

Preview Show - Chicago

Surprisingly positive

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The 2009 International Casual Furnishings Preview Show last week met or exceeded expectations of most manufacturers asked. Retail buyers kept their appointments and department store buyers were scouting the category so although attendance appeared lower than in recent years, the mood was surprisingly upbeat.

"Our drop-in business was almost equal to the number of appointments we had," said Dudley Flanders, president of Lloyd/Flanders. "The retailers who were here came looking for new products to invigorate their stores. Most of them had cleared out their inventory." With five new collections and 68 fabric choices, Lloyd/Flanders did not disappoint. "We're giving them a reason to have a better year because we all need it," Flanders said.

Summer Classics' showroom included not only its own introductions and SC Home indoor products, but the launch of partner company Parker James with 10 container-only collections.

Hanamint President Russ Sorenson was able to gather responses to its 17 new collections for its Hanamint, Casa Casual and Alu-Mont divisions from some bigger specialty dealers. The company now has time to make suggested changes before the Sept. 21-24 market. "We felt it was important to bring out new collections in this economy. With all the gloom and doom, we didn't want to contribute to it," Sorenson said.

Jamie Lowsky, president of Pride Family Brands, recalled the experience of dealers who began feeling the economic pinch after Memorial Day 2008 and attended last year's market still burdened with inventory in their warehouses. "Now, they're all coming in here very positive," Lowsky said. "Their warehouses are empty and they're relieved to have made it through the year. The traffic is down, but the people who are here are the people who should be here. They're studying the programs and fabrics. For the next show, they'll be that much ahead of the game."

At Whitecraft, Bill Herren related the experiences of Northwestern and northwestern Canada dealers who said they regretted running short of inventory this season and would be ordering more to avoid a repeat. A retailer who had bought one container for this season said he will order two containers for 2010. "They had a good season this year and they planned on having another one," Herren said.

"I think the people who decide they don't want to have inventory are going to miss out on sales," said Terri Lee Rogers, whose O.W. Lee showroom stayed busier than she had expected during the Preview Show. "Retailers don't like it (premarket) because they feel forced to come, but we're not forcing anyone to be here," she said. As a permanent showroom owner, she decided it made more sense for her company to participate.

"It's surprisingly upbeat because people put it into perspective," said Bob Gaylord, president of Agio International. A dozen new groups reflected the requests gathered during a dealer forum. Smaller-scaled collections to fit urban balconies were one result from retail feedback.

Telescope Casual's showroom stayed busy as it debuted five collections, one frame finish, two marine grade polymer finishes, 40 fabrics and six new colorways. Many other manufacturers showcased new collections or extensions to best-selling lines.

"I didn't see as many people, but I was able to spend more quality time with the ones who were here," Gloster President Eric Parsons said.

Alfresco Home President Joseph Cilio, whose company was one of the dozen manufacturers showing in temporary spaces on the Merchandise Mart's 8th floor, described customers as ones who were doing well enough in their business to be "willing to come out and see what we have. It's not that we've seen a ton of people, but the ones who have been here are quality retailers."

Debate continued about whether the casual furnishings market needs a premarket and when it should

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