



West Michigan office furniture makers make dramatic changes for annual NeoCon show in Chicago

By Julia Bauer | The Grand Rapids Press

June 06, 2010, 6:00AM



Mark Copier | The Grand Rapids Press

Haworth designers Michael Welsh, left, and Nicolai Czumaj-Bront discuss the Holland company's new Very task chair that will be introduced at NeoCon. **View photo gallery**

When 40,000 designers, journalists, and office furniture giants converge on Merchandise Mart in Chicago next week, they will see few big-ticket mahogany executive suites, the Hummers of the furniture industry.

Instead, the world's largest office furniture makers at **the NeoCon show**, June 14-16, are **unveiling more flexible, more fit** and — in the wake of the worst sales year in history — more frugal designs.

Whether these new products are a hit with customers is important to West Michigan, where the office furniture industry is centered.

For aging baby boomers, plenty of designs focus on hospitals, waiting rooms and outpatient settings.

Boomers' grandchildren heading to college are the target for classroom tables and chairs, technology and student lounge furniture for kicking back.

A troubled generation of middle agers aren't left out, either. Downsized and pinching pennies more than ever, many mid-career people are

THE LIST

Who's there from West Michigan?

American Seating
BIFMA (trade group)
Coalesse (Steelcase)
Compatico Inc.
Configura Inc. (software co.)
Gill Industries Inc.
Grand Rapids Chair Co.
Haworth Inc.
Hekman Furniture Co.
Herman Miller Inc.
Herman Miller
Healthcare/Nemschoff

working at home or even renting a "third place" desk by the hour. Most of this year's office chairs and desk/benches target these small-volume buyers.

As banks and New York financial houses crashed in last year's collapse, some of the richest markets for high-profit, high-design office furniture dried up.

Industrywide, office furniture sales took their steepest drop in history, plummeting 30 percent in 2009.

That nauseating slide sent the industry's largest player, **Steelcase Inc.** of Grand Rapids, as well as the next-largest, **Herman Miller Inc.** of Zeeland and **Haworth Inc.** of Holland, scrambling for healthier sectors of the industry.

Going after hospital orders

On the health care front, new entries range from Pocket, a whisper-quiet rolling workstation from **Nurture by Steelcase**, to Compass, infection-resistant wall panels designed by **Herman Miller Healthcare**.

Last year's prize-winning cancer-chemotherapy suite in Nurture's NeoCon showroom is out, replaced by new settings for hospital patients and their families.

Pocket is expected to be the biggest hit among Nurture's entries. The slim design is a rolling tech center, with sync and wireless capabilities.

"There are a lot of carts out there today that evolved over many years," said Kyle Williams, general manager of Nurture. "We wanted to focus on simplicity."

The Pocket, a play on nurses' scrubs with bulging pockets of gear, employs a redesigned caster and bearing to make the cart nearly noiseless as it rolls.

A rail-hung wall system, Compass creates flex space in the hospital. If more space is needed for a patient's supplies, a wall panel can be swapped out for a 13-inch-deep storage cabinet, said Joel Van Wyck, director of healthcare products.

Each unit has a wood-tone thermal foil surface.

It's "95.5 percent PVC free," Van Wyck said. "They're designed to be reused, instead of ripping out cabinetry."

Even the modular sink is germ-phobic and anti-splash, he said.

A Herman Miller-designed faucet tips slightly toward the back of the sink, sides of the sink slope inward, and the drain is offset, so water doesn't splash directly into it.

Target the schools

Several West Michigan office furniture companies say they are trying

IzzyPlus
Knoll Inc.
Light Corp.
Nucraft Furniture Co.
Nurture by Steelcase
Sparkeology Inc.
Steelcase Inc.
Stryker Corp.
Turnstone (Steelcase)
VarnerumStelter
Workstuff Inc.

Source: NeoCon.com

UPDATE

What's new at NeoCon?

When doors open at the big office furniture show in Merchandise Mart June 14-16, new products from at least 20 West Michigan companies will be on display. Here is a sample:

Health care

- Pocket rolling workstation, \$1,200 to \$3,500 list: Nurture by Steelcase
- Compass wall-hung systems: Herman Miller Healthcare (to be made here)
- Tava seating, furniture, \$1,500-\$3,500 list: Nurture by Steelcase

Education

- Z Series tables, IzzyPlus
- College lounge furniture, Herman Miller (to be made here)
- Truman lounge collection, IzzyPlus
- Salsa four-seat square, VarnerumStelter (to be made here)
- Rize mechanism, to move smart boards up and down; VarnerumStelter (to be made here)

Lower-price office furniture

- Everywhere table, Herman Miller: \$600 to \$2,000 list
- Very Task chair, Haworth: \$575 to \$1,000 list

hard to manufacture more products in this region. Why? They can shrink their carbon footprint, plus gain an edge among schools and industries freshly eager for U.S.-made products. The lineup for education is as healthy as the industry's high hopes for hospitals.

IzzyPlus, based in Spring Lake, is devoting its entire NeoCon showroom to "Izzy University," with classroom tables, chairs and new Truman lounge furniture.

Herman Miller is in school, too, unveiling yet-unnamed student lounge furniture with a swooping wave rather than a side arm — reminiscent of the rooflines of DeVos Center and the new parking garage at Gerald R. Ford International Airport. The slope accommodates youthful side-sitting as well as the more staid feet-on-the-floor orientation.

"We envision a 350-pound football player using this," said Kim Shaw, seating manager. "It has the Herman Miller 12-year warranty."

The design team worked hard to ensure the line would be made in West Michigan, Shaw said. Beyond the obvious hope for local jobs, the customer plays a role.

"In the education market, they want things made in the U.S.A.," she said. "Higher education is a growth area. It's a nice hole to fill."

Why the big push for education?

"We're at one of those incredible moments in time, where systemic change is really happening," said Izzy owner Chuck Saylor. "This next generation of students, the millennials, really represent the largest body of people since the baby boomers were in school."

This wave of college students doesn't rely on chalkboard learning, and it doesn't sit still for long.

"In just a few years, this generation is coming into the work force," Saylor said. "Work is truly moving to happening anywhere, at any time."

Education is a big market for **VarnerumStelter** in Grand Rapids, too. The company has a handful of new high-tech products, including a desk with a disappearing monitor, and Salsa, a four-person desk unit neatly tied together in a contiguous square.

Rize and Flow are also on deck: Rize lifts and lowers an electronic "smart board," while Flow is a classroom chair.

"We sold 1,000 Rizes in the last three weeks, all to community colleges," company owner Jim Stelter said.

Keeping a lid on prices

When it comes to new office seating and benches, they are slimmer and simpler.

Several ship knocked-down, with consumer-friendly assembly.

At Steelcase, the new Reply chair lineup ranges from \$550 to \$800 list, and will be sold through e-tailers such as **Target.com** or

- Move chair in plastic, Steelcase: \$199 to \$300 list
- Reply chair, Steelcase: \$550 to \$800 list
- Penny table, IzzyPlus
- Frame1 office bench, Steelcase: \$1,200 to \$3,500 list

Revamped showrooms

- Izzy University
- Haworth "active space"
- Nurture patient/caregiver hospital setting

- [View photo gallery](#)

Source: The companies



VarnerumStelter in Grand Rapids offers Salsa to accommodate up to four students in a design that provides pop-up laptops and group dialogue. [View photo gallery](#)

Crate and Barrel.

"At smaller companies, you can roll your office chair from meeting to meeting," said Jody Hanson, marketing director. Reply is for harder-working spaces, she said. And it ships knocked down, with no-tool assembly.

The Everything table by Herman Miller has 15 leg/base options, able to create 90 different tables.

"They're all common parts with different leg sets," said Larry Kallio, program leader.

"It hits a range of environments, at lower prices," said product manager Niki Ainsworth. "It goes everywhere."

It also arrives in a flat box for customer assembly. The line starts at \$600 list, up to \$2,000.

On several fronts, the design lead-up to the 2010 NeoCon show was a foot race.

At Haworth Inc., a new lower-price Very task chair hit the virtual drawing board just a year ago, said Michael Welsh, principal seating designer. That compares to three or four years for previous chair creations.



Mark Copier | The Grand Rapids Press

Herman Miller's new line of Everywhere tables will show at NeoCon.

"We scaled it down. It's a very 'clear' chair," Welsh said.

Nicolai Czumaj-Bront, a senior industrial designer, said he was amazed at the "very quick, aggressive process." List price? \$575 to \$1,000.

Smaller offices, more teamwork, and a more mobile work force led Steelcase to go global with its European office-workbench design, FrameOne.

"You can grow or shrink the space," said Steve Sanders, director of furniture marketing. Mix-and-match options let the shared desktop fit users from the "nomad," (think hoteling or study carrel), to the more permanent user who needs storage and privacy. Most parts for FrameOne will be built here, Sanders said. List? \$1,200 to \$3,500.

2011 should be better

After the upheaval and shifting markets of the past year, the outlook for the office furniture industry is slowly improving. The latest forecast from **the Business and Institutional Furniture Manufacturer's Association**, or BIFMA, expects industry-wide shipments to drop another 5 percent this year, but recover in 2011 with an 11 percent rebound.



Emily Zoladz | The Grand Rapids Press

Jody Hanson, marketing director for Steelcase, demonstrates how the new Repl chair is adjustable from a seated position while giving a presentation on new products that will be introduced at NeoCon. **View photo gallery**

The bruising year of 2009 leads typically upbeat voices to be circumspect.

"It's still all hands on deck," Izzy's Saylor said. "I would still be cautiously optimistic." The company has consolidated plants, now down to two, and worked to absorb acquisitions.

Amid the upheaval, a new website to integrate the company's brands is in the works, and some very recent signs of growth are popping up.

Stelter agreed. "It's a fight for orders," he said.

E-mail Julia Bauer: jbauer@grpress.com and follow her on Twitter at twitter.com/jbauer5800

© 2010 MLive.com. All rights reserved.