



Sneak peek: Area companies trending toward multi-use products at NeoCon

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Holland, MI — As Holland-area firms head to NeoCon, the massive design and manufacturing trade fair beginning in Chicago June 14, they offer an assortment of new products or expanded lines, often fitting a trend toward diversification and multiple-use products as furniture makers look for new markets.

“The industry got smarter after the last major recession and realized other markets offered a significant opportunity,” said Michael A. Dunlap, a Holland-based industry analyst and consultant. He dubs some of the new offerings “cross-over furniture” that can be suitable for more than one market — like Haworth or Herman Miller office chairs in hotel rooms.

Indeed, new products this year offer potential in health care, education and hospitality markets.

Herman Miller’s “Oasis” project, still awaiting a market name, offers casual lounge furniture for a range of uses. Its Thrive portfolio of desktop work tools builds on its ergonomic tradition. Herman Miller Healthcare is growing with a highly researched Compass System of health care room furnishings. Trendway adds a clear wall to its architectural products line and steel Pack Desking to a laminate line that has seen double-digit growth despite the economic downturn. And while Haworth gave a sneak peek at one new chair, it promises more new systems furniture and some experimental pieces as part of a new showroom design unveiled at NeoCon.

Sparkeology is an offshoot of the Worden Company, helping to broaden its market base, noted Robin Hendrick Lane, vice president of marketing.

“I’m sure we’re not the only ones looking to do that,” she said. “The way the economy is, you need to take advantage of whatever opportunities there are, and do something you’re good at.

“We’re not doing something completely new for us – just taking it in a different direction.” Many new products are derivations of older ones, Dunlap noted. “Rarely does NeoCon result in any revolutionary products, but the industry is in an evolutionary mode.”

And while the economic downturn might have trimmed investment in new products compared to 10 years ago, he sees bright spots. “The product development process has become far more efficient and productive than 10 years ago,” he said.

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