10 to15 percent but many other furniture stores were down by 50 percent or more. I cut back further on expenses, only advertising during holiday periods. Over that difficult time, our competitors went out of business. Eventually there was nobody left to compete with except large, big box retailers selling mostly leather imports.

“The lesson learned was that it didn’t pay to take a shot-gun advertising approach to reach out to leather furniture customers, who at the time accounted for only three to five percent of the upholstered furniture market. Specialty retailers like Arizona Leather are better off using a sniper approach. We started using Google, Yahoo and Bing to reach only customers who were actively looking for leather furniture. We’ve been doing that since 2010.”

Riedl says Arizona Leather is in an especially good position to tout American Made. “We’ve beat that drum from day one, encouraging our customers to buy American, and support our workers.”
Following the Money

“When the 2008 recession hit, we scaled back in other areas as well. We were at 10 percent unemployment. The good news is that Arizona Leather sells to the other 90 percent—especially well-heeled clients who don’t skip a beat during bad times.”

Riedl found that sales continue to hold up during the COVID-19 pandemic. “Right now,” he noted, “people can’t travel. They’re not attending big events. They’ve been stuck in their homes with their old furniture and are replacing it like crazy. We are experiencing a resurgence in volume that is unprecedented.”

Made in America Story

“We definitely lead with the Made in America story. When customers enter our stores in California, they are asked if they’ve visited before. If they haven’t, they hear that everything is made ‘right here in California.’ If they’re visiting one of our Arizona stores, we let them know the furniture is made ‘right here in the United States.’”

Riedl says Arizona Leather is in an especially good position to tout American Made. “We’ve beat that drum from day one, encouraging our customers to buy American, and support our workers. We’ve said that our leather furniture is made in Chino, not China. What a difference a vowel makes!”

“As customers walk through an Arizona Leather showroom, they find it’s a little different than other stores due to the level of customization available. They can change nearly anything they like about a sofa. We offer 50 kinds of leather and 350 color options. Any style can be made into a sectional. We emphasize that since it’s made right here in America unlike other stores, they don’t have to settle for what they see. Instead, they can buy exactly what they want.”

Arizona Leather sells just about every style imaginable from classics to contemporary to ultra-modern to the western-style hair on hide (right). “Motion is on fire at Arizona Leather,” says CEO Jim Riedl.
what they want, specially designed to fit in their home."

No eCommerce

“Arizona Leather has chosen not to engage in eCommerce. We do eComm very well through another entity, however, for our brick and mortar stores, it’s more effective to say, ‘Hey, call us, there’s a lot more information involved than just price.’

“Maybe someday that will change, but our present experience is that customers need to be educated about leather to purchase at our price points. Whether they buy from us or not, shoppers walk out of our store with an education on what to look for in leather furniture.

“When most people start their search for a leather sofa, they think that leather is just one thing. People don’t realize how diverse the category is when they’re looking at a website, or when they shop other stores that don’t have quality leather or the expertise to explain the differences.

“Our website is a visual catalogue of what we have to offer in leather furniture. If a shopper wants to know more, they need to speak with one of our leather experts.”

Sales Education

“We do extensive in-house training. If new sales hires are local, we walk them through Omnia’s factory so they can see the scale of the operation, because it’s pretty impressive. They get to speak with the people who run the leather cage, the frame shop, as well as seamstresses and upholsterers to get a feel for the bigger picture. But, most of the training time happens in-store with a focus on how to explain all the information customers need to know about leather, not just at our store, but at any store that sells leather furniture. We are the one-stop-shop for leather furniture.

“My people know more about leather than many leather hide sales reps for a reason. The amount of misinformation out there is amazing. We still have customers come in and compare our leather covers to Naugahyde, a vinyl product made by Uniroyal about 40 years ago.

“Consumers often have the pre-conception that they can just let their leather furniture sit there and it will last forever. However, leather furniture needs care just like upholstered furniture. Our customers are educated on how to care for their investment. Proper maintenance is key to decades of ownership.”

High Touch, not High Tech

“Fortunately, our business is not brain surgery at Arizona Leather and our partner company, Texas Leather. We use handwritten invoic-

"People are moving to cleaner, less heavy looking designs and brighter colors. Off-whites and light grays are really big. All shades of blue are popular right now."
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es and hand-drawn illustrations. The options we offer are dynamic, diverse and can be cumbersome.

"New salespeople at Arizona Leather are still getting their feet wet—even after six months. Some of our best sales hires are people with a sales background from other industries. They don’t have preconceived ideas but are strong salespeople and good closers. We familiarize them with all the possibilities. Once that’s done it’s rare that they will have to say to a client, ‘No, we can’t do that.’"

“The tools Omnia Leather provides to retailers makes selling easier. It’s rare that we can’t satisfy a client’s leather furniture needs.”

Leather Trends

Western Looks: “There’s always going to be demand the cowboy and Indian western styles.

“Hair on hide does well, especially as rugs. Some of our styles have tooling on the arm caps and rails. These styles work in some of our customers’ homes.”

Colors: “Now though,” Riedl continued, “people are moving to cleaner, less heavy looking designs and brighter colors. Off-whites and light grays are really big. All shades of blue are popular right now. We sell a lot of nailhead styles, rolled arms and plenty of motion.

“These trends are consistent across a pretty good cross-section of our customer base, but it seems to me that clients who are 50 or older are moving back towards furniture with contemporary lines—a Scandinavian modern look, but still comfortable.”

Motion: “Motion furniture is on fire. Everybody wants to incorporate recliners. We are selling over 50 percent motion right now, and probably 75 to 80 percent of that is motorized. The nice thing about a motorized recliner is that it provides a lot more options as far as comfortable positioning.”

Small Scale: “People are looking for smaller scale upholstered pieces. They don’t want the cushions to be seven inches thick, but they are still looking for comfort. A four-inch thick cushion makes for sleeker scale, so we’ve been moving in that direction.”

Fabric & Leather Combos: “Lots of our customers do fabric seats with leather, and some do all fabric. We do COM for clients as well.”

Customizable Options: “Some customers just want to buy a sofa and loveseat, but it opens up the sales funnel if a style is available in a large selection of different SKUs. We offer any upholstered configuration for a given style. I think, that has made Omnia the monster they are today. Nobody does what they do.”

Keeping Things Easy

Jim Riedl likes to keep things easy. He explained, “Working with a few major suppliers streamlines the work funnel. A large percentage of our sales come from one major vendor. There are many leather furniture suppliers we could choose to work with but no one offers as much as diversity as Omnia Leather. The people at Omnia are awesome. The entire organization is filled with great people who take pride in their work. It’s obvious they are happy and that makes a big difference.

“For Arizona Leather it’s not just one supplier, it’s the right supplier for our concept. And since my core lines are taken care of, I’m freed up to spend a lot of time at furniture shows focusing on accessories and other concepts we are developing.”
With today’s changing world, having access from virtually anywhere is more important than ever.

Furniture Wizard recently introduced a new cloud-hosted version of its powerful POS system that offers users simplicity, security and seamless access from virtually anywhere.

“We help retailers manage everything from ordering to inventory and everything in between—and now they can do that from wherever they are,” said Teresa Fischbein, President. “This solution has been in the works for more than a year, but its release earlier this year could not have been more timely.”

Options & Versatility

The new cloud-hosted solution expands Furniture Wizard’s customer options and versatility. Now, customers can choose to operate their point-of-sale system in one of three modes:

- **Local operation:** Software is run on in-store computers. A cost-effective solution that’s suitable for small or single-store customers.
- **Server-based operation:** Software is hosted on a server operated by the customer. Good for larger stores or multiple locations. Requires customers to run and maintain their own server infrastructure.
- **Cloud-hosted operation:** Software is hosted in the cloud, so customers have no up-front investment in computer infrastructure. Suitable for any size customer that doesn’t want the responsibility of maintaining and updating their own software. Automatically updated, redundant and good for those customers who value performance speed, especially for multiple users.

No matter which version of Furniture Wizard you may choose, the software is fully customizable for each retailer. It offers website integration, as well as integration with major brands like Ashley Furniture.

For more information on Furniture Wizard, contact sales@furniturewizard.com or call 859-837-6949.

"Users appreciate how the system can grow with their business, allowing them to easily add users without impacting speed or needing to invest in more hardware."

- Evan Faller, Director of Operations
What a lousy year to celebrate HFA’s 100th anniversary...or is it?

HFA had such big plans for 2020. We were prepared for a lot of toasts and fun gift giveaways. It was going to be festive.

Then came Covid. Celebrations and festivities seemed ill-timed, inappropriate and frankly unsafe. Yet from where I sit, we are honoring our heritage more than ever, 100 years after a group of retailers decided to come together to create an association. How has that happened?

In 2020, we’ve channeled the spirit of 1920 by remembering why HFA was formed. Retailers, then and now, want to learn from each other, hear about best practices, and come together for the common good and to survive collective threats. Sure, our members are competitors who want to win and dominate their marketplaces, but they also want our furniture industry to succeed.

In March, HFA’s team looked at this crisis and decided we needed to step up and be the voice for our industry, to advocate, facilitate and lead. To do that, we listened to members to understand their needs and challenges. From those conversations came action:

- The HFA Government Relations Action Team, made up of retailers from around the country, met multiple times each month. They were joined by members of Congress, key government agency leaders and other experts (including HFA’s lobbyists) to push for liability protection, low-cost and forgivable loans and, tax relief, and to show that our industry is safe and needed in these times.
- We created a dynamic Covid-19 resources webpage that is now the industry standard as a source for real-time, important information and links to programs and services for furniture retailers.
- We procured PPE and other products quickly and affordably for HFA members.
- We presented weekly webinars showcasing industry leaders who provide insights retailers can use as they navigate the Covid retail environment and beyond.

If our founders were around today, I think they’d give us a thumbs up for continuing to deliver on the principles and purpose this association was founded on, and for providing much-needed leadership. I also think they would point forward, reminding us that our work is just beginning.

For more information on HFA visit https://myhfa.org/.

"Retailers, then and now, want to learn from each other, hear about best practices, and come together for the common good and to survive collective threats."
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Tucked in between other stores, B. de Vine looks like every other retailer in Vintage Park, a 350,000-square-foot outdoor shopping center in Houston.

There is, however, one striking difference between this furniture store and its neighbors. B. de Vine is the store with cars parked out front, shoppers inside, and sales climbing week after week. In a city whose economy has gone ice cold, B. de Vine is a rare hot spot.

Home Furnishings Association member Carolyn Blum said she’d like to take credit for that surge in sales—business has doubled the past two months compared to last year—but she knows better. B. de Vine sells high-end furniture, lines like Paul Roberts and John Richards atop $3,500 Jaipur rugs. It’s not out of the ordinary for a B. de Vine customer from The Woodlands, Tomball, Magnolia, Cypress or Houston’s surrounding upscale communities to walk out with a new six-figure living room.

“This is our time—we’re blowing and going,” said Blum, walking the showroom hallways last month at Las Vegas Market, a week before the market’s official start. “Our customers haven’t felt the effects of the economy like some have, so we’re very fortunate in that way.”

The secret to B. de Vine’s success isn’t really a secret at all. While demand, tightening credit and the worst unemployment levels in decades have altered consumer spending habits, there remains a slice of the workforce that has not felt the recession’s pain—yet.

Blum said her business suffered when Texas and the rest of the nation shut down most brick-and-mortar retail operations. “But my customers were still there, and we were still needed for our design services,” said Blum. “That never went away, and I just don’t think it will.”

Blum opened her furniture store in 2014—six years after the Great Recession. The current recession is the only economic speed bump her business has faced.

Industry analyst Jerry Epperson said Blum’s story is similar to other

“It’s easy to go down in price and quality, very much another story to go up,” Epperson said. “If you’re a retailer known for $499 sofas, that’s good. That means you’re known for something, so stay with it.”

Carolyn Blum, second from right, and associates from HFA member B. de Vine. Blum, whose Houston, Texas, store offers high-end furniture and interior design services, says the pandemic has not slowed down business. “We’re blowing and going,” she said.
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high-end furniture retailers. “I think back in March when the stock market dropped like a stone, their business dropped, too, because, their clients’ assets went down,” said Epperson. “But look at what happened through mid-September this year. The market kept going up. That meant that the folks who shopped high-end had confidence.”

Epperson said retailers should not look at Blum’s booming business and assume they can replicate that success simply by upgrading the furniture lines they sell.

“It’s easy to go down in price and quality, very much another story to go up,” Epperson said. “If you’re a retailer known for $499 sofas, that’s good. That means you’re known for something, so stay with it.”

Samsen Furniture

HFA member Doug Samsen of Genoa, Ohio, is trying to buck that trend. Samsen spent the past five years as an Art Van franchisee until the company filed for bankruptcy earlier this year. Samsen Furniture, as the store is now called, is going back to the independent name it carried back when the store opened 60 years ago.

And with the new name, Samsen wants to sell higher-end lines of furniture than were offered under the Art Van brand. He’s working with La-Z-Boy, England, Flexsteel, Liberty and other manufacturers. That’s not easy these days given tight supply lines and exclusivity rights, but Samsen is being patient. “We are filling our showroom with what we can until we can find the right lines,” he said.

Epperson, a regular speaker at the HFA’s Resource Center, said furniture retailers considering adding a higher line to their showrooms should start slowly. “Take a section at the front of your showroom and dedicate it to higher end,” he said. “Call it a ‘boutique’ and let people know it’s a little different than everything else you sell. In three months, you’ll know if you’re on to something or not.”

About HFA: The Home Furnishings Association is dedicated to the success of furniture retailers. For more information about supporting or joining the HFA, visit them at the RRC in High Point or go to membership@myhfa.org.
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Providing paid sick leave is natural for Benfatti Furniture in Pueblo, Colorado.

“We love our employees,” Marie Benfatti said. “We treat them like family, because we’re a family business.”

But a new law in Colorado worries her. Signed by Gov. Jared Polis in July, it builds on the federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act, applying its provisions to Colorado businesses that aren’t covered by the U.S. law, which expires at the end of this year. Then, on January 1, 2021, businesses with 15 employees or more will be required to provide up to six days of paid medical leave annually. A year later, on January 1, 2022, the mandate also will apply to smaller businesses.

That’s not all. In the event of a public health emergency—such as the current pandemic crisis—employers will have to extend paid sick leave by up to an additional two weeks.

Benfatti, whose family founded Benfatti Furniture in 1957, understands why employees might need that time off. She couldn’t be more sympathetic. She is willing to “bend over backwards” to accommodate employees’ needs. But for small businesses, the idea of having several essential employees out on paid sick leave at one time is daunting. It could force Benfatti to hire fill-in workers or not get some work done.

Benfatti Furniture, an HFA member, promises free delivery to most areas of Colorado and Northern New Mexico. They also pick up and dispose of old furniture and bedding upon request at no charge. That requires reliable employees!

Black Carriage Furniture

Candi Hawkins agrees. She and her husband, Jerald, founded Black Carriage Furniture in Grand Junction, Colorado, in 1999. “We take care of our employees,” she said, noting that everyone wanted to stay at work as state orders forced them to close earlier this year.

When the store reopened, “Our customers were waiting at the door. They were beating at the door saying, ‘Let us in!’”

Sales have been strong since then, but running a small business is always a matter of “keeping our heads above water,” Hawkins said. A law mandating extensive paid leave for employees could sink a business.

The Colorado law is likely to cause hardships for some furniture retailers and other businesses. But its impact may extend outside Colorado, according to the Employment Law News blog. It’s an example of “what the future may hold for paid leave laws.” That’s because, among other effects of the coronavirus, legislators in many states are motivated to set new mandates aimed at granting employees time away from work when they need it. In addition, some cities are writing their own leave requirements.

Some of these state laws and city ordinances, like the federal Families First Coronavirus Response Act, are meant to last until the present emergency ends. Others will be permanent.

Colorado, New York and New Jersey are some of the states that enacted or expanded paid leave laws.

The Colorado law provides that, in a future public health emergency, employees would be entitled to paid leave for several purposes:

• Self-isolation.
• Seeking medical care.
• Caring for family members.
• Sheltering in place due to...
A public order.

• Staying home due to being at risk for the emergency.

A debate in California split legislators between those who think this is the wrong time to burden businesses with additional requirements and those who think employees need extra protections now.

California already had a paid leave program, funded by a small tax on paychecks. But employees are not guaranteed that they can return to their jobs. The new proposal, pushed by Gov. Gavin Newsom, would extend that guarantee to more workers and expand leave to as much as eight weeks. Only businesses with fewer than five employees would be exempted.

“I think we have to be very sensitive towards what we’re adding on to our small businesses, in light of us going through this pandemic,” Assembly member Joaquin Arambula, a Fresno Democrat, said in opposing the bill during the debate this summer. Arambula wanted to limit the requirements to employers with 20 or more workers.

The federal bill offers tax credits for employers to offset the costs of providing paid leave related to the COVID crisis. It expires at the end of this year.

In states where paid leave is being considered, retailers should contact their legislators and explain the difficulties such requirements present.

“In states where paid leave is considered, retailers should contact their legislators and explain the difficulties such requirements present.

About HFA: The Home Furnishings Association’s Government Relations Action Team advocates for retail businesses in Washington, DC, and State capitals. For more information about supporting or joining the HFA, visit www.myhfa.org.
Fans of 1950s and 1960s cop shows may remember “Dragnet,” the quirky and fast-paced drama where every crime was solved in 30 minutes.

That’s a short time to solve a case, but asking the right questions helped police detective sergeant Joe Friday do it every time. Solving the mystery of finding the right mattress for your shopper quickly and efficiently takes a great deal of detective skill as well. Those old-time TV cops would have made great salespeople.

If “Dragnet” was about a store selling mattresses, it would have gone like this:

The Mattress Detective

“This is our city—a large metropolitan complex. There are factories, stores, schools, businesses, and restaurants. People drive to work, do their jobs, then drive home at the end of the day and go to bed. Sometimes they are uncomfortable and can’t sleep at night. That’s when I go to work! My name is Joe Monday, and I carry a pen.

“I was working the day watch out of the mattress department. It’s a typical showroom with 30+ models. The time was 11:15 am. A female stepped into the department. She identified herself as Helen Backman.

Joe: Welcome to our Better Sleep Center. My name is Joe Monday.

Helen: Mr. Wednesday, you have to help me, I simply can’t sleep at night.

Joe: The name’s Monday. What seems to be the trouble?

Helen: It’s just awful! I go to bed right at 11 pm, Mr. Sunday. I’m comfortable for a while, but then I toss and turn. The sheets get all tangled, and I am up half the night.

Joe: I understand. Let’s start from the beginning. You say you go to bed at 11. Do you turn out the lights right at that time?

Helen: Why yes, Mr. Tuesday. I said that. Of course, I watch the news on TV in bed, and sometimes the Late Late Show. They had an old Kojak movie on last night.

Joe: I see. And how old is your current bed?

Helen: I don’t see what that has to do with it. Mr. Holiday, is that what you people do? Just hassle people with a lot of questions. I just want better sleep.

Joe: (looking very stern): We ask questions for a reason. There is a lot of good sleep at stake. And without it, you are performing below your best level. Getting just six hours of sleep instead of eight hours means you’re functioning like you have a .08% blood alcohol level. And that’s legally drunk in this state.

Helen: Do you think I’m drunk? I never touch the stuff! Sure, a little sherry before bed. And wine with my book club at noon. But...

Joe: I’m going to ask the questions, and you’re going to answer them. Just the facts, ma’am. I just want the facts. When you wake up, what part of your body hurts?

Helen: Mostly my hip and shoulder. They get a little tingly too, Mr. Thursday.

Joe: Oh, so you sleep on your side?

Helen: Yes, how did you know?

Joe: It’s my job to know. Now how old did you say your mattress is?

Helen: I’m not sure, I remember we bought it with some money my husband won when that L.A. baseball team surprised everyone and won the World Series.

Joe: OK, so you’ve had it since 2002 when the Angels won.

Helen: No, it wasn’t the Angels, isn’t there another team in LA?

Joe: There’s the Dodgers, but they haven’t won since 1988.

Helen: Yes, that’s it, they had that cute chubby manager, Tommy Something? But the mattress is just like new!

Joe: Just a couple more questions. You and your husband share the
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bed? What size mattress do you want? And when you can sleep, do you spend more time under the covers or over the covers?

Helen: My Wally insists that we have a king size bed. You know, he thinks he’s king of the house. (Giggles slightly). And the covers, I start out nice and snuggly underneath, but I toss them onto Wally about an hour later. He always complains about that. But, that’s my payback for his endless snoring. He’s like a buzz saw.

Joe: Yes, Mrs. Backman. It’s an open and shut case. From what you’ve told me, your mattress is past it’s comfort life. It may look new, but for proper support and comfort you need to replace your mattress every seven to eight years. You sleep on your side and need a little deeper comfort level on top to cushion your hips and shoulder. You’ll need a plush model.

You said that you toss off the covers. That indicates that you sleep warm or hot at night. Adding in a layer of cooling foam with gel or carbon memory foam will allow better temperature regulation—not too hot, not too cold.

Mr. Backman’s snoring is disruptive to you, but also indicates that he is not breathing properly at night. Snoring is like gasping for air. You will want to get an adjustable bed to slightly raise his head and neck. He’ll breathe better and you’ll sleep better.

Helen: Do you really think we need that base Mr. Payday? It won’t help me.

Joe: You said you have a TV in the bedroom. We don’t recommend watching TV directly before going to sleep and watching the news can get you wound up and make it hard to relax. And Kojak-really? Those cop shows are such drivel. However, you can set your adjustable bed into a TV-watching position, just like a giant recliner, and no more stacking pillows to get comfortable.

Helen: That makes sense.

Joe: OK, let me show you a mattress set that will help you get the rest you need. By the way, do you have a 5-sided or 6-sided mattress protector at home?

Helen: Mattress protector?? What’s that?

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Epilogue

On September 28, 2020 a mattress purchase was made at a local store. The result of the purchase was endless nights of restful sleep and shoppers converted into raving fans.

The Backmans were sentenced to marriage with no time off for good behavior.

About Gordon Hecht: Gordon Hecht is a Senior Manager for Serta Simmons Bedding’s Strategic Retail Group comprising over 400 locally owned and operated bedding stores across the country selling Serta Simmons branded and America’s Mattress branded mattresses. He has been a store manager, multi-unit Manager and National Director of Sales and has been recognized for outstanding achievement with Ashley Furniture HomeStores, Drexel-Heritage, RB Furniture, Reliable Stores, and Sofa Express. See all of Gordon’s articles at www.furninfo.com/Authors/List. Questions and comments can be directed to Gordon Hecht at ghecht@serta.com.

“I’m going to ask the questions, and you’re going to answer them. Just the facts, ma’am. I just want the facts. When you wake up, what part of your body hurts?”
CELEBRATING HEARTS & HEROES
JANUARY 8, 2021 IN DALLAS

The team behind the annual ARTS Awards is making a heart-felt change for 2021. The Hearts Awards, a one-time special event, will celebrate hearts and heroes who showed outstanding leadership, empathy and service during the pandemic.

The thirteen honorees, selected by leading home and gift trade organizations will accept their awards at a gala event January 8 in Dallas hosted by Carson Kressley and Thom Filicia.

Honorees will be announced and tickets will go on sale in October.

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Another Performance Tip From David McMahon

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“Set aside some time each month to review critical data with your management team: Profit and Loss, Balance Sheet, Statement of Cash Flow, Written Sales Metrics (by category, vendor and salesperson). Discussing what is behind the numbers is what usually generates actionable conversation with your team.”

- Financial Performance Consulting: Remote, Onsite, and Offsite options
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- Business Reviews and Performance Coaching
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