

Trends and developments in seating design

If the steady stream of new products still being launched almost on a daily basis is anything to go by, seating manufacturers are determined to remain competitive and ready to win new business as Interior Channels has discovered

The focus on employee health and well-being is clearly the hot topic in seating design. As we highlighted in our review of Orgatec 2008 (see Interior Channels November 2008 issue), that is evident from the new focus on backrests designed to almost cradle or hug the back, while allowing for greater movement.

The most talked about backrest has to be the Herman Miller Embody. But one question on many lips is - will it prove to be as successful as the Aeron chair? Priced at around £1,500, mega sales volumes may not be on the cards in the current economic climate.

The simple elegance of Eve from Nurus



It depends on whether you count success as market share and numbers sold regardless of margins; or keep to a firm business survival model and count success as net margins and the number of zeros on the bottom line of the annual accounts. A glance at Herman Miller's latest financial report showing a reasonable healthy bottom line with net margins at circa 32 percent. A good model for others to follow perhaps. [www.hmeurope.com]

Appealing to physical needs

Seating that appeals not only to physical needs but emotional needs of employees is a hard concept to accept, but it is certainly a major trend in the new touchy, feely world of design. For Klöber, this manifests itself in the new Itera which has been designed to create an island of intimacy through a high backrest. The objective is to convey a feeling of security and privacy in the back office or when engaged in confidential consultations. [www.klober.com]

For Designmatics, appealing to the senses is also an important aspect of chair design, as Sonic chair proves. It is designed to appeal to several senses thanks to its inbuilt stereo headphones, 20in touchscreen and sockets for your recharging your mobile phone or laptop. Ideal for listening to mood music to calm your nerves before an interview; or viewing a presentation to jog your memory before a meeting. [www.designmatics.de]

A shift from posture to movement

But static seating is not the right option for the working environment. Jorgen Josefsson of RH Chairs says: "Ergonomics for office workers has traditionally been seen as an issue of posture. This is rooted in legislation and the flawed idea that it is up to employers to provide the right 'ergonomic' equipment; carry out appropriate training; and generally mitigate the effects of poor posture. Now the focus is shifting towards

movement, which is both more positive and more in touch with modern management". [www.rhchairs.co.uk]

Motoo Kumagai of Kokuyo agrees about movement and says: "A chair, like our 2000 series, is the workplace product most connected to the human. I mean that literally in that we are in contact with it; it shapes itself to us and moves with us. It's no surprise that the majority of new workplace icons of the past 15 years have been chairs. [www.kokuyo.co.jp/english]

A more relaxed meeting culture is the trend that has led to the development of HÅG Sideways: "This is a new meeting room chair that allows you to sit comfortably no matter how you twist or turn," says head of R&D Hilde Britt Mellbye. "A unique feature of the chair is the armrest that curves all the way around the back so that you can rest your arm when sitting sideways. The seat is also designed so that it is equally comfortable regardless of the way you are sitting". [www.hag.com]

At the end of the day, in today's commercial environment, it is likely to be the basics of performance, design, comfort and value that will drive sales. New task seating such as Dash from Senator [www.senator.co.uk] and Brant from the Comfort seating portfolio from Morris [www.morrisfurniture.co.uk] are likely to be among the popular choices.

Seating for reassurance

Seating designed to project an image of comfortable reassurance in reception areas is likely to be in popular demand in banks and other financial institutions who need to overcome customer fear and mistrust. A contender for that market would be Sven's new HB3 reception seating. Similar to the trend in task seating, the backs of the chairs and sofas is designed to be 'on show', maintaining an attractive appearance from any angle. [www.sven.co.uk]

A focus on the design of seat backs is in, too, for home as well as office. Designed by Fritz Frenkler and Anette Ponholzer, Eve from Nurus is a good example of simple elegance designed for both home and office use. Most importantly for an increasing number of concerned buyers, it cares for the environment with its recyclable components. [www.nurus.com]

With its unusual backrest construction, Vitra claims that the AC 4, designed by Antonio Citterio, blazes a new trail. The technical features are neither put on display, nor are they hidden beneath foam padding. The structural sophistication in the backrest allows for a flexible range of movement, but is visually concealed with meticulous detailing. It is actually divided into three sections with distinct internal functions: The lumbar zone, which supports the lower back, transitions into a flexible



zone for the upper back to sink into, followed by a section with stronger support for the shoulders. What one sees is elegant simplicity; what one feels is comfort. [www.vitra.com]

The secret of survival

With such a wide range of designs and developments to choose from, what is the secret to survival in what is likely to become an ever more competitive game as everyone chases new business? "In a word, diversity", says Stephen Russell of Pledge. "Don't confine your business and your energy to do more of what you are presently doing, but look to expand your markets by offering new and different services and products. This will not only open your business to new opportunities and revenue streams, but the effect will be to stabilize and protect your current core business. We strongly believe at Pledge that our diversity into new markets, without prejudicing our traditional markets has set us in good stead for the future".

He went onto explain the Pledge survival business model: "To ensure long term success as both a manufacturer and as a supplier to the trade, we embarked on a radical development programme in terms of product, customer markets and accreditation three years ago. "This has opened up a whole new market to us in terms of government business





Morris Brant



Interstuhl's
Champ is due for
launch in the
spring

and those who are looking for products with an environmental angle. Coupled with our ongoing product range and brand awareness development in our traditional channels, this has opened up many new revenue streams".

"As a manufacturer in the true sense of the word, we have also offered our services to the wider office furniture manufacturing community with considerable success. While it would be unfair to name names, our client bases are considerable and surprising. [www.pledgechairs.co.uk]

David Rand of Morris Office adds: "It's clearly a difficult market, but there are opportunities out there for the right firms and the right products. Some businesses that are actually doing pretty well. They tend to be the ones who never stopped developing their business into new areas, either with new products or services or into new markets.

Choosing a road less travelled can make all the difference. We're fortunate to have just launched several major new ranges; won significant contracts in markets that have held up well; and changed our business from within to offer better services through dealers and develop stronger relationships with our main partners. [www.morrisoffice.co.uk]

One company that is proving to be very successful diversifying into new markets is Sky Creations. Initially asked to supply conference seating and tables, for the Ricoh Arena, one of the Midlands' premier venues and Home to Coventry City FC., MD John Hoath was then asked to supply contemporary seating for the Singers Bar and Bistro. "Once the furniture was delivered, the response was extremely favourable and further discussions led to the sponsorship of one of the Ricoh Arena's suites, just off the main reception area, which has now been re-named the Sky Creations Lounge".

Ricoh Arena CEO says: "The colourful, comfortable seating is a fantastic addition for busy delegates taking a rest during conferences and exhibitions. The Stella conference and banqueting seating with the seat support is especially comfortable and looks great in the different fabrics we

chose". The not-so secret ingredient is the ground-breaking ProBax technology which improves the postural position of the seat occupant, significantly enhancing comfort by maintaining the natural curvature of the spine. "Sky Creations has an exclusive licence for the ProBax technology in the conference seating sector in the UK and we were delighted to offer this revolutionary seating to the Ricoh Arena", says John Hoath. [www.skycreations.co.uk]

Never be afraid of price

For Dauphin, survival is planning for the future, with continued investment in new products. "With our Blackburn factory closed and, with that, the Trendline range, we no longer had a synergy with a significant number of dealers", says Nicholas Podolier. "We now focus on the middle and, selectively, the upper end of the market where there is more opportunity. We want dealers to see us as a partner who can bring a new dimension to their business; not just another supplier". A showroom has therefore been opened in Clerkenwell right next to Vitra and opposite Boss Design.

Survival advice for dealers is "Aim high and never be frightened of price. With a new duty of care where employers need to provide their people with the right tools for the job, we can all learn from Herman Miller. Without question, it has raised the bar by introducing the Embody chair at a price which is seen by many as astronomic and unimaginable. But they will have done their homework and recognised a new demand and need for increasingly more complex, but more effective, seating solutions. It gives me great confidence to go out into the marketplace with our new products". [www.dauphinuk.com]

Customers still want choice

"Despite this economic downturn we find ourselves in, it is worth remembering that customers still want choice", says Martin Long, MD of Interstuhl Ltd. "And more now than ever they want to know that they're getting good value. At Orgatec, I believe we showed tremendous confidence with the preview and introduction of six new ranges. A few months later it would be easy to say "shelve them" but that would be ridiculously short-termist. The companies that survive recession are those that have the foresight to see through the plans that have been made and to keep visible and in touch with the relevant distribution channels.

"With the introduction of products like Hero and Champ we are taking good value, unique and well engineered products to market. The market may be slightly smaller than 12 months ago, but that doesn't make them any the less demanding; if anything the opposite is true. Turning off the product development tap now, just like with marketing, is just turning off future revenue."



Sven HB3