

Positive mood reigns at Casual Market

By Casual Living Staff

CHICAGO – The International Casual Furniture and Accessories Market kept its positive mood and stayed strong throughout its four-day run at the Merchandise Mart in Chicago.

“It’s been a fabulous show,” said Max Jensen, CEO of Jensen Leisure Outdoor Furniture, on the market’s final day. Janet Wansor, Jensen Leisure vice president of sales and marketing, said the market’s positive mood gave her “the outlook that this is going to be an incredible season.”

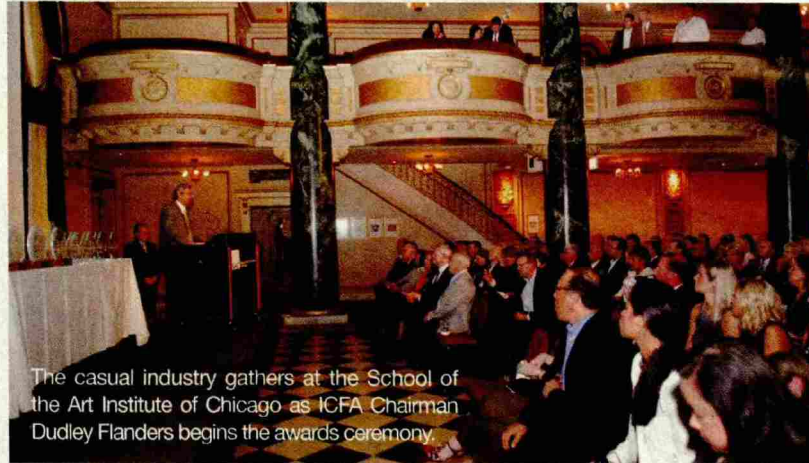
Retailer Debbie Stegman also used the word fabulous to describe the market and said it reminded her of past markets when the economy was booming. Her family’s attitudes were certainly upbeat as they confirmed their plans to open an Elegant Outdoor Living store this month in Naples, Fla.

“The people who are here are writing (orders) better than last year, when there was a lot of looking,” said Carl Lored, Woodard’s chief marketing officer. “People here are coming in to buy. Looking’s great; buying is better.”

“Buyers are in the mood to buy and they’re writing business,” said Randy Meeks, president of Oxford Garden.

In an effort to avoid shipping delays, Agio had encouraged dealers to place orders before the Casual Market. “We had more orders in before the Casual Show than ever, so we were able to spend more time with new customers,” Mike Gaylord said, noting new faces among the 550 people lined up for lunch at the showroom. “Our cupboards are full, we’re ready to ship, and we anticipate a very large increase.”

His father, Agio President Bob Gaylord, said he expects a \$40 million increase in specialty retail orders, given the amount ordered since July. “Historically, it was all



The casual industry gathers at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago as ICFA Chairman Dudley Flanders begins the awards ceremony.

about people writing orders at the show, but that was just habitual and there’s nothing wrong with being early,” he said. About 35 indoor furniture dealers were added this season, Gaylord said. “My personal goal is for outdoor furniture to have a permanent home in any store that says furniture on the sign.”

Fred Ilse, president of Outdoor Lifestyle, said the buying began shortly after the Preview Show in July. “We’ve had a lot more early buys than normal,” he said. “Aluminum prices are still up 20-25% higher than last year, but we stuck to our programs so our dealers don’t have any shocks and surprises.”

During his keynote speech, designer Roger Thomas spoke of using unexpected fabrics, colors and scale as he designed spaces at Wynn Las Vegas and Encore at Wynn Las Vegas. “I am seeing a complete blurring of the lines for furnishings appropriate for indoor and outdoor,” Thomas said. He described how pool areas are designed for dual functions. “The big trend in making money in Las Vegas hotels is beach clubs/night clubs.”

Busy was the word Steve Riley of

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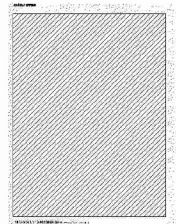
Bill Markowitz and Roger Thomas pause in the Veneman Collections showroom.



At Jardin de Ville’s cocktail party, from left, Chris Quenee, Alain Bourdages, Martin de Blois and Dominic Larin.



Bew White and Harold Hudson host a celebration of Summer Classics’ 30th year making casual furniture.



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Nebraska Furniture Market chose to describe the Casual Market mood. "We're seeing a lot more sectionals and a lot more contemporary furniture," he said.

Treasure Garden's expanded showroom stayed busy with visits from specialty retailers and mass market visitors looking for ideas and trend directions during the market. Demonstrations of retractable awnings were a popular feature. "A lot of important people came to see us," said Margaret Chang, chief operating officer.

Kathy Juckett, CEO, Telescope Casual Furniture, said response was good to the company's showroom improvements as well as its many new products. "Our marine-grade polymer has been hugely popular," she said. "We just added manufacturing space and equipment to handle demand. We're fortunate. Our product has been checking well."

Phenomenal was the word Mark Fillhower, COO Homecrest Outdoor Living, used to describe the mood of the market. "Our traffic is above what we expected," he said. "The overall mood has been very positive. Dealers' inventory is very clean."

"We've gotten more early buys right after the premarket, and I think we'll get a second turn on early buys after this show," said Terri Lee Rogers, co-president of O.W. Lee.

Temps get a lift

Near the end of day one of the Casual Market, Cole Mehlman was asked for his business card. The managing partner at Flexx Market Umbrellas fished in his badge holder and kept pulling out cards from buyers. "Well, I guess that's a good sign that we're busy," he said. "I can't find any of my cards."

It was one of several positive signs in the market's temporary exhibits. Chad Yordy, director of marketing at Poly-Wood, said his company's pre-set appointments were at an all-time high. "The last few markets turned



Many attendees made comments about the number of smiling faces as buyers and sellers mingled.



Retailers Debbie Stegman and Petey Fleischut pause with Jaclyn Kotzum and Whitney Gillespie, both of MMPI's Casual Furniture staff.



Booths like this one on the 8th floor offered a relaxed business setting.

out to be good for us, but there weren't as many commitments as there are this year," he said.

Carrie Morales, marketing and sales director at Windward Design Group, said she noticed positive buzz for the market at its August open house in Sarasota, Fla. "Last year, our business increased 40% and we're looking at that kind of growth this year, if not more," Morales said. "Based on the appointments we've made here and our early buys, I'd be surprised if it wasn't more."

Yordy, however, stopped short of declaring that happy days are here again for the

casual industry. Major order writing hadn't happened yet. The buying habits of consumers had changed so drastically during the recession, he said, those habits will take a few years to change.

That means an ongoing effort on the part of vendors to help retailers give consumers more value. Case in point was a new compact floor display Sunbrella showed off in its booth on the eighth floor. The company had been offering it on a trial basis, but used the show to market the display as an everyday solution for dealers.

"Most people know Sunbrella and see this merchandiser as an opportunity to sell their customers on fabrics they can use to make pillows, tablecloths and outdoor draperies," said Paige Mullis, decorative fabrics resource manager at Sunbrella.

Another good example is the cushion program at Two Palms, which allows dealers to mix and match different cushion fabrics from Outdura on a single piece of furniture, at no extra charge.

"We started doing that at the High Point Market a year ago," said Alex Boyer, vice president of sales and marketing. "It allows dealers to offer diverse looks without it being too complicated."

Napoleon, the Canadian manufacturer known for its grills and hearth products also diversified its look as it debuted a line of furniture to offer buyers even more variety. E.J. Scott, Napoleon national sales manager, said the company carefully considered the move. "We needed to understand who our customer is," Scott said. "We also needed to provide more than just a 'me too' product."

Tammy Newton, sales manager for Palm Springs Rattan & Garden Classics, said the positive market mood was just what the industry needs. "I think everyone is tired of hearing all the dismal news," she said. "That's why you're seeing a lot of color and fun from the manufacturers. Everyone just wants to lift up." 