



# Friant

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By Rob Kirkbride



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No one camp is better than the other, though if you are caught in the middle, well, you might have a rocky road ahead. For most companies, it is not an all of nothing proposition. Steelcase falls firmly in the first camp, yet it sells lower priced furniture through its successful Turnstone brand. And even if you are selling based on price — think AIS and others like it — it does not mean your furniture is of inferior quality.

In fact, companies like AIS, Friant and others might just have an advantage. How many times have we walked through NeoCon's showrooms and scratched our heads as we looked for something — anything — that was different or unique?

All things being equal, why wouldn't you buy based on price? Friant, the upstart California furniture maker that blends company-controlled Asian suppliers with US manufacturing, takes that question a step further: If you are a dealer and sell Friant's products with substantially greater margins, why would you sell anything else?

It is an increasingly compelling argument for dealers that

have been squeezed from every angle. Margins are lower while competition is fierce. Dealers are looking for an edge. At the same time, growing companies like Friant are looking for long-term partnerships with dealers.

Friant is outpacing the industry in terms of growth. Sales increased 35 percent last year, said industry veteran Dan Landman, senior vice president of sales who formerly worked at Herman Miller, Global and Steelcase, to name a few. Landman is working to expand Friant's dealer relationships. The company also hired more customer service, inventory control and design staff.

Friant also invested in internal improvements by installing new systems and software for everything from inventory tracking to improved renderings. Two new warehouses were added — one in Hayward, Calif. and the other in Atlanta, which also features a showroom and enables better, faster distribution for the East Coast.

Behind the company is Paul Friant, who Landman calls an industry "visionary." The company started 22 years ago when Friant, then 22 years old, plunked down \$1,500 to start his office furniture installation company. His father was an office furniture dealer in the San Francisco area. Friant started at a dealership himself, but in 1990, started a company that ser-



ved office furniture dealers with one- and two-man jobs. His crews would install smaller items like visual boards, cabinets and desks. He added remanufacturing, refurbishing and cloning Herman Miller Action Office II panels. Soon after, the company started making its own worksurfaces and opened a manufacturing shop.

Unlike many companies that outsource furniture production, Friant started its own plant and set up manufacturing and operations to make U.S.-designed furniture at an overseas plant. The company was making furniture there, not simply importing it. Products brought into North America are finished at the company's plant in Oakland, Calif.

While the company started as a remanufacturer and clone seller, it has quickly grown by adding to its own product line. The company added seating in recent years and has several new products that will launch this spring and at NeoCon.

Friant is launching Interra, a new systems line that uses 30 percent less material and less waste at the end of its useful life. The company is also launching a new universal desking system, tentatively named Dash, that will be launched later this year. The system can go from private office to a more traditional system and benching. Other products will be launched, including the addition of the high back Celesse task seat, addi-

tional seating in the task and lounge categories and expanded standard fabric options.

Both Interra and Dash will be available to Friant dealers through its new Advantage Program, designed to promote deeper relationships with participating dealers. In effect, the Advantage Program will foster sales with dealers that see Friant's product as "go-to," not an alternative product competing with refurbished or "as is." Friant wants to home in on the dealers that are most interested in leveraging Friant's value proposition, which is based on design-forward products that offers high profits for dealers and affordability for the end users.

It is a bold move for a smaller, lower priced office furniture maker. Landman said the company hopes to reward dealers that want to form closer, more cohesive relationships. Friant hopes to attract about 200-250 dealers to the Advantage Program. About 40 are signed up already.

Friant is fighting for marketshare using two parallel paths: Increasing its distribution network; and adding to its product mix. Dealers are getting on board, Landman said. "It's simple, really," he said. "The dealer gets to keep more money as gross profit if they work with Friant. You make more money selling our products." ♣