

money•sme spotlight

Designs on Italian furniture market

Six companies bound for Milan trade fair to showcase local flair

By FRANCIS CHAN

SIX furniture companies are shrugging off falling consumer demand to venture overseas to showcase the group's products.

The firms - Air Division, Getz Bros & Co, Koda, Office Planner, Star Furniture Industries and Exit Design - are exhibiting their collections for, hopefully, an army of global buyers at the 48th Salone Internazionale del Mobile trade fair in Milan, starting today.

The president of the Singapore Furniture Industries Council (SFIC), Mr Andrew Ng, hopes the local firms will make a positive impact in Italy despite disappointing returns from a similar trade fair in Germany earlier this year.

"With the current economic slowdown, we are a little cautious...but at the same time, we are positive that we will achieve encouraging results and I am confident that our Singaporean

'never-say-die' attitude will shine through," said Mr Ng.

The firms are exhibiting in Milan under the Singapore Mozaic initiative, a Government-backed programme started by the SFIC with the support of International Enterprise (IE) Singapore and Spring Singapore.

SFIC, Spring and DesignSingapore Council are also joining forces to lead a study mission to the 12th SaloneSatellite, which runs during the Milan event.

The SaloneSatellite is an annual showcase for new designs and ideas by architects and students of industrial design under the age of 35.

It has become a must-see for furniture industry professionals and manufacturers.

Visitors at SaloneSatellite can expect to see cutting-edge pieces by designers from local firms such as IdegOFF design playgroup, d.lab, Jarrod Lim Design, Air Design Group, Outofstock and Studio Jujū.

Mrs Kee Ai Nah, director of retail, furniture, textile and apparel division at Spring, said the move was to encourage and nurture young local designers through opportunities to meet and

learn from their European counterparts.

"It is heartening that Singapore Mozaic and some young designers are able to maintain their presence at Salone Internazionale del Mobile and Salone Satellite this year," added Mrs Kee.

"It is also timely that more Singapore furniture companies are taking steps to become design-centric and several are participating in the first design-focused mission led by Spring."

Now in its second year, Singapore Mozaic has emerged as a brand name representing local furniture companies and the collective products, services and expertise they can offer customers.

It helped 18 companies exhibit at imm cologne 2009 in January.

Exhibitors from Singapore Mozaic and other key industry players at the German event achieved total confirmed sales of \$8.3 million, with an additional \$7.2 million worth of business under negotiation.

However, SFIC said last month that overall sales and deals under negotiation at imm cologne fell 25 per cent compared with last year.

But it still expects the Singapore furniture industry forecast of \$77.3 million in expected sales of furniture from imm cologne 2009 to be achieved over the course of the year.

SFIC said such an outlook means there is no suggestion that local firms should cut back their overseas ventures.

Mr Tan Soon Kim, deputy director of business and lifestyle services at IE Singapore, said there are still "pockets of opportunities" even in such challenging times as buyers seek quality supplies.

"Our companies offer a compelling proposition to both trade buyers and end consumers with its diversified production bases, strong fundamentals and superior offerings," said Mr Tan. "Our trademark reliability and consistency in supplying to buyers offer an added assurance to the way business is concluded in such times."

Downturn or not, furniture bosses like Koda managing director James Koh believes design will be key for local companies trying to gain a foothold in an international market.

"It's crunch time now - everybody is hungry, people are trying their best to capture market share by getting into a price war but that is not the way go," said Mr Koh.

"I think one needs to capture a market by differentiation instead and getting the design right for a particular market and strong branding where people can tell you apart from the rest."

The SFIC's Mr Ng is also optimistic: "We remain upbeat that, with our combined efforts, the Singapore furniture industry will be able to weather the challenges ahead and emerge even better and stronger."

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