

Trends, Development And Technology

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This year was the first year in about 12 years that I had the opportunity to visit Interzum and LIGNA in Germany. These two biennial events are the global show cases for the furniture and panel industries to exhibit the latest in terms of Design, Technology, Innovation and Trends. I am not able to compare this year's events to those held in 2015 and earlier, but I can compare them to similar events held in China and the rest of Asia.

The first and most noticeable difference is that the Europeans are still the best in organisation and presentation. In Asia probably the only venue that comes close in terms of quality is Singapore, I do however need to make a caveat that improvements made in China are astounding and will probably rival Europe very soon. In terms of size China has probably already exceeded that of Germany!

Getting down to business; the Europeans know how to be creative in how they present their material, machines or services. When you visit an exhibitors booth, it is usually uncluttered, clean, and fresh. The visitor is not tripping over random machines, samples and promotional material, rather he is guided through the companies vision and unique selling proposition and then greeted by a knowledgeable sales person. Many of the large European exhibitors put more emphasis on the personal interaction and relationship, with many Stands resembling Restaurants with the important Bar option. A visitor would typically report to a central reception just like at a hotel to make an inquiry for a particular product and market. Within minutes a Salesman would come, usually with iPad on hand, whence you would be escorted to a table and offered food and drink whilst you discuss the details of your inquiry. For me this was a very clear demonstration on how sales at least in Europe has developed. The Europeans cannot sell purely on price and specifications alone because in 99% of the cases the Asian manufacturers would out do them! Now the European emphasis is on Quality, Service, Reputation and the 'Customer Experience'.

For the MDF and panel business I didn't really see anything 'new and exciting' most of the new developments were incremental and only builds or improves upon existing technology. The only possible exception was the concept displayed by Siempelkamp showing the use of Ultra-sonic technology to break down wood fibres as a replacement of the traditional Refiner or Defibrator. The potential here is significant in terms of energy saving, the technology is still in its infancy pending wider commercial application.

Significantly for the MDF industry and the wood panel industry in general is the strong trend towards 'Light Weight Panels'. The concept of using light weight panels for furniture is actually an old one and this method has been widely used for many years in Japan. The difference now is that the rest of the world and especially Europe is beginning to wake up to the advantages of this build idea. I was told that IKEA has set a target that in the future no consumer 'Flat Pack' should weigh more than 15kg, the advantages are very clear and obvious. Light weight panels will mean less material usage thus saving on the worlds valuable timber resources, lower transportation costs, easier assembly of RTA furniture by consumers, 'greener credentials' in terms of recycling and these panels can be 'engineered' for specific purposes (heat insulation, sound insulation, fire retardant, etc.).

Another "trending" concept for the RTA furniture sector is the use of 'tool-less' assembly and construction technology. Patented designs are being offered under license from Europe and the USA which claim to simplify and speed up the assembly of RTA furniture.

From what I can observe the Europeans still dominate the market and process for high net worth materials and furniture and even as there domestic markets shrink new affluent customers will emerge in the developing countries to keep these businesses busy. What was missing in Europe was how we are to satisfy the exponential growth in the demand for entry level and middle income furnishings and fittings? For this market the exhibitors in Asia still rule the day! ☺