

STILL MORE OF THE SAME

Cologne/Germany- Mai 2013.

In 1981 I have attended my first personal Interzum show. Back in those days, the furniture world was a very exciting industry to work for. The transition from traditional furniture to modern type furniture was in full progress and a series of very dynamic actors were growing fast by addressing the new needs of the industry for function and design. Some of today's "monsters" of the industry squatting large surfaces in Cologne at the 2013 Interzum edition have seeded in those days and are now ripping the rewards.

In 1981, I was driving the first Volkswagen Passat as a company car with a pile of Michelin maps on my lap; I was introducing the first ERP from Nixdorf to manage the business I was working for, whilst the visit reports were still done on carbon copy blocks. I had to wait until 1986 to get my first Alcatel mobile phone, a heavy waste-bin large chunk of technology, which stayed in the car during the customer visits, because of its sheer size.

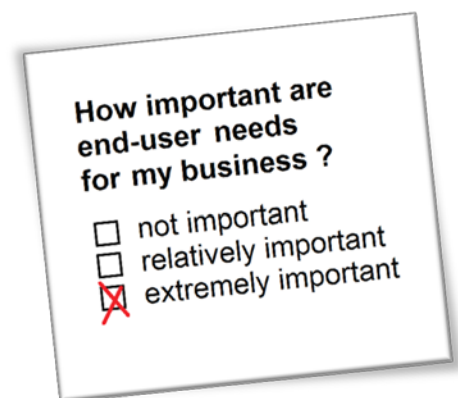
Nowadays, I travel light with my ultrathin laptop, which communicates with my sexy smartphone in my trouser pocket. I can do reports on the go, stay in permanent contact with my customers and the tools at my disposal increase my personal efficiency manifold, whilst enabling me to deliver quickly measurable results. The high technology of my car has taken over most of the attention dragging activities and it is bringing me safely, precisely and comfortably to every place, at a fraction of past times petrol consumption.

Looking back at thirty two years in the furniture supply industry, I feel uncomfortable with the progress done.

Hinges are still made in the spirit of the Heinze patent, just that we have increased the life span and added damping. Drawers are now hiding the slides in a chunky side skirt and are full extension and damped. Spring loaded lifters for flaps have left the place to smoother systems with damping.

Pull-outs are still pull-outs and their closing is smoothed to a point, where they need now damping. Swivelling solutions are replaced by jiggling solutions in trying to win the space in the

corners and their movement is dampened. All these solutions have added extra-cost to the final product and are giving a loose sense of comfort to the mid-level and upper market segment. I just wonder how much of the real needs of the end-consumers are currently fulfilled with these features, and how much of the stuff supplied is the result of an incestuous development process.



In my work as consultant for market oriented business and product development in the furniture industry, I am amazed to see how little the real needs of end-consumers often count in the thinking process of furniture distribution, manufacturing and their supply industry. In this edition of Interzum, some exhibitors were showing some interesting features at last. I guess it is really more than time to understand, what customers are looking for, what are really their problems to be solved and start to ensure that the act of buying furniture is generating the same excitement, as the one of choosing a car, a smartphone or the latest gizmo. There is absolutely no reason that unexcited and unwilling men have to be dragged by their partners into discount focusing furniture stores. And there is absolutely no reason, that real needs expressed by the end-consumers are reduced to some gimmicky features or to the look only. It is time to stop doing more of the same and let customer focused marketing thinking taking over from engineers.

The industry is challenged by the current economic crisis. It's a unique occasion to rethink the business we have the privilege to work in.

Roger Reichert



DESIGN TENDENCIES

If there was still a doubt after the latest furniture shows in Europe, now it is clear. Wood is back! The wood industry is surfing on the need for cosiness and the new cocooning. Wood is influencing the look of furniture again. It was about time, after years of clinical minimalism, that some warmth was turning back into our homes. For sure, the wood of my Louis Philippe sideboard and the wood of new surface materials have very often little in common. Up to date structuring and finishes are replacing the flush looks of the past, adding a haptic experience to the optical one.



Copyright Petr Kratochvil

This trend allows also the printed surfaces industry to surf on a new wave with tri-dimensional surfaces hiding the technological magic of rendering the wood look truer than life.



Copyright Nathalie Du Pasquier

On the more modern end, digital printing is giving a lot of flexibility to the furniture designer, by allowing to influencing not only the shape of the cabinets, but also the spatial perception. And small production lots down to 1-piece series are giving new possibilities to match the consumer taste and surf on tendencies launched for example by the fashion and electronics industry.

TECHNOLOGY TRENDS

Still many so-called innovations are navel centred and it is difficult to understand which needs of the end-consumers are addressed - a part maybe a loosely perceived quality and comfort appeal.

Mechanical push-open drawers with damped closing are starting to work nearly like they should, with very little non-intuitive behaviour left. A little "push" here, and these solutions might put an end to the electrical one-touch solutions.

Houses are not becoming larger and the main vocation of furniture as space management tool is starting to get some interesting answers. Beautifully crafted innerware with really clever day-to-day helpers were showing the way in the booth of some large companies, but also in

the offering of some challengers. Specialising the pull-outs and offering dedicated solutions is the new trend.

Ergonomics was another subject and size or posture adaptive solutions were on offer to move some components or even complete series of kitchen units. Electrical servo-solutions aiming at the very high end of the market are still presented in many companies, often more as a proof of innovation-capability, than for real volume sales. Remote control actuation presented on some openings seems a bit out of touch with practical use, but brings enormous show-room effect.

Lighting is quickly making the shift into All-LED Technology and touch sensors, proximity sensors and deformation sensors are entering the furniture industry.

FOOD FOR BRAINS

Special Edition Interzum Show 2013



Some manufacturers have also managed to take away the “cheap” appeal of point to point LED, by smoothing the look and getting the light to glow behind glare free screens in glass or translucent plastics.

Very little battery powered solutions are taking away the hassle of electrifying the cabinets and with improved battery technology now available at a good price, there seems to be more to do in that area



By courtesy of the designer of the ion-lithium battery powered lighting for furniture

On the different ways to open cabinets, dampened hinges are now present in all major product ranges, even if the tsunami-scale conversion of the market to this feature didn't occur on the ground so far.

Sliding doors are now dampened in all directions and on all doors. Very few flush sliding door systems are joining the few on offer, the price tag being still the greatest hindrance for this undeniably appealing opening. Omnibus opening is trying a comeback with a nicer look and finish, but is still far from discrete.

On the combat side of door-lifters, the war is now raging between a few heavy investors and at least some of the products are becoming a little less scary for feminine users and a bit more discrete. At last, non-invasive technology is pointing the nose in upper cabinets.

The inner life of drawers is getting more and more attention and plenty of solutions are helping to put some order in “stuff”. Order in bathroom drawers seems still not at the top of the agenda of many manufacturers and the few solutions visible were sticking out of the crowd.

Some multimedia solutions showed on different booth are demonstrating that the iPhone and its Android emulations are finding their way into the furniture world, but few systems on offer were really convincing. There is still some way to go there as well.

OUTLOOK

The 2013 edition of Interzum in Cologne has shown that the furniture supply industry is still very dynamic and capable of attracting nearly 60.000 professional visitors from all over the world in a few days. Obviously the stands of the big guys were crowded most of the time, letting some more space to stroll along the halls and identify some emerging actors. German, Austrian and Italian suppliers are still the major magnets of this exhibition. Chinese suppliers, Turkish manufacturers and others are joining “The Club” in a difficult moment for several markets.

For sure, the quality of the leader's offering and their standing in the industry made them the inevitable booths to visit for furniture manufacturers and hardware distributors. But also the challengers, with their price conscious approach and some reverse innovation have attracted customers from the large volume market. And as in the eighties, the coming decade might reserve some surprises with some daring newcomers launching some disruptive solutions. No time to sleep for none of us.

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