

Chicago Preview Show bodes well for 2011

By Cinde W. Ingram

The Casual Preview Show provided indications of a strong 2011 season ahead as casual furniture buyers shopped Chicago's Merchandise Mart last month. Many buyers said they had good seasons, little to no inventory and were ready to set their programs for 2011.

Richard Bockner, Leisure Designs' vice president of sales, described the Preview Show as a "good dress rehearsal" for the Casual Market. He viewed it as an opportunity for vendors to make tweaks to products in time for the Sept. 21-24 show. Like the other new and expanded permanent showrooms, his stayed busy.

"It's a good predictor of what to expect in September," said Brian Blakeney, director of sales and marketing, Kingsley-Bate. "We had more traffic than last year and people are positive."

Kingsley-Bate President Clay Kingsley agreed with that summary. "Our customers have had a good year and they're ready to buy more," he said.

"They're coming out of this season

clean," said Mark Fillhouer, chief operating officer, Homecrest Outdoor Living. "The bigger dealers are trying to pre-make their decisions so when they come in September, they'll be ready to order. And we'll have more to show in September."

UL-approved firepits were one of Homecrest's new offerings that garnered good retail response. "Feedback has been excellent on our new products and colors," Fillhouer said. "We're pleased."

The Mia settee and lounge, displayed at the entrance of Tropitone's showroom, was an example of its products, developed primarily for the contract market, but adapted for residential customers in response to dealer requests. "We see the premarket as an opportunity to present the new programs and new products," said Peter Homestead, vice president of design, Tropitone. "It's for the bigger players.

Most of them have multiple stores and need more time to plan things out."

"We had more appointments this year than last," said Steve Lowsky, Pride Family Brands, executive vice president. "Everybody in this building is doing well. They are coming to buy."

Treasure Garden's newly expanded permanent showroom attracted a healthy amount of dealer traffic, President/CEO Oliver Ma said. "Our sales reps had already talked with their customers so they knew what to expect," he said.

With nine new collections and a new table lamination product, Suncoast stayed busy inside its expanded showroom. "Past customers who visited said they loved the new showroom," said Paul Varshney, president, Suncoast Furniture.

"Everybody said it looks like we stepped it up," Suncoast National Sales Manager Rick Baker added. Retailers especially reacted to

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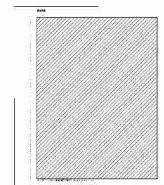
its functional Radiate Arc and Linear Sectional group and recognized the value of its laminated tabletops, he said.

Retailers in O.W. Lee's showroom were noticing its innovative tabletops, ranging from concrete paired with steel tubing to Art Glass and hand-crafted wrought iron. Its crescent shaped cuddle chair, swivel rocker club chairs and firepits also were gaining attention.

With more than 100 new products, Telescope Casual's showroom remained busy as people learned more about its marine-grade polymer products. Spokesmen for Gensun Casual Living, NorthCape



Buyers meet with Linda Hogeland, at right, in the Meadowcraft booth on the temporary floor.



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International and Tommy Bahama also were pleased with the Preview Show.

"We've been full from the word 'Go,'" said Mike Gaylord of Agio International, which started the show with a full set of appointments but worked in others as they arrived. "We've seen the bigger guys, who need to get their orders in early and program themselves out. Because of the shipping problems (from China) this season, manufacturers had to chase it all year. With the trials and tribulations of what happened last year, the model now is to get ahead of it. I've had people writing orders at the show."

His father Bob Gaylord, president of Agio, said he saw no big difference between the 2010 Preview Show and last year's premarket. "Everybody had a good year so I can't imagine they would stay away in September," he said of buyers. "Almost every manufacturer is doing something new for next year. And they're using more colors."

Gerald Visel of Cornwell Pool & Patio said he also noticed strong but subtle colors in product debuts and probably would give them a try in his own stores, which he said were having a good season. "When the stores are all earth tones, it's always safe, but it's boring," Visel said. "If it looks good to us, it's going to look good to the customers."

"We listen to our customers' needs and we respond to that," said Joseph Cilio, president, Alfresco Home. As a result, Alfresco Home's new collections include expanded woven groups, cast aluminum and a new range of wrought iron along with a fun Margarita bistro group of stamped iron in four colors: Green Apple, Blue Hawaii, Cocoa Bean and Blood Orange.

Asked to describe the premarket mood, Cilio said, "I think it's been very strong. The retailers who are here are serious. They are focused on what we need to do



Alfresco Home's two-tiered tables, which can be adapted for use as a grill or beverage cooler, prove to be good sellers.

now to have success in 2011. They have had a good year and are excited to move forward."

"The market and the turnout have been amazing," said Raffi Don Dayian, vice president of sales, Beka Casting. "Definitely the players are here. We're happy to be seeing our old friends and new buyers, too. The reaction we're getting to our products is really positive. There's a positive energy to the show. Although we had a limited amount of space (in a temporary 8th floor booth), the people who visit us have a good demeanor." He noted retailers from Florida and other Sun Belt states were well represented, then added, "if they're a container buyer, they really have to come here."

"Those who are here are the ones who felt they needed to be here," said Eric Parsons, president, Gloster. "We've heard more talk about putting together a container from folks who haven't in the past."

Because fewer retailers attend the Preview Show than the September Casual Market, it allows more time for conversations, Parsons said. "It's nice to be able to spend time with customers. One area we haven't diminished is new product development. We know 50% of the product sold was developed in the last three years."

Max Jensen of Jensen Leisure said he was extremely pleased with buyers' response to his company's products as well

as the number of buyers in attendance. "I think we'll see 50% of the volume of our buyers," he said. "All of the majors are here."

"So far it hasn't been about quantity, but quality," said Fred Ilse, president, Outdoor Lifestyle. "We've seen buyers who haven't done business with us for two years. A lot of stores were caught short this season so we had a huge amount of special orders during the season; our orders are up 48%."

Lloyd/Flanders also had many more appointments this year than last. Dealers were excited about the Coastal Living collection, woven products paired with cypress wood and an array of new fabrics.

The number of West Coast dealers was a little off, but Northeast dealers were well represented, said Hanamint President Russ Sorenson. "They want to flesh out new products, make soft decisions and give input and feedback on the new products. Sorenson also found the Preview Show to be similar to the 2009 show. "Our number of appointments was down, but then more buyers showed up than had made appointments."

Patio Renaissance attracted attention by exhibiting for the first time in its new permanent showroom. "Customers who have visited us before have finally decided to buy from us," said Albert Lord, vice president of marketing. "We're getting a lot of new dealers."

"Last year was basically flat, but things are going real well for us this year," said Tad Varga of Three Birds Casual.

Showing for the first time at the Preview Show, Kevin Sypolt of Padma's Plantation, said he was not disappointed. "We started our inside/out collection about 18 months ago and this has impacted our business in a big way," he said. "We under-forecast the amount of outdoor furniture we would sell this year and we completely sold out." **CL**