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SPECIAL REPORT >

SINGAPORE: ON A MISSION IN THE BIG APPLE

Singapore: On A Mission In The Big Apple

Singapore Mozaic members and designers went on a business mission trip to New York to experience first-hand the retail and design trends in the Big Apple. Furniture Furnishing Export, International reports on some of the observations made from the International Contemporary Furniture Fair and learning points taken from a seminar by Joseph Carroll, publisher of Furniture/Today.

By Ong Hong Tat



From May 15-22, 2008, Singapore Mozaic members such as HTL International, Four Star Industries and Star Furniture took part in a design mission to New York, US. The trip was organised by SPRING Singapore, Singapore Furniture Industries Council (SFIC) and International Enterprise (IE) Singapore. Singapore Mozaic is an industry brand developed to differentiate Singapore furniture from international competition and is an initiative spearheaded by the three organisations. Also present at the mission were Singapore designers and design companies such as Moodoo Designs, The Life Shop and more.

“The mission will provide a good avenue for marketing opportunities and potential partnerships. Missions like this will help to heighten the companies understanding of new markets and open doors to greater opportunities. Most importantly, we hope that Singaporean companies will be inspired to integrate design in to their business strategies. SPRING will continue to help Singapore furniture enterprises upgrade their business and design capabilities and work closely with SFIC and IE Singapore to raise the profile of Singapore furniture overseas,” said Kee Ai Nah, Director, Retail and Furniture, SPRING

Singapore. SPRING is the enterprise development agency for growing innovative companies and fostering a competitive SME sector.

The objectives of the learning mission were to:

- Attend the International Contemporary Furniture Fair (ICFF) and study furniture retail concepts in New York.
- Understand the US furniture market and explore possibilities for market penetration.
- Meet potential buyers and learn about their requirements for business transactions.
- Interact with international designers and facilitate future possible partnership and collaboration between them and Singapore furniture designers and manufacturers.
- Establish the ICFF's relevance to Singapore Mozaic.

The International Contemporary Furniture Fair

The ICFF is North America's top showcase for contemporary furniture designs and lifestyle concepts. American companies make up 48 percent of the exhibitors, with the rest coming from 38 countries such as Austria, Italy, Philippines and China. Designers, architects and buyers predominantly from the US congregate at the ICFF. Major buyers such as Wal-Mart and Crate & Barrel comprise 30 percent of the visitors.

Products at the ICFF are organised by country segments rather than products. The showcase is diverse – from carpets, wall coverings to outdoor and residential furniture. Booth designs at the ICFF tend towards open-concept layouts and a clean, simple presentation. ICFF's booths contrast with other shows such as IMM Cologne and Furniture China in Shanghai, which tend to feature more structured and enclosed booths.



The delegation also met up with ICFF organizers, George Little Management (GLM) to discuss the relevance of their fair for Singapore Mozaic. GLM pointed out the possibility of a Singapore Pavilion consisting of design-led companies and furniture designers. There are only two Asian pavilions in the ICFF – Thailand and The Philippines. Due to the design nature of the fair, the ICFF would be more relevant to Singapore's design-centric furniture companies rather than the mass manufacturers.

Indeed, commenting on the mission, Neo Sia Meng, Vice President of SFIC and Executive Director at Four Stars Industries, said: "It's paramount that our local designers are given opportunities to network overseas and explore international markets. The mission and the

furniture fair that we will visit together with our young designers and our design-centric companies will provide a good avenue for marketing opportunities and potential partnerships.” The SFIC was established in 1981 as the official representative body of Singapore’s furniture industry. Its primary role is to promote the interests of its members and the Singapore furniture industry.

Marketing To The US

Joseph Carroll, publisher of Furniture/Today and editorial advisor of Furniture & Furnishing Export, International, presented a seminar titled ‘How to market to the US’ during the delegation’s seven-day visit to New York. According to Carroll, the US furniture market was worth about US\$90 billion in 2006. This figure excludes sales of furniture from nonfurniture retailers such as Wal-Mart, Macy’s and Target.

In his seminar, Carroll added that companies interested in the US market needed to establish their target customer profiles, understand customers’ expectation and needs, as well as develop a unique look and presentation for their products. He also suggested niche areas where Singapore companies could explore such as furniture for housing home theatre systems and healthcare furniture, areas where US companies have yet to gain a competitive advantage.

Apart from assessing their own internal operations, the delegation also learnt about the details of exporting and working with their US counterparts. For example, US buyers prefer to deal with companies with a US presence. Companies will fare better if they have a representative office with a contact person for the buyers’ convenience. While the US is still a huge market, companies hoping to enter should conduct thorough research and obtain a good understanding of the market and import regulations. In this area, an experienced US consultant can help Singapore companies navigate business rules and provide focal guidelines on suitable market segments and channels. Carroll pointed out that existing Singapore companies already exporting to the US market might be a useful information resource for those who want to do the same.



Cautioning the delegation, Carroll advised companies interested in the US market to take a long-term view and encouraged a thorough, well-planned approach. Companies should bear the future in mind and not commit hastily to exclusive contracts with buyers which could restrict potential future growth and expansion in the US market.

Understanding The US market

Delegates learnt that the US market values a different aesthetic than the Asian one. Uneven surfaces, knots and discolouration on wooden furniture may be well received by the New Yorkers. Such looks are popular as they bring out the individuality of each piece of furniture.

Keeping abreast of trends, delegates learnt that the season's colours leaned toward natural tones such as brown and orange. In addition, black lacquered furniture is also popular with New Yorkers for its modern, contemporary look. In pursuing trendy, up-to-date designs, delegates were also reminded that colours and designs change with the seasons: good furniture design should be able to stand the test of time.

Oriental-inspired details are popular with New Yorkers, particularly among the young professionals living in the bustling cities. Designers and companies can capitalise on Singaporean culture and their Asian roots in their new product designs to appeal to US consumers. An East-meets-West design aesthetic may be able to provide a strong competitive advantage for Singapore furniture companies to gain a foothold in the US market.