

Friant & Associates LLC: Innovating Office Furniture Solutions

By Camila Osorno

Paul Friant started Friant & Associates LLC in 1990 as a company that manufactures innovative, customizable, surprisingly affordable high-end office systems. In the process he reformulated the way the furniture industry does business.

Today, Friant & Associates prides itself on offering clients “A-grade products at B-grade pricing.” From its 145,000-square foot showroom and custom wood/fabric shop in Oakland, California, augmented by four international production plants, Friant & Associates manufactures and distributes a full array of panel systems, wood and laminate casegoods, reception units, conference tables, seating and accessories, office furniture, storage and panel systems priced to compete even with refurbished systems from leading manufacturers.

Friant & Associates was founded on the belief that office furniture aesthetics shouldn't create price barriers. Rather, they pride themselves on delivering easy-to-install, beautiful solutions for the most productive office environments. In particular, Friant & Associates made a name for itself with the Tiles and System 2 panel systems. The Tiles system offers customers endless design options, easy installation and reconfiguration, and a durable solid steel frame. System2 offers customers a Quickship option, over 20 fabrics and finishes and structural compatibility with other standard systems.

Streamlined, cost-effective production channels and a strong commitment to superior engineering form the Friant & Associates advantage, and clients rest assured that their products are designed to last using an increasing amount of sustainable materials and practices. And this dedication to quality in both product and pricing has resulted in ongoing growth for what is now a mid-sized company. In 2010, Friant & Associates celebrated its 20-year anniversary and simultaneously opened a second warehouse and showroom facility in the Atlanta area to keep shipping costs low for clients across the country. In total, Friant partners with 135 associates, including 85 independent representatives throughout the country.

From Humble Beginnings

Two decades ago Friant & Associates was a very different operation, however. Initially Friant & Associates was started on a \$1,500 loan and headquartered in Paul Friant's own home, where he would service and install furniture. In 1993 Friant himself cleaned and refurbished 700 chairs for the Red & White Fleet, one of San Francisco's oldest sightseeing cruise companies. In lieu of a warehouse, the chairs had to be shipped directly to Friant's lawn. Shortly thereafter, Friant relocated the operations to a small warehouse, growing the business gradually and upgrading to newer facilities as needed.

“My dad ran a furniture dealership, so I've grown up in the industry,” explains Friant, who has guided Friant & Associates continually as the company's president and owner. “We started off providing office furniture services and then very gradually moved into the manufacturing.” It was only in 1997 that they moved operations into the company's current home, and in 1998 invested in an overseas manufacturing

facility to increase its total production capacity. Ever since, they have made waves in the industry by providing quicker production times, factory-direct pricing, and responsible manufacturing processes.

One truly impressive distinction is the timeframe in which the company can provide its systems; while most product ships in three to six weeks, clients can receive orders in as little as five days. With the Five-Day Quickship program, customers choose between some of the companies' most popular finishes, which are expanded under the 10-day Quickship option. For custom orders and orders over 50 workstations, they offer an Extended Lead Time option with the added bonus of additional savings.

In addition, Friant & Associates offers dealers a much larger profit margin than leading manufacturers. Typically, most brands offer the dealer between seven- and eight-percent profit, whereas Friant & Associates sales regularly provide between 25- and 30-percent profit margins and a lower cost to the end-user. They believe that the lower price point shouldn't overshadow the quality of its products. Every product is designed to uphold or set industry standards for durability, performance, sustainability and aesthetics, and the flexibility of profit margins allows dealers to determine the right profit margins for the target market.

Expanding Product Line and Environmental Responsibility

Friant & Associates has made even further strides in the past two years, rethinking the purpose and needs of today's modern workforce. The company launched a signature Mesa series of conference tables designed for plug and play multimedia needs with discreet voice, data and power cabling. The company also launched its new Celesse desk chair with customizable, enhanced lumbar support that can be adjusted according to how far back in the seat the user is positioned.

Behind the scenes, the company has worked to solidify its commitment to environmentally responsible production, assuring operations maintain both low emissions and low price points. Friant & Associates has always used non-toxic finishes, incorporating recycled materials and fabrics wherever possible, and 2009 kicked off a massive year for the company's environmentally conscious production program. The company switched to using water-based wood finishes and adhesives, and as a result achieved MAS Green certification of its panel systems. Ultimately Friant & Associates made no additional changes to its manufacturing process to achieve the certification, meaning that both systems have always been produced with low VOC emissions.

As a result, Friant & Associates production process meets the American National Standards Institute's criteria for members of the Business and Institutional Manufacturers Association to contribute points towards a project's LEED certification. In turn, the company hired a full-time LEED Accredited Professional to advise customers on office furnishing solutions that could help meet their LEED goals.

The future looks bright for Friant & Associates. Currently, they are furnishing seven floors of one of the Bay Area's largest law firms. But large jobs are nothing new to Friant & Associates. "We ship an average of 2,000 orders a month. Because we offer the right products at the right price," asserts Friant. According to the company, they grew by 65 percent in 2010 and are on track to see growth of 50 percent in 2011.

Entering into 2012 Friant & Associates will follow up by launching the Interra Series of panel systems. The system was designed as a mix-and-match frame-and-tile system to meet the company's stringent durability standards. The difference with Interra is that the system uses 30-percent less material.

In the next few years, Friant hopes to see growth in the 25- to 30-percent range as the economy continues to improve. Regardless of external circumstances, Friant & Associates LLC will continue to push the boundaries in its markets, using its factory-direct process to exceed customer expectations in regards to product selection, quality, pricing and service.