

Nothing ventured, nothing gained

Lane Venture wows at new High Point Market showroom, zeros in on sustainability and value

By Cinde W Ingram -- Casual Living, October 25, 2011



The company moved from the eighth floor of the IHFC to a more open, user-friendly space in the main wing situated along "outdoor row."

SLIMMED DOWN, STILL FASHIONABLE AND MORE sustainable describe Lane Venture's current profile.

The casual furniture company that opened nearly 40 years ago as Venture Furniture, a division of the Lane Company, later combined Venture's family room upholstery skills with those of fellow upholstery maker Hickory Tavern and contemporary dining manufacturer HTB as the company developed and narrowed its focus on wicker and rattan furniture. Nearing the end of its second decade, Lane Venture created WeatherMaster, pioneering drainable cushions and adding fully outdoor finishes to push wicker/rattan furniture further outdoors.

"I think the biggest thing is we have done is focus on product that retails," Lane Venture President Gary McCray said. "And the secondary part of that is what you see out there in the plant in terms of turning it in a week."

As it nears its 40s, Lane Venture shows off its quick turnaround time and the lean manufacturing process it adapted over the past couple of years inside its Conover, N.C., plant. Where better to show off than at this month's High Point Market.

Lane Venture moved into prime position last year by taking a first-floor showroom in the Main wing of the International Home Furnishings Center, moving from the much larger space it once held across from Lane on the eighth floor of the Commerce wing. Gone is the reception desk that occupied the front of the former showroom. The open access welcomes potential buyers to walk through and explore. Exhibiting near Brown Jordan, Veneman Collections, Barlow Tyrie, Janus et Cie, Summer Classics and Uwharrie Chair is helping to achieve a critical mass that elevates outdoor furniture in the High Point Market.

Sewers of custom-order cushions are located only steps away from the foam fill process. "It's gotten us in front of a lot of people who didn't know who we were or people who had a preconceived notion of what we do," said Zachary Bryant, VP of design and development. "We always had people come into the space on the eighth floor and they'd say, 'I didn't know you guys did all this. I thought you just did wicker.' The new showroom has made us much more visible."

Visitors now see a narrowed product selection, reflecting Lane Venture's movement away from indoor furniture and accessory lines that once included hand-painted chests.

"The fabric is important, but we don't get caught up in a theme," said Patti Frye, fabric merchandise manager. "In the past, we had dealers to come in and say 'I don't like those fabrics,' and they couldn't see past the fabrics or the accessories in the area" to notice the furniture and select fabrics for it that would work in their marketplaces.

"The focus now is more on the product as opposed to the display," McCray said. "It's a lot brighter than it used to be. We like to say: Where we were reflects where we were and where we are reflects where we're going. When you look at the lifestyle stores like Restoration Hardware and Crate & Barrel, they don't get hung up on the theme of the moment."

The new showroom draws lots of walk-by traffic now. "The designers come in and say 'Where have you been?'" Frye said.

"I think another thing our showroom does for us in the High Point Market is it gives us consistency," Bryant said. "Before on the eighth floor, every time you would come to market it was completely different in terms of where our product was, the themes that we had and the display we had it in. For those who didn't come to market every time and weren't able to follow that, it was easy to get lost. Hopefully over time, we'll become known for this kind of look and people will understand how to shop our product line and how to use it."

As part of its efforts to offer value to customers, Lane Venture worked during the downturn toward building a sustainable business model. Implementation of lean manufacturing practices at its Conover, N.C., plant included new performance metrics with an emphasis on increased communication and input from staff. In its Employees Dedicated to Growth and Excellence (EDGE) Program, for example, self-directed work group teams in each functional area meet daily to discuss and resolve quality, safety and production issues as well as generate ideas for improvements.



"Everybody is working toward the same goal," Plant Manager Darren Fox said. "We constantly try to improve the product and we work really hard to keep a good, even, steady flow through our plant."

As of the week before the Casual Market, workers had logged in 690 days without lost time to injury. The safety committee inspects the plant daily to make sure it stays as clean as possible.



Close, hand-finishing work helps achieve an antique appearance in new woven furniture. Recycling efforts also have gained focus. While the plant averaged 10 tons of waste per month last year, this year it had 75% less waste.

"We're making great progress as far as recycling," Fox said. "It's the right thing to do and also it saves money."

Fox noted the cell system of lean manufacturing and the way the plant has smoothly integrated handwork with automation. "We have a small group of people that does a tremendous amount of variety," Fox said. "With pressure on price points, we work hard to keep in the value in the product without having to raise the price."

Inventory is constantly moving out of the plant, with a typical five-day turnaround on product orders except upholstered products that require cut-and-sew handwork.

"To me, outdoor upholstery's major use is in those transition areas between indoors and outdoors," McCray said. "It's gradually working its way outdoors. It's a natural product for certain areas of the country, like in Southern California and Florida. We've seen a lot of enthusiasm for it there."

Watching the market turn from six or eight years ago when patio furniture stores flooded seas of cast aluminum furniture toward conversation groups with cushions and fabric has been an important transition for wicker/outdoor woven manufacturers like Lane Venture.

"We've gone from the old days of so much open, woven wicker to much more solid shapes and it's just a short step from that to fabric-covered frames," McCray said. "It's always been a double-edged sword, but I think now more Lane Venture President Gary McCray, left, stands with Plant Manager Darren Fox in front of a conveyor belt filled with products ready to be packaged and sent to customers than ever, you've got to bring something new to the game. At the same time, you have to realize you can't get just anything for it from a price point."

To help its retail customers with their local advertising expenses, Lane Venture is rolling out co-op marketing funds for 2012. As a division of Furniture Brands International, Lane Venture also is able to provide competitive rates on freight. McCray said the company does more direct container business than he ever thought it would.

Looking ahead, McCray expects to see more focus on customization, particularly at the high end. Dealers need "differentiation from the same things that have been out in the marketplace for awhile," McCray said. "At least that's what we're seeing and what customers are asking for. At the same time, though, still a lot of focus on

value. Just because it's new and different, you can't get away from the fact that you've got to provide value in your product."

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