

relationship. For example, when Olivieri was at Teknion, she built several CEU programs that had nothing to do with Teknion furniture -- the topics included business etiquette and how to dress for success and put your best foot forward when meeting clients. The programs were wildly successful and Olivieri had people from New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco ask her to repeat the seminars. "I've already started developing things here at Kimball Office that will really help design firms improve," she said.

Indeed, when you talk to Olivieri, it sounds as if she has worked at Kimball Office for years. And in a way, she has. Though she just accepted the new full-time position, Olivieri has worked with Kimball Office for four years as a consultant, helping the Jasper, Ind.-based company build its sustainability program. Years ago, she worked as one of the company's very first architecture and design reps for seven years. "I told them once, that if I ever went back to work for a manufacturer, I would come and work for you," she said.

The job itself is externally and internally focused. Using her background with architects and designers, Olivieri said she hopes to build bridges to what she calls the "new" Kimball Office. Internally, she hopes to convey the needs of architects and designers to the company. She also will help with product development, marketing, creating CEU classes -- anything that will help designers choose Kimball Office. Though she is not in charge of product design, she said her team will be a strong influence in promoting the needs of the A&D community.

She has already done that. Olivieri worked with Eva Maddox on Kimball Office's Surface Material Program. The company's willingness to change, improve and move forward most interested her. She said the company is going through a remarkable change and becoming much more appealing to the architecture and design community.

"The best testimonial is to turn something around in record time and have fabulous aesthetic results," Olivieri said. "The company comes from a strong traditional wood background. It has moved

itself away from that in some ways in a totally different relationship in its product design -- away from a heavy wood look to a European look and feel. The design is much more refined and light. And it makes it much easier to live with in today's real estate where you have so many people in a space. The products are so much more sophisticated."

The company has made some significant introductions in the last few years. Its Hum and Fluent systems changed the way the A&D community looks at Kimball Office. Hum brings benching to a whole new level, Olivieri said, proving that office dwellers can work better in a smaller space while still improving productivity. The products compliment each other. "Knowing what's coming down the pike, you're going to see a lot of exciting things," she said. "This company has definitely come a long way. The partnership with Interstuhl has been an accomplishment in itself. That is where we are aiming."

Olivieri has had a long and distinguished career. After spending time coordinating the national A&D efforts for Haworth and Teknion, Olivieri is returning to Kimball Office, which is where she previously worked as an A&D rep for seven years. "Exciting transformations are taking place at Kimball Office and the A&D community is taking notice. I look forward to sharing the company's relevant, new solutions that will inspire designers and build strong awareness of the brand," said Olivieri.

Olivieri earned her MBA from the Kellogg School of Management and is a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Accredited Professional. She has more than 13 years combined experience with the contract furniture and architecture and design industries, and is a member of the International Interior Design Association (IIDA) and the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC).

"Georgy's strong relationships with the architecture and design community, and unique knowledge of creating sustainable environments, provide Kimball Office with the tools necessary to strengthen existing relationships and build new ones as well," said Allen

Parker, vice president of marketing and sales. "Kimball Office's product portfolio is expanding to further meet the changing demands of workplace environments, and Georgy's experience will provide great insight into developing strategies that complement the needs of the design community."

Olivieri put Kimball Office's competition on notice. The company is preparing several new products to launch at NeoCon. And Olivieri continues to engage the architecture and design community. "We're looking at this as such a great time and opportunity for us because some of those companies have been sitting back. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity to speed by them."

## Friant & Associates turns 20

► In many ways, Friant's story is simple and sounds the same as many entrepreneurs in the office furniture industry.

Paul Friant has always been a do-it-yourself kind of guy. And he built a company on the same attitude: When your customer has a problem, you fix it for them. 20 years later, Friant & Associates is still going strong.



In fact, based on a model that brings together the best of U.S. design and Asian manufacturing, the Southern California company is thriving, according to its owner.

In many ways, Friant's story is simple and sounds the same as many entrepreneurs in the office furniture industry. He took the experience he had (along with a measly \$1,500), took a leap of faith and worked extremely hard. And here's another little secret to his success (and the success of many successful people in this industry that I talk to): He never said "no" to a customer.

Friant remembers his first office in a rented house. He was 22 years old and had a \$1,500 loan to start his office furniture installation company. And soon

after starting the business, his ambition got the best of him -- almost. According to his blog, Friant put in a bid on a service project for San Francisco's Red & White Fleet and won it, not realizing the company expected Friant to do the work at his location, not at Red & White Fleet's. "So before I knew it, 700 chairs were being delivered to my front lawn and due back within 72 hours -- scrubbed to a new finish and ready for re-installation on the fleets," according to the story on his blog. "One might ask why I didn't just turn back the truck, saying I had misunderstood and wasn't ready to accommodate? Because 'NO' is just not in my nature."

Instead, with his brother and a small crew, Friant finished the project on time and on budget. His relationship with Red & White lasted another 10 years and word of the company's commitment to service grew.

It is an extreme example of customer service at its best, but one that exemplifies Friant's work over the past two decades (and before). Friant grew up submerged in the office furniture industry as well. 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 serviced 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. In recent years, the company has worked hard to grow its product line and dealer base. Friant designs and manufactures high-end office systems, at prices the company says are unmatched in the industry. The company's product lines include two panel

systems, wood and laminate casegoods, reception units, conference tables, seating and accessories.

The company has 125 employees in Oakland and another 350 oversees. Friant also is an owner of Yangzhou Cubespace System Furniture Inc., a joint venture of China Cubespace and Friant. The Cubespace company conducts business worldwide and has completed projects in Kuwait, India and South America. Though Cubespace does much larger projects than Friant (usually in the 1,000 to 3,000 workstation range), the North American market still accounts for about 70 percent of Friant's business (the company entered the Canadian market a few months ago).

"My goal is to create a high quality product," he said. "We are creating a name brand for it at a low cost with full service. Dealers are participating with us and we are identifying their role to make the full circle work. Five years down the road, I want to introduce a new style to the industry. I'm in the process of designing my own panels. We are also working on new chair designs that people haven't seen yet. That is our direction."

That direction will also include manufacturing at the company's plant in China. Friant said because his company owns the plant and controls the quality, they have been successful manufacturing overseas. Some office furniture makers have had problems with manufacturing in China because they outsource a line to a plant they can't control. "When you are dealing with the Chinese market, if you don't own the plant, you are never in control of lead times, it is difficult to control the costs and you are never in charge," he said. "We control it 100 percent because we pay the bills. We come first every day. We don't have to get a story and then have to question whether it's true. We are able to control what we are doing there on a daily basis. What (other) people have been trying to do for so long, that's a difficult path."

The company also is focusing on new products. It is committed to the high quality, low cost market, but that's not to say the furniture is cheap or cheap

looking. In fact, the company promises to bring a "new level of functionality" to the conference room at a low price point with its Mesa line of conference tables, which will be launched in September.

Mesa, which will come in at the low end of conference tables in terms of price, is built for multimedia conferencing and Internet connectivity. The Mesa line can be customized with a range of surface materials and a contrasting base center panel, at no additional cost. The table has a built-in modular power system and separate troughs to organize voice and data wires and power can be provided for everyone at the table. Additional wire storage is also provided in each base. Mesa conference tables are available in many standard sizes and many mix and match finish options, including brushed metal, wood and laminate. Mesa can be viewed at Friant's Oakland and Shanghai showrooms.

And while the environment and Asia are thought to be at odds, Friant said the country is making meaningful strides to be an environmental leader. Since his company controls the plant, they are able to ensure the products are green. In fact, the company recently was named MAS Certified Green for its Tiles and System2 panel systems. MAS Green Certified is a designation provided by independent testing laboratory MAS (Material Analytical Services), a micro-analytical and environmental consulting services. Friant's panel systems required no changes in order to be certified, which means that Friant's panel systems are (and have always been, according to the company) low in VOC emissions and meet the industry's ANSI-BIFMA Standards, making them eligible for LEED points.

The Friant model is interesting and worth watching. Its blend of overseas manufacturing and U.S. finishing, along with the ownership of its plant in China, demands watching from an industry trying to cut manufacturing costs as much as it can. Friant is a company built on telling the customer "yes." It will be interesting to see if the industry continues to say "yes" to Friant in growing numbers. ▮