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The Monday Morning Quarterback • November 5, 2007

MMQB
THE BUSINESS OF THE OFFICE FURNITURE INDUSTRY



Greenbuild 2007

Office Furniture makers loom large at exhibition this week

Furniture is where the people meet the building

Contract manufacturers come to the Greenbuild show to learn from other companies.

By Rob Kirkbride

There's no hotter topic in the contract furniture industry than the green revolution.

Maybe that's why Greenbuild 2007, which will fill every inch of the west building at McCormick Place in Chicago later this week, has become so important to the office furniture industry.

A quick scan of the show floor shows just how big Greenbuild is to contract manufacturers. Flooring company Shaw Industries has the largest booth in the show — 50 feet by 50 feet. Herman Miller is nearby, in one of the most prominent areas of the show floor with its booth — 20 feet by 40 feet.

From flooring companies like Bentley Prince Street and Milliken Contract to manufacturers like Haworth, Steelcase, Teknion, HON and Knoll, the contract industry is dominating the show put on each year by the U.S. Green Building Council.

What started as a show in Austin, Texas with about 2,000 attendees has blossomed into a massive conference with more than 20,000 expected.

Just how important is Greenbuild? Former President Bill Clinton will deliver the keynote address Wednesday morning.

Greenbuild also is three days of speakers and educational sessions; LEED workshops and hands-on training; local green building tours; design charrettes and networking events; and the massive exhibit hall.

Greenbuild's exhibit hall sold out nearly a year in advance. There are 800 booths displaying the newest green building technologies, products and services.

Paul Murray, director of environmental affairs and safety at Herman Miller said Greenbuild is a great place to show the company's environmentally

sensitive products to its customers.

"There are a lot of designers coming to the show to learn about LEED," he said. "This is a great chance for us to interact with those customers and listen to their concerns.

"We stay active with the USGBC so that helps us stay connected with our customers. Herman Miller continues to show that we are a company committed to the legacy of building green buildings," Murray said.

In addition to showing its Convia modular electrical infrastructure, My Studio Environments cubicles, The Be Collection of workspace accessories and enhancement to the Celle chair, Herman Miller will introduce its second sustainability report at the show.

Entitled "A Better World," the report measures the company's progress toward meeting economic, social and environmental objectives during its fiscal 2007 year.

"For us, contributing to a better world takes many forms, including environmental advocacy, corporately-sponsored and individual volunteerism, and financial support to great causes," said Herman Miller President and CEO Brian Walker. "We believe building a better world should be every person's goal, and every company's."

Murray said building green is not only the right thing to do, it also makes business sense.

"The market is growing," he said. "It's becoming rare that a quote doesn't have questions in it about the environment. Both the knowledge and expectations are growing at the same exponential growth rate.

"Every time you open the newspaper, you read something about climate change,



whether it's a contaminated site that's been cleaned up or global warming."

While the public is just waking up to environmental problems, the design community has recognized them for years, Murray said. "Architects and interior designers have always been ahead of the curve," he said.

Kimball Office participated in the last Greenbuild in Denver, which had about 10,000 attendees. And the company will be in Chicago this week for Greenbuild as well.

"I think it has grown substantially," said Douglas Prickett, director of sustainable design. "This year's Greenbuild is going to be huge. You can witness what's going on in your own life. The topic of sustainability has just taken off in the media. You can't turn on a television set without hitting a show that's talking about sustainability.

"I think this topic, in all its versions, has just grown tremendously."

Blame it on the Baby Boomers, Prickett said. The Baby Boom generation grew up in the '60s and came up with green events like Earth Day. Now the Baby Boomers have the money and power to promote environmental causes with vigor.

"This is just a natural evolution," he said. "It's a snowball that's turned into an avalanche."

Greenbuild is also about learning. Contract manufacturers come to the show to learn from other companies.

Ken Brandsen, manager of facilities design and management at Haworth, said there are few building projects out there that don't specify green or environmentally sensitive materials. "Greenbuild has become the premier place to have the broadest conversations about the environment. We understand that and we want to share with others what we are doing," he said.

Greenbuild has become a source for new environmental thinking as well. Ideas like Biomimicry have spread and gained acceptance at Greenbuild.

So why is the furniture industry so tied to Greenbuild? Furniture is where the people meet the building, said Mitch Boucher, project manager for Haworth's new headquarters, which is expected to be LEED certified.

"This industry has been a driver and at the forefront (of the environmental movement) for years," he said. ↑