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 furniture

Agio's Heritage Collections reflects the updated styling of current offerings.



Summertime Sales

OUTDOOR FURNITURE MAKERS AND SELLERS HAVE lots of reasons to be optimistic as they enter the height of their selling season.

First, the weather has been cooperating in most parts of the United States.

"As you might guess, weather is very important to the category," said Joseph P. Logan, executive director, International Casual Furnishings Association. "We've generally had a good spring, with some regional exceptions. It should be reflected in sales for 2010."

While the weather has generally been cooperating, the casual industry is still navigating out of the economic storm. Casual furniture retailers were conservative with their early buys, sources said. Most stores went into the spring with low inventories.

"When biz jumped in the spring, manufacturers were challenged to get the product out," Logan said.

Like other home furnishings categories, outdoor furniture took a hit during the economic downturn. "Sales are very dependent on consumer attitudes and outlook," Logan said.

Social trends, a boom in more fashionable introductions and expanded distribution should lead casual furniture to make a quicker recovery than most.

"Casual furniture is one of the categories that has remained fairly stable," said Whitney Gillespie, director of leasing and sales for casual furniture at the Merchandise Mart. The Merchandise Mart, home to more than 45 permanent outdoor living showrooms, hosts the International Casual Furniture & Accessories Market on Sept. 21-24. "We held our own. Flat is the new up, as they say," Gillespie said.

A major benefit to casual furniture's stability and poten-

tial is the relatively recent trend to turn available outdoor space into a more usable living area. Consumers looking to turn their backyards and decks into comfortable extensions of their home have contributed to the category's health.

Retailers are benefiting from an extended selling period for outdoor furnishings, as consumers are using their outdoor spaces longer—up to three seasons in moderate climates.

Meanwhile, manufacturers are responding to consumer wants with expanded accessory offerings. Most modern line introductions include a plethora of accessories such as umbrellas, stools, hammocks, bars and side tables. "The breadth of product offerings such as deep seating and firepits really helps the consumer put together a comfortable outdoor living space," Logan said. "From a retail standpoint, it's a great add-on sale."

At the same time, materials used by manufacturers are improving, resulting in higher price points even at mass merchants such as Walmart and Home Depot.

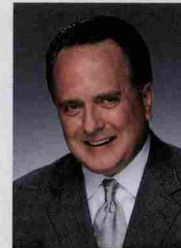
"The mediums they're using are unprecedented," Gillespie said. "The lushness of the fabrics, for instance, are mimicking the same as found in consumers' living rooms."

Logan agreed. "The fabric offerings are incredible, compared to the past," he said. "Consumers can do an amazing job decorating their outdoor spaces."

The distribution of outdoor furniture is expanding. While specialty stores are still the most important channel of distribution for outdoor furniture, the increase in sales potential and more fashionable styles have made the category more attractive to full-line furniture chains, which are starting to test the category.

Another potential area of growth for outdoor living is the design trade. Gillespie said the Merchandise Mart's outdoor living showrooms are seeing more interest from designers.

"This is an area that designers need to embrace," Gillespie said. "It's the easiest way to add on sales. Why stop at the back door?" ■



Joseph Logan, ICFA: 2010 sales have benefited from good weather.

It's summertime and the casual living's easy
 By DUKE RATLIFF

