

Dealer/Manufacturer Relations

The relationship between Columbus, Ohio-based Continental Office Environments and Indiana Furniture has been cultivated over more than 30 years.

BY ROB KIRKBRIDE

The relationship between manufacturers and their dealers is critically important in the office furniture industry. It is a symbiotic partnership: Neither can succeed without the other.

The relationship between Columbus, Ohio-based Continental Office Environments and Indiana Furniture has been cultivated over more than 30 years. And while that's not necessarily unique in an industry known for its long connections, the help Continental provided when Indiana Furniture needed a new Merchandise Mart showroom is special.

Indiana Furniture wanted a new look to reflect the changes the company has made over the past few years. It has greatly improved the modularity of its products and modernized its manufacturing process. The company also dedicated itself to improving the sustainability of its products and plant.

According to Mike Blessinger, vice president of sales at marketing at Indiana Furniture, those changes were not reflected in its Merchandise Mart showroom. The showroom was a bit stale. It wasn't terrible, but it wasn't a showroom that made customers and designers take notice.

So instead of turning to an interior designer firm to remodel its showroom, Indiana Furniture tapped Con-

tinental for the project. Continental has changed as well by expanding its business beyond the furniture. In addition to selling office furniture, the company has added flooring, movable walls, moving services, and professional and workplace services. It

room. Magoto and other Continental executives visited Indiana Furniture's headquarters in Jasper, Ind. where they got a sense of the company and its culture.

Telling the story of a wood casegoods company and what makes it unique can be a challenge, Blessinger said. "We wanted to make a statement and we needed someone outside that had the resources to help with that. Continental was the logical choice. They did a branding workshop with us and helped us form the brand we wanted to present. Previously, Indiana Furniture had been known as a value-oriented wood casegood



also helps its customers with design and branding.

Nick Magoto, Continental's vice president of design, led the process of revamping the showroom. "The goal was to create a showroom that more reflects Indiana Furniture's brand," he said. "There is new management in place, but there is also this heritage and tradition of working with wood. They wanted to attract the architecture and design community and get involved with more project business. It was important that they have a more sophisticated showroom."

Magoto worked with Indiana Furniture's senior management team on the company's vision for the show-

company. Over last five years, the company has changed dramatically."

The recession has hurt sales at Indiana Furniture, but its growth over the last five years is nothing short of amazing. Since 2004, the company has doubled in size. "That story needed to be told," Blessinger said.

Indiana Furniture didn't want to spend a fortune on the showroom redesign. But the company had to spice up the space. The showroom is on an inner hallway on the Merchandise Mart's 10th floor – not a prime space for foot traffic, even on the busiest days of NeoCon.

"In the past, they just brought a range of furniture products in different finishes to the showroom,"

Magoto said. "It wasn't really well thought out. We honed in on new products and the products they wanted to emphasize with the A&D community. When we were designing the showroom, we wanted people to understand the great wood heritage of the company and create a continuity throughout the space."



Continental's designers created a modular wall graphic that represents all the wood shades and finishes available to customers. Designers also highlighted Indiana Furniture's modular wood products and all the products that are Greenguard certified. The company's new Elevate furniture line was placed in the front of the showroom.

Blessinger said Indiana Furniture wanted a showroom that gave peo-



ple a sense of comfort. "We wanted it to say, these people are genuine, they work hard, they are committed to what they do, but there is a comfortableness to Indiana Furniture. We wanted to raise the level of what people expected of us," he said.

Continental has plenty of experience designing spaces, but this was the first Merchandise Mart showroom they ever tackled. Together, Continental and Indiana Furniture

pulled it off. The showroom was a hit at NeoCon and continues to pull in designers and potential customers with its stylish and comfortable design.

"It is night and day from prior NeoCons," said Ira Sharfin, presi-



dent and chief executive officer of Continental, describing Indiana Furniture's new showroom. "Not only is it updated, it is really cool."

The Indiana Furniture showroom has become a de facto Continental



showroom as well, a space where the dealer can show customers an example of its design capabilities. The showroom has strengthened an already strong relationship between dealer and manufacturer.

"Continental is a sophisticated and somewhat unique dealership," Blessinger said. "They are the type of dealership that we typically target to do business with us. They are sophisticated and work well with the A&D community."

"We feel very strongly about our partnership with those guys. We respect them tremendously and I think they respect us as well." ↗



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