

## Casual Market off to strong start

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CHICAGO —The New Product Gallery featured both innovative and familiar designs. A positive mood and steady order-writing were reported as the International Casual Furniture & Accessories Market moved through its first full day at the Merchandise Mart in Chicago.

Retailers arrived with optimistic attitudes and were looking for products to add to their assortments. They found plenty of colorful products as well as a larger number of fire pits and barbecue grills in showrooms and booths dedicated to outdoor furnishings on four floors of the Mart. Buyers appeared to be evenly dispersed between floors throughout the day.

"We've been steadily busy all day," said Brenda Pereyda of Mallin. "We've actually seen some new dealers. It's been an exciting time."

"We are so excited. Our new fabric story is turning heads and people are really responding to some of the thoughtful changes we have made," said Terri Lee Rogers of OW Lee.

Nourison exhibited a portion of its outdoor rugs at the show for the first time. After only a couple of hours, Director of Furniture Store Sales Jeff Gonzalez knew it would not be the company's last. "I was dipping my toe into the water and I didn't know what to expect," he said. "But now that I've seen the big boys I wanted to see, we're going to do this on a much grander scale. Next year, we will triple the space."

Elaine Smith pulls from the runway for fashion-forward outdoor pillow introductions. "Customer traffic's been really good," said Randy Meek, president of Oxford Garden

"It's a good start for the week," Stacey Shiver of Fishtales said at the end of opening day on Thursday. "Canada's here."

Bill Markowitz, president of Veneman Collection, said he sensed a vitality in the market that had been scarce since the economic downturn started, but that he didn't expect an immediate recovery. "It took a few years going down and it will take a few years coming back," he said.

"The Merchandise Mart's financial commitment to revamping the casual floors speaks volumes," said Joe Logan, International Casual Furnishings Association executive director. "It feels as if there is a renewed sense of enthusiasm this year and that's pretty amazing."

Mamagreen's showroom featured colorful stripes on new collections of sustainable outdoor living products. Director Vincent Cantaert noted stripes have been well received at recent European shows. "I don't think people should take casual furnishings too seriously," he said. "The outdoors should be fun, a place to entertain and it should have colors."

"I'm amazed by all the color! It's never been as fabric-driven as it is now, and we are in Texas where it's all about brown," said Geneva Wallace of Designer's Patio in Irving, Texas. "But all of these patterns incorporate that so a lot of it works with brown. That's a major step!"



The New Product Gallery at the Casual Market featuring Summer Classics' Royan Arm Chair.

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