

# Furniture tradeshow are two different beasts

Grand Rapids still is recognized in High Point Market.

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Every spring there is an international fashion show in High Point, N.C. It lasts for six days and in that time, the models never leave their posts.

High Point Market, the largest furnishings industry tradeshow in the world, takes place April 17-22 this year — about two months before Chicago's NeoCon World's Trade Fair, also a furnishings industry tradeshow. While the two shows overlap somewhat in what visitors see, they are completely different beasts — and the West Michigan presence at the High Point show has dwindled over the years.

"The most significant difference is the High Point Market is residential home furnishings, first; there are some very small offerings in contract. But it is a buyer's market," said Max Shangle, professor and program chair for furniture at Kendall College of Art and Design of Ferris State University.

NeoCon is traditionally an exposition where contract furniture companies, such as Herman Miller or Steelcase, show off their goods.

Another big difference is the role that the High Point Market plays in shaping its industry.

"The buyers who attend the market are going there to purchase and order products. They are negotiating deals, contracts and quantity orders, and based on those orders, manufacturers make decisions about which of their offerings are going to go into full blown production, which will go away, which need to be reconsidered in terms of price point and design. It really is a fashion market," said Shangle.

"Those products that leave the High Point Market eventually get to retail and become the stuff you and I see when we go to the furniture store. They are guiding and

shaping the trend of what's going on in residential home furnishings. It's also driving the industry. Without a good market, the manufacturing community suffers badly because it's an order-taking market.

"At NeoCon, yes, some orders are written, but that's not an order-taking market."

In the days when Grand Rapids was called Furniture City, the moniker was not only due to the quantity and quality of furniture manufactured in the region, but also because markets like High Point and NeoCon used to be held here.

Those markets left the region along with many of the furniture manufacturers.

"In terms of West Michigan home furniture manufacturers, (the High Point Market) is as important now as it has been for the last 50 years. It's where their product gets in front of the buyers," said Shangle.

"The difference is we're not a dominant player at market, but market is a dominant player in our business. It really has gone global. West Michigan manufacturers are

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not the major players in the market that they once were."

A few of the West Michigan companies he expects to see represented at the High Point Market are Sligh, Howard Miller, Hekman and Kindel.

"The numbers are small, but we are still recognized in the market, which I think is a very interesting thing," he said. "When you say 'from Grand Rapids,' it still resonates with the buyers. Even in this global economy, we get recognized."

Shangle said that even though furniture manufacturing now is global, there are opportunities for American manufacturers to compete through service and quality. And, he said, American manufac-

turers have an innate understanding of the complex U.S. market, whereas other countries have a more difficult time adapting to the market.

"It's that idea of understanding our marketplace. The one thing that American industry, particularly the furniture industry, is really good at is knowing its market. It's a diverse market. Price point wise, it's diverse, style wise, materials — all of that stuff. If you were on the outside looking in, it's chaos piled on top of itself. What our industry has been able to do is work its way through that and continue to serve the customer in ways that other parts of the world can't respond to."

Even though NeoCon focuses on contract furniture and High Point on residential, the two converge in the territory known as the home office.

"It's another market category where if we do things well, we respond to specific user's needs," he said.

"That gets us into a better understanding of the marketplace."

While many contract furniture companies are seeking to enter the home office market, Shangle believes the residential furniture industry has the edge — despite the fact that the contract industry has been doing a lot of investigative research into the residential market to learn how it differs from contract.

"We're more dictated by architecture than contract furniture is: room sizes, room flow, windows. All of those impact our product more than what a contract designer would be thinking about. They would be thinking about configurations; we'd be thinking about getting it through the door," he said.

"The difference is that we, as residential furniture manufacturers, already have our foot in the residential door. The people that are buying product for their home are going to the home furniture store. They don't know that a major office manufacturer has done two years of investigative research to decide what the shape of a table ought to be, because they may never see it. I think the contract industry understands it better, but



I think it's the residential industry that makes the biggest impact, because we're already there. We also have an established trust."

Shangle also pointed out that West Michigan is a little skewed when it comes to furniture.

"We have to remember that we're in this really strange part of the world," he said. "We know furniture companies, but go someplace else and they don't know furniture companies."