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Vendors continue to see 'outdoor living' trend as opportunity for growth

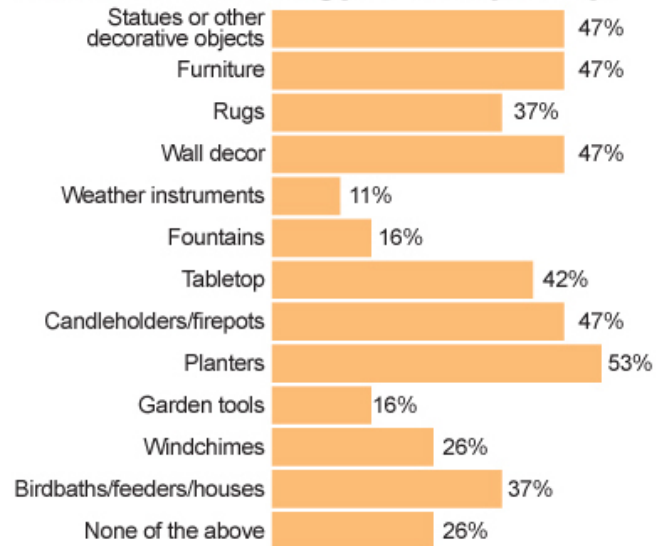
By Jenny Heinzen York -- Home Accents Today, October 27, 2010

OF THE LIFESTYLE trends that have emerged over the past several years, outdoor living has been, and looks to remain, one of the strongest.

By updating a porch, patio, deck or balcony area with more comfortable furniture, and water-resistant rugs, decor and lighting, a homeowner can add a significant amount of living space without investing in a major remodel. And with safer, more-efficient methods of outdoor heating, even colder climates are getting in on the outdoor living trend.

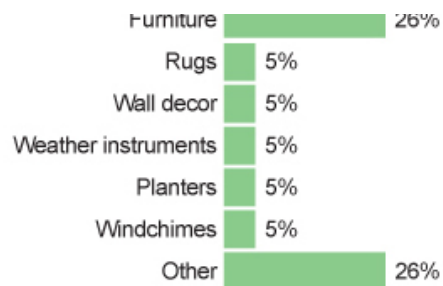
WHAT RETAILERS ARE SAYING

What kind of outdoor living products do you carry?

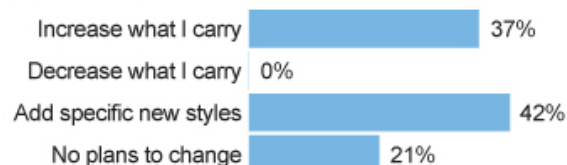


What are your best-selling outdoor products?





How do you plan to change your outdoor living mix in 2009?



In fact, according to the results of recent consumer surveys conducted by sister magazines Furniture Today and Casual Living (specializing in outdoor furnishings), the outdoor space is high on the list for redecoration. Furniture Today's research shows that the outdoor room is the third most popular space for adding new furnishings - right on the heels of the family room/den and master bedroom.

Casual Living's research (conducted, like Furniture Today's) in conjunction with HGTV and representing the opinions of more than 9,000 American consumers, shows that 60% of consumers are hoping to buy outdoor furniture in the next two years.

In order to grab a piece of that pie, gift, accessory and furnishings producer Tag unveiled its first collection of Indoor/Outdoor Folding Furniture at the Casual Furniture Show in Chicago last month.

The new furniture collection includes several styles of folding chairs and tables available in white, black and natural stain finishes.

In addition to this new furniture collection, Tag's new Spring/Summer 2011 line offers a range of product categories, including coordinating outdoor accessories and entertaining products.

"I have always believed that when it comes to Tag's mix of well-designed affordable products, every room in the house is fair game, including the outside," said Tag's Norman Glassberg. "Tag has always made products that support the consumer's outside lifestyle. This introduction of indoor/outdoor furniture is a natural extension for us."

Tami Newton, director of sales and marketing for Palm Springs Rattan & Garden Classics, said she thinks that now is the sweet spot for the outdoor furnishings business. Her company specializes in rattan and wicker furnishings, but also carries wood, Prolene, allweather wicker, aluminum frame products, umbrellas and a line of accessories.

"I believe the garden/outdoor products business should be thriving," Newton said. "People are staying home more to beautify where they live - to surround themselves with their own paradise. People are investing in their homes, creating a paradise to have staycations."

Emissary President Peter Nealing said the "outdoor room" business is performing better than strictly indoor products right now.

"I do think outdoors is a strong category because people are still thinking of the outdoors as an area that they can improve - make it more than it has been - particularly with products like pottery and garden seats."

Pottery and garden seats are key to Emissary's product line, and they are the best-sellers in the company's business at the moment. Emissary is also going aggressively after the color story, though it's harder to pin down what are the hottest ones right now.

"Color's not like it used to be," Nealing said, "like when everyone wanted mauve, for example. There's a lot more variety in the marketplace, so we're going after some very bright colors. I don't want Emissary to be monochromatic. If you want color, you should come to Emissary. Even if you're doing neutrals, you should want a splash of color. (Otherwise), how boring can you be?"

"In this economic situation and what's going on, I think we should all try to brighten things up," Nealing said. "It may only be a splash of color, but you need to put something in your window that will draw customers into your store and make them feel good." Newton said at the Casual Show, color was an important trend.

"Outdoor wicker was everywhere in Chicago," she said. "I am seeing lots of seating - alternative tops - performance fabrics in brighter colors - and more petite size furniture."

But furniture is only part of the outdoor room story. At Tag, the best sellers for the outdoors include candle lighting, umbrella tablecloths, solar and LED lighting and garden decor. "Decor items that continue to make the garden an extension of the home are hot," said Nancy Michaels, director of marketing.

The overall economy continues to weigh on the outdoor products manufacturers, but there are reasons for optimism.

"2010 is definitely better than 2009," Nealing said. "The trend is up, but it bounced off of a very low bottom. Business has come back quite a bit, but it's nowhere near where it was. We've gotten a bounce off of our low. I don't see a double-dip, but I think it will be a sluggish recovery. But sluggish is better than no recovery."

Emissary, like all importers, is dealing with price increases (both on the factory and on the freight side), as well as the ongoing weakness of the dollar, which reduces the buying power of American companies doing business overseas.

"For now, we are absorbing the price increases, but our shipping has almost doubled this year," he said. "We are still absorbing it - we don't want to raise our prices in this economy - but at some point you're going to have to."

Palm Springs has also held the line on prices so far, Newton said, and is continuing to emphasize product development and customer service as its other competitive advantages.

"We have not had a price increase yet while our competition has," she said. "We have continued to develop new product, purchase more fabric selections, serviced our dealers, and kept our lead times as promised. We have always tried to improve efficiency and tighten our belts internally as well."

Emissary has made cuts to its cost structure, like nearly everyone else, Nealing said, but has not pulled back on marketing or product development.

"I've been around long enough that I've seen bad times," Nealing said. "A lot of people have not seen this kind of thing before. We went after it aggressively and invested in our products. We know that the down times are good opportunities to be aggressive and move forward."

To that end, Emissary is bringing out a lot of new pieces for this month's High Point Market, including higher end pottery, garden seats and a new line of ceramic tables. It will also unveil a completely redone High Point showroom this month.

Tag is emphasizing its in-stock positions, and adding new products and categories to stay on top of the competition - and maintaining an upbeat mood.

"The retailers and the suppliers that are left in business have been through the worst of it," Michaels said.

"The mindset is that they can now focus on growing their businesses through brick and mortar and through e-commerce. It is a

new world, and retailers and suppliers alike are navigating new ideas to grow their businesses and brands."

Newton agrees with the power of the positive attitude.

"We could all make a long list of outside influences spoken about daily on the news to include interest rates, banks afraid to loan money, new restrictions from credit card companies, the unknown of tax increases, home foreclosures, overseas labor issues, peak season container rates," she said. "But the fact of the matter is, if you continue to keep a positive attitude and make it fun for your customer - provide a product that gives them benefits and features that they cannot find from the competition - why wouldn't they want to buy?"

"The mood is clearly more positive than it was a year ago," Emissary's Nealing said. "You can feel that when you go to the shows. They are spending money - not wildly - but they are spending. The thing is, we're all in this together, and we're still here. Considering the alternative, I'm optimistic."

The future for the success of the category - and the industry as a whole - is new ideas, Nealing said.

"I would predict that there needs to be a lot of new ideas, new products, new designs - we all need something to grab onto to move forward," he said.

Newton said Americans are, at their core, shoppers, and it's up to the vendors and retailers to provide the products and services to make them spend.

"The (retailers) that continue to work on improving themselves - the ones that recognize to go outside of their four walls - are the ones succeeding," she said. "If you go out and do something unique, provide a unique product, make it fun for your end consumer to buy from you and give a reason for them to want to trust/buy from you - they will. Americans can't stop spending. Also, we are selling globally now, and many areas of the world have plenty of money to spend. Stay positive, make it fun and give them a reason to buy!"

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