Bill McLoughlin
Editor-in-chief

Did Facebook's Zuckerberg just fire a warning shot across the furniture industry's bow?

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's recent announcement that the social media giant would make its new Camera Effects augmented reality (AR) platform available to outside developers signals a quantum leap forward in the implementation and dissemination of that technology.

The announcement drew widespread press coverage as it clearly signals that augmented reality is a technology whose time has come. However, an element of the presentation that garnered less attention may have even greater implications for the furniture industry.

In demonstrating the various applications for AR, which Zuckerberg sees evolving from its current smartphone-based platform to wearable technology that consumers can access through glasses or implanted contact lenses, the Facebook founder demonstrated a use that could impact the future of furniture design.

Imagine, he noted, that instead of watching a physical TV, consumers could view all "television" programming virtually, meaning through a pair of glasses or contacts. OK, let's imagine that.

If you're a maker of television sets, that prospect has to be somewhat unnerving. And if you're in the business of making furniture to house those televisions, it might be prudent to start thinking what the future of "entertainment" furniture might look like.

This evolution is already underway. Wall-mounted flat screens and streaming media have all but negated the traditional entertainment console. In similar fashion, the decline of tower-based desktop computers in favor of laptops, tablets and smartphones have altered the nature and function of office furniture.

That's a significant amount of floor space and a hefty number of SKUs that are either gone, pared back or in need of redesign.

This is not to suggest that in the next year or two, office and entertainment furniture or big-screen TVs are going to disappear. Change is rarely that abrupt.

It should, however, be a wakeup call that technology is not simply changing how consumers shop for furniture. It is changing what they buy and how they use it.

It's not enough to add a USB port and believe you've made furniture design au courant. (Apple last week was granted a patent for wireless charging technology that could enable a WiFi signal to also charge a phone.) Instead it is time for a look at the future of furniture's role in the American home.

It can be challenging in an industry as fragmented and prone to imitative flattery as this one to achieve the directional unity and open information sharing required of such an effort.

The alternative, however, could prove even more challenging ... existentially so.

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Franklin re-engineers motion

Recline technology, seat spring free furniture from limitations

By Erin Berg
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HIGH POINT — It's not easy for a company with the history and legacy of Franklin Corp. to think outside the box, but with the unveiling of a completely redesigned seating system and recline mechanism at the recent High Point Market, the 47-year-old domestic upholstery manufacturer flexed its innovation muscle.

Franklin's Ultralign recline technology and Ultrarc seat spring could be considered revolutionary in motion furniture because together they embody re-engineering that frees motion furniture from the limitations that make it vulnerable to objections in terms of overall seating comfort, seat depth and width, service and delivery issues compared to stationary furniture.

"We spent two years developing what we feel is a game changer in the motion industry. Ultralign Recline Technology effectively addresses long-standing limitations in motion while satisfying three customers — the consumer first, the dealer next and the internal customer (the manufacturer)," said Chuck Tidwell, vice president of merchandising and product development at Franklin.

"The introduction of Ultralign to dealers was a slam (10)

The Ultralign recline technology was introduced in five motion groups at High Point Market, ranging from $799 to $999 retail for a manual sofa.

Thomasville's new take on Hemingway line gets modern twist

By Thomas Russell
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HIGH POINT — The latest Hemingway collection at Thomasville, Havana Modern, features design inspiration from various aspects of old Havana where Hemingway frequented — and lived — between the late 1920s and the '50s, including his estate just 20 minutes outside the capital city.

The launch, which debuted at the recent High Point Market, occurs just as Cuba has begun to attract more tourists and visitors since the lifting of major travel restrictions in early 2015.

The 60-piece collection, which includes several sectional, sofa and chair frames, was designed by Jena Hall, who has visited the country twice, this past October and in 2007 as part of a mission trip.

Pieces have a number of mid-century-inspired designs inspired by Hemingway's years there and furniture seen in his residences there.

"Everybody is interested in Cuba and Hemingway's life there," Hall said in reference to the growing popularity of the country and interest in the Nobel-prize-winning author's history in Cuba.

The collection mixes several wood species including mahogany, walnut, maple and primavera veneers with materials such (34)

Natuzzi Italia plans for U.S. stores on fast track

By Powell Slaughter
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HIGH POINT — Italian leather powerhouse Natuzzi is "progressing rapidly" with its ambitious plans to open whole-home Natuzzi Italia stores in the United States and abroad.

"We're looking for good locations in new markets," said Chief Brand and Sales Officer Gianluca Pazzaglini during April High Point Market. "Right now we're concentrating on California, Florida, the Chicago area and the Tri-States."

The U.S. prototype store for the global Natuzzi Italia retail initiative held a grand opening in March. Designed by the Natuzzi Style Center in Italy, it reflects the evolution of the brand experience that Natuzzi Italia would like to deliver.

The location showcases collections in a 9,000-square-foot selling space, designed to blend the company's expanding lifestyle mix of living, dining and bedroom collections, featuring a range of color and fabrications. Accessories, rugs and lighting also are available, as well as free interior design services.

Two more Natuzzi Italia stores are just around the corner, with probable June openings in West Palm Beach, Fla., and Orange County, Calif.

Natuzzi is floating its new store concept — which calls for 8,000 to 10,000 square feet of selling space — with potential partners during its April-June dealer congress at its headquarters in Italy.

"It takes so long because we do the congress week by week, country by country," Pazzaglini said.

In addition to Natuzzi Italia upholstery, for the whole-home approach, Natuzzi partnered with select manufacturers in Italy for exclusive designs in other categories.

"We had to have suppliers who share our ethics, quality levels and eco-friendliness," Pazzaglini said. In addition, Natuzzi has partnerships with five designers from around the world to develop exclusive products.

Natuzzi's Gianluca Pazzaglini demonstrates the Re-Vive chair in the company's showroom.

Amazon

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$39.99 monthly fee for an unlimited number of listings as well as 15% on the product sale and 20% on the services, according to Brett Hobson, Amazon business development representative in the furniture category. He added that retailers can choose to roll their services into the product price and offer just one price to customers for that 15% fee. However, in that case, Amazon shoppers wouldn't see a menu of service options.

Making things easier

Hobson said the biggest and toughest objection to overcome that he's seen from furniture sellers during his career at Amazon is that they "don't have the capability or experience shipping out of their region.

"You've got your own crew. You offer white glove, but to put your 300-, 400-, 500-pound product in the hands of a third-party freight company is a little bit daunting, and at the end of the day, it doesn't always work because they're not going to put the same care and attention into that process as your own crew will," he said.

That's where the Amazon change comes in. The mandate that stores must ship nationwide will disappear, at least for product that weight 50 pounds or more. Stores, instead, will be able to use a geo-fencing tool that allows them to pick and choose the ZIP codes within their region they want to ship to. They can expand beyond their typical boundaries — to possibly encourage customers who may not have the ability to make a trip to the brick-and-mortar stores — but there's no pressure, he said.

"That's the ultimate promise of this," Hobson said. "We want to make it easier for you guys to provide the same customer services you've built your companies on and you pride yourselves on while reaching that massive customer base we've generated."

While Hobson said Amazon aims to make it easier for stores to participate on its marketplace, it's counting on gaining a new advantage, too — the ability to be more competitive in the heavy and bulky furniture category.

"It's safe to say Amazon is very competitive in most of the categories we compete in," Hobson said. "But in furniture, because we've kind of forced the seller's hand when it comes to the nationwide shipping component, you will see a lot of the brands you guys specialize in are on our site, but you might be shocked from time to time by the price points and how inflated they are.

"That' what I like most about this," he said. "We will be able to be very price competitive because you don't have to charge an extra $300 to $500 to cover your (shipping costs)."

At the meeting at FMG's High Point headquarters, retailers peppered Hobson and the other Amazon representatives there with questions such as: Will the shopper know they're buying from the store (yes); will stores be able to integrate their own financing options (not immediately); and can stores qualify for the coveted Amazon Prime (only if they can prove themselves capable of two-day delivery or stock their product in an Amazon fulfillment center).

Industry reaction

In a blog post and on a guest post on FurnitureToday.com, Carl Prindle said the real news is "that Amazon is doubling down on the brick-and-mortar model for furniture."

"Amazon has changed their hugely successful 3rd party seller program — just for furniture," said Prindle, CEO of industry e-commerce platform Blueport Commerce.

"That's a big deal. Other than a dalliance with local cell phone carriers ages ago, it's the first time they've allowed local listing and shipping. Furniture is the only category for which they've fundamentally changed how Amazon works."

Prindle said he's talked on and off with Amazon for some time and first spoke to company "about the potential of a geofenced marketplace model in 2002 and several times since."

"Their answer then and always has been 'maybe someday' and implicitly, I imagine, 'not if we don't have to,'" he said in his post.

The market presentation "suggests that today is that someday, and for now, they think furniture retailers do it better than they can."

FMG hosted the Amazon meeting, "simply to keep our members in the forefront of new developments that might affect the retail home furnishings industry," said Mike Herschel, executive director of the High Point-based buying group that includes many of the largest furniture store chains in the nation.

"Interest was extremely high," he said, as demonstrated by the questions, and "post-meeting comments were across the spectrum."

"Most FMG members will wait till Amazon representatives come back with a few more details to decide whether the 'buy local' initiative on the Amazon platform is right for them," Herschel added.

Barb Tronstein, co-owner of Gardner-White Furniture, the Auburn Hills, Mich.-based Top 100 company, was one of the FMG member attendees. Her initial take: "It bears further investigation.

"I have to really crunch some numbers," she said. "You don't have (salesperson) commission. You don't have the brick-and-mortar cost. But whether it makes sense is something I'm not willing to commit to right now."

Hemingway

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as stone and marble seen on the tops of wood pieces such as nightstands, cocktails and end tables. Mahogany veneers can be seen in sunburst patterns on a number of pieces, including a rectangular dining table that has an open late Art Deco-inspired base, the headboard of a wood panel bed and on the door of a chifferobe.

A trompe l'oeil detail in walnut, mahogany and maple is seen on the doors of a bunching curio cabinet that can be used as a dining room or library office piece.

The bleached primavera on a dining table top was inspired by the deck of a boat Hemingway owned that is still on display at his estate.

Other material elements include faux raffia seen on the drawer fronts of a three-drawer chest and acrylic accents such as finials on the posts of a canopy poster bed and the hardware of a companion nightstand.

This dining table is part of the new Ernest Hemingway collection at Thomasville, Havana Modern. It has a bleached primavera top and a splayed mid-century-inspired trestle base.

Dining chairs bear designs from the 1950s, when Cuba was a travel and gambling destination for many American tourists.

Hall said the collection is a way to rejuvenate the line in a way that would reflect how Hemingway might live today, capturing elements from both the period and from specific pieces he owned, yet updating them with a mix of classic deco and more modern design elements.