

Casual industry expands in Chicago

By Cinde W. Ingram

Despite the economic recession, four casual furnishings manufacturers have invested in permanent showrooms at the Chicago Merchandise Mart. Three more outdoor living resources were expanding existing showrooms while other showrooms were being redesigned.

"We are very excited about the recent leasing activity and it is a great sign when businesses are investing in their businesses, even in tough economic times," said Whitney Gillespie, MMPI vice president of casual sales and leasing.

Mike Bullinger, president of Homecrest Outdoor Living, said returning to a permanent showroom is also exciting for his company. "It tells the dealers we're not a flash in the pan; we're here to stay," he said. "We're working very hard to bring Homecrest back to what it once was: A leader in the casual industry."

In addition to Homecrest, Canadian-based Actiwan and Leisure Design have invested in 17th floor showrooms. NorthCape International will show in the 16th floor showroom space formerly leased by Weber-Stephen Products, but also will continue to share a 16th floor showroom with Anacapa.

Tom Murray, president of NorthCape International, said his company pursued its aggressive marketing plans and continued to grow the business during the prolonged economic downturn. When a Mart showroom space became available that nearly tripled the size of the space NorthCape had used, "We figured it was the best time to make it our time," he said. "This is our chance. There's a lot of churn out there right now with customers, and it was time for our presentation to improve. It's part of our bigger marketing plan that went into motion in 2008."

Patio Renaissance by Sunlord Leisure

Products, Suncoast Aluminum Furniture and Treasure Garden each have expanded their showroom spaces at The Merchandise Mart. Renovations also were underway inside the Lloyd/Flanders and Tommy Bahama showrooms, she said, while Telescope Casual was expected to complete its changes in time for the September Market.

Major showroom changes will take place during August to prepare for the September show, Telescope Casual President Henry Vanderminden IV said. Meanwhile, Telescope is introducing 103 products, many made of marine grade polymer, and 36 new fabrics.

Jaclyn Kotzum, casual furnishings marketing director, MMPI, said she expects the Preview Show to include a healthy amount of product introductions.


Murray said that's true for NorthCape, where more than half of its products will be new. As far as styles, NorthCape brought in outside designers but stuck with the kinds of furniture that have proven to be top sellers.

Bullinger confirmed Homecrest will introduce a number of new products.

Having a permanent showroom will make participating in the Preview Show easier "because you don't have to set it up and tear it down after every market," he said. "And we can use it year-round to bring dealers in."

Although people in the industry appear more optimistic, Gillespie expects product introductions will still be somewhat conservative. "It may not be what they would normally introduce but I definitely think they will do some new collections, as opposed to last year," she said. "I think they're encouraged by the economy. I won't say the economy is shooting upward, but I think we have definitely plateaued and are taking baby steps up."

Having new vendors on the permanent floors will lend an unexpected feel to this month's Preview Show and the Casual Market in September, Gillespie said.

"There will be different offerings and that's just natural due to the four new companies (in permanent showrooms)," she said. "I think what we have found is everyone has really stepped up. They're refreshing their showrooms, even if they're not new." 



Buyers peruse casual furnishings inside the Merchandising Mart

