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Canuck bold

Canadian furniture manufacturers go for power in custom market

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Forget about the gold standard, Canada's furniture industry is opting for the bold standard.

Canadian furniture designers and manufacturers are aiming high -- and pricing moderately -- to capture a market that they want to make their own.

While imports from China and other countries may command a sizable chunk of the market, Canadians in the business are taking off their gloves instead of diving for the nearest lounge chair to head for cover.

They're boldly going into market segments where they believe they can call the shots. That includes providing Canadians with what Canadians want, and attempting to capitalize on homegrown celebrity style and appeal.

Winnipeg's Pulse Furniture, which offers exclusive and customizable lines of contemporary Canadian-made furniture, and the designing duo of Steven Sabados and Chris Hyndman -- best known as the original Designer Guys and for their second HGTV Canada show Design Rivals -- with their recently launched Steven & Chris line are two different examples of the new direction Canada's furniture sector is taking.

Edmontonians, meanwhile, are getting a first-hand chance to see some of the newest offerings from Canadian designers and manufacturers at the 2007 Home & Interior Design Show, now on at Northlands AgriCom.

With an increased emphasis on home furnishings this year, the show has rolled out an Interior Design Centre special feature with its own host -- interior design specialist Elissa Scott -- and exhibitors who are showcasing some of the selections from Pulse and the Steven & Chris line, among others.

Pulse president and founder Jeff Golfman, whose family traces its furniture roots back to the 1940s, says his company will succeed by giving Canadians optimal customization when it comes to a furniture purchase.

"It is a build your own, get-what-you-want concept. I believe this is the future for the Canadian (furniture) manufacturing industry.

"You can get the sofa made how you want it made -- the foam you want, the legs you want, the colour you want, even the dimensions you want," says Golfman.

"Our pricing is higher than the Chinese imports, but lower than the European imports so we fit right in the middle. If you're looking for service, quality and customization and you want to get exactly what you want, we're your guys."

At the other end of this moderate price spectrum are Sabados and Hyndman, who launched their upholstery line earlier this year.

Jake Bergen, president of Spruce Grove's Straightline Furniture & Interiors expects this new line that he's carrying to be a big seller -- in part because of the name power of Sabados and Hyndman and in part because it is a stylish, quality product at a reasonable price.

Straightline, located 15 minutes west of Edmonton, was created four years ago to focus on custom furniture and design.

"My wife and I were shopping for furniture and we were very frustrated with what we found. We had some very specific needs and realized how hard it was to get what we wanted, so what we've tried to do is make good design accessible," says Bergen who left the oil fields to become part of a growing number of Canadian furniture entrepreneurs.

"What we are all about here is carrying really cool stuff, offbeat yet interesting items that also meet people's needs, which is why we do a lot of the custom work," says Bergen, who like Golfman, feels there definitely is room in the market for a quality Canadian product.

"We do custom work where people have very specific desires and can't find those certain pieces they're looking for," adds Bergen, whose showroom carries Canadian offerings like those from West Bros. (out of Toronto) and Camlen Antiques from Knowlton, Que., in addition to being one of a limited number of dealers in the Edmonton region selling the Steven & Chris line.

Golfman, for his part, believes Canadian entrepreneurs can correctly gauge the pulse of Canada's furniture buying public and stay ahead of the curve. But he says to do that they should pay attention to four things: quality, price, customization and speed.

"There are lots of places where you can get good design right now but the product might be made overseas and the quality won't be there," says Golfman. "People are becoming more sophisticated and looking for something that will last."

They also want something that is manufactured locally or if not in their own backyard, in another part of Canada, adds Golfman, noting that this gives Canadian manufacturers an ecological advantage as well.

"Our ecological footprint is drastically smaller than the stuff made overseas. You're not shipping it as far, and you're not packaging it as much," he says.

On top of this, there's another new wrinkle giving Canadians even more choice in furniture -- again at reasonable prices -- and it can be found at Edmonton-based F2 Furnishings, a company that is also taking part in the Home & Interior Design Show.

F2, or F squared as it is referred to, is about life meeting style, says Shelley Derksen, a partner in the operation that focuses on modern and contemporary product lines.

"F squared is derived from the fusion of two essential elements: form times function," says Derksen, pointing out that while F2 carries Canadian furnishings from companies such as Pulse, it also designs its own unique and affordable products that it will have specially manufactured -- though not necessarily in Canada.



"In most cases, the pieces we have designed (and manufactured) have a functional aspect," says Derksen, referring to items that are flexible and can be adjusted with ease -- like its Serena or Jimmy D sofas that can easily morph into different positions or shapes; both of which can be won

at the home show this weekend courtesy of F2 -- or other double-duty items such as its Morgana dining table, with its solid wood base and thick tempered glass that seats six.

Morgana's versatility is that it comes with glass pieces that effortlessly swing out, allowing the table to accommodate an additional four people.

"It's really a good time to be in the furniture business," says Derksen, referring to Edmonton's robust housing market. But with a reasonably strong housing sector in other parts of the country, Derksen and her partner, James Li, also have their sights set on other Canadian hot spots.

"The (Edmonton) operation was opened to create a concept store, which would carry internationally inspired designs of classic modern and contemporary furnishings that could be made accessible to the mass market," says Derksen. "This business is growing and we're looking at expanding into other markets."

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