



## Flooring News

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**Game on at NeoCon 2011**  
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[Chicago] NeoCon 2011 is set to offer product from more than 700 manufacturers, present 140 seminars across a breadth of topics and play host to more than 40,000 visitors June 13-15 here. Mark Falanga, senior vice president of Merchandise Mart Properties Inc. (MMPI), contract, said that equally important is the show's concerted effort to bring manufacturers, designers and facility managers together, promote partnerships and educate visitors on what products are available.

"The most important thing is that the visitors that are coming here are educated on what new products are available so that when they go back to design offices or school environments or government facilities or restaurants, there is a scope of understanding and that they have a range of what's available," said Falanga. "Secondly is for that crowd to have a current level of knowledge and education of what is going on in the business and what is state of art in the industry. In order for design firms to be competitive, they need to be aware of these things," he said.

As far as the show's product focus goes, Falanga said, "The show's basic philosophy is to broaden the range of a category and add to a range of interiors." But, he said, there are

depth to each category and to have all products in a category for a range of interiors. "Over the last three years, business has shifted from office to other facilities so the product mix and emphasis on product mix is focusing on healthcare as well as hospitality and education."

As a result, a Healthcare pavilion was created. "It's a very stable marketplace," he said adding, "The education market is a fairly stable marketplace. You'll see more products here focused on that as well."

The show has also pursued the lighting category. "Whatever the environment, lighting is a component to that and we wanted to make sure that the show is comprehensive and broaden the scope of product," said Falanga.

The commercial market is reportedly rebounding faster than the residential market when it comes to floor covering sales. Falanga said that one benchmark indication of the rebound is BIFMA (The Business and Institutional Furniture Manufacturer's Association) which is predicting a 9 percent to 11 percent increase of wholesale home furnishings this year over last. "Unemployment is decreasing, employment is increasing. As that occurs, pent up demand will fuel growth in this business — especially in floor coverings. It's part and parcel to any renovation. A very efficient change of space is changing out the floor covering."

Falanga said that one of the special exhibits this year is a result of NeoCon's effort to bring young talent and established firms together. "One of the most interesting [special exhibits] is the Furniture Revolution Gallery — a platform for young designers to bring interesting furniture designs and create an opportunity for manufacturers to couple themselves with young designers."



In fact, Falanga said that there is opportunity for manufacturers to tap into new types of work space designs through these young designers. "I've had the opportunity to walk through the Groupon space, for example, and other tech companies like that. Workspaces for younger people — incubator spaces — are dramatically different than the more traditional work spaces that most of us have grown up with. This is a whole new energy and way of working. [Manufacturers] see these designers as an asset rather than a liability. In order to keep NeoCon fresh, we need to cater to that crowd."

Along those lines, NeoCon 2011 will also host a Student Day program. "We cultivate a large crowd of students to come because we recognize that they are the next generation of designers and specifiers. The manufacturers have the ability to create a strong impression with those young minds," Falanga said that they expect between 2,000 and 2,500 students to attend from all over the country the Wednesday of the show.

The green movement has also had what Falanga said is a "massive impact" on the show. "I credit the floor covering industry with sparking this green movement and our involvement. The Merchandise Mart, in fact, is the world's largest LEED-EB certified building (existing building), according to Falanga.

When the show first addressed "green" it was with a small pavilion. Today, Falanga said, "it would be ridiculous to show in a green pavilion because almost every manufacturer has something with sustainable principles. To not pursue sustainable principles is irresponsible.

"The core is bringing buyers and sellers together in a very efficient way to make it as compelling as possible," Falanga said. That is why, he said, they offer networking opportunities, receptions, educational seminars, keynote speakers and tours of facilities to name a few components.

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