

"I've been to public days at other shows, and I think it's a dumb idea," said Stephens. "I think it changes the tenor of the conversation."

"It's not a design-oriented enough show here," said Wieler. "It's pulling back curtains that don't need to be pulled back."

"From a retailer's perspective, the trend in the industry is that consumers want to buy less and less at retail, and they're looking for a way to pay less, so having a consumer day kind of encourages them to see the other side of our industry," Stephens added. "They're the end of the chain and they're lopping off some links in that chain. The chain already has been stressed with the internet and other ways people can bypass the retailer, so they're not doing the retailers any favors. They're shooting the retailers, who in essence are who the show is for."

Wieler pointed out that, much like in a restaurant, the magic is lost when too much prep is observed. "To connect all the dots for people in an already stressed environment, I don't think it's helpful. Ultimately, I don't think it's helpful for the consumer. All it's going to do is add more confusion."

While many exhibitors and buyers agreed with Stephens and Wieler, others were a slightly more positive on Consumer Day. Some tried to mitigate potential confusion by preparing lists of retailers for consumers interested in purchasing products.

"I got a lot of people phoning me, and I told them they're more than welcome to come in," said Sheryl Lowe, Renwil's showroom co-ordinator. "I told them that I can't sell directly to them, but I can refer them to a retailer in their area. We all ultimately depend on the consumer, so I think it's good they came in here, looked at the product and hopefully went to a store to purchase it. It benefits everyone."

Surya's Clapham said, "I'm not sure about public day. When a consumer comes in and we have multiple dealers in an area, who will we suggest they go to? I don't like to favor particular dealers."

The flow of consumers who came seemed steady throughout the day, with Steven and Chris' presentation drawing the largest audience. The trends the designers discussed were consistent with the trends showcased at the show, and consumers got to ask the experts about how to incorporate these trends into their decorating.

During the presentations, the designers drew attention to exhibitors, praising pieces by Huppé, Décor-Rest, Hellenic Rugs and Pink & Brown, to name a few.

After the event, the QFMA reported they sold a disappointing 1,300 tickets to Consumer Day and said it would not be a part of next year's event. **HGO**

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CFS GETS MIXED REVIEWS FROM EXHIBITORS; ORGANISERS SAY THE BLEEDING HAS STOPPED

BY MICHAEL J. KNELL

The first edition of the renamed Canadian Furniture Show received mixed reviews, although nearly every exhibitor surveyed said they booked reasonable orders, and promised to return in 2016.

Pierre Richard, president and chief executive of both CFS and its owner/operator, the Quebec Furniture Manufacturers Assn., said he was fairly well pleased with this year's event, noting that work on 2016 began on June 8 – the day after this year's show closed.

Of course, the first question about any trade event concerns attendance: Did enough of the right people walk through the halls? Richard said early indications suggest overall attendance for the 2015 CFS was roughly on par with the 2014 edition of what was then called The Canadian Home Furnishings Market.

Insiders pegged retailer attendance at about 2,500 or so, driven mainly by the continuing support for CFS from the three major buying groups, Cantrex Nationwide, Dufresne Retail Solutions Group and Mega Group. Total trade attendance (including decorators, designers and others) was estimated at slightly fewer than 5,000, although there was no break-down of that figure.

In a longstanding complaint, exhibitors said attendance by retailers in Western Canada was light. What was new was the noticeable lack of attendance by Quebec-based retailers. This was attributed to two factors. First, CFS was too close to Quebec's unofficial traditional moving day, July 1. Canada Day, it seems, is the most popular day of the year for households in that province to change locations. Second, CFS coincided with the Grand Prix de Montreal, a very popular sporting event.

There were some unexpected twists in overall attendance. Perhaps

Pierre Richard, CFS president, is seen here with a member of the acrobatic troupe that entertained market goers when the halls of the International Centre opened for extended hours on Saturday evening – a first for this country's only national furniture industry event.



the most striking was, as Richard reported, some 250 new badges for members of the trade were issued on Sunday morning – the opening of Consumer Day. Organisers suspect the majority of these were retailers and decorators. “I think this shows Consumer Day really didn’t prevent the business of the trade from happening,” Richard said.

He also firmly believes the drop in overall attendance seen in recent years has bottomed out. “We seem to have stopped the bleeding,” he said – an observation he also made before opening day about the number of exhibitors participating in CFS.

CONSUMER DAY GETS A BIG ‘THUMBS DOWN’

When asked about Consumer Day, every exhibitor contacted said they were unhappy with the results. In addition to the turnout being much poorer than anticipated, most indicated it took away from CFS’s primary mission as a platform for resources and retailers to work together in a convivial atmosphere.

Not one resource said it should be repeated in 2016.

Jason Harris, vice president of sales for stationary upholstery specialist Stylus, Made-to-Order Sofas, gave a typical response: “We got very little out of this day. Our location is not great for walk-by traffic, so that may have affected our exposure. It’s fine when you are a destination for your customer base, but I noticed the main aisle-ways were much busier on Consumer Day. Even with improved traffic, I’m not sure it’s worth repeating.”

“Having the public day on a Sunday prevented most of our Ontario dealers from attending,” said Adam Hofmann, president of case goods producer BG Furniture. “It interrupted our opportunity to sell and completely confused most of our retail customers.

“However, on a positive note, we embraced it and spoke to many consumers about our products,” he added. “We likely referred about 50 consumers to BG retailers in the Greater Toronto Area and as far away as Guelph. About five to 10 consumers were seriously wanting to buy our products after they saw them in our showroom.”

Hofmann, who opened a new permanent showroom in the SOFA annex of the International Centre just before CFS, believes that if the organisers want to keep Consumer Day, it has to be handled at some other time, such as a Saturday evening.

Steve Preiner, director of marketing for first-time CFS exhibitor BSH Home Appliances, was unhappy with the results of Consumer Day. “Traffic was slow and we felt the focus should be kept on the trade,” he said. “Some of the consumers were tire-kickers, looking for ‘show specials,’ and dealers were concerned about vying for attention with consumers on the floor at the same time.”

Richard admitted Consumer Day wasn’t as successful as the organisers hoped, with only 1,300 consumers attending. “The level of satisfaction wasn’t very high,” he said. “People wanted to buy and walk out with a new sofa. They were disappointed they couldn’t leave with something.”

Consumer Day has been dropped from the calendar for 2016 CFS.

ORDER WRITING OK, NOT GREAT

When all is said and done, every market for furniture, mattress and major appliance retailers in North America is judged by orders written. The higher the order pile, the greater the event’s success is deemed to be. This has been particularly true of the markets held in Toronto over the past 43 years.

On this key question, CFS exhibitors were divided, with a strong minority saying retail attendance was poor, and that was reflected in orders written.

“It was a good market – not excellent, but good,” was BG’s Hofmann’s assessment. “I had higher expectations for total dollar orders. Many dealers visited our showroom but did not make orders. They asked the sales rep to come back to their store to review and finalise. Many dealers were not in a buying mood. However, we had some very important leading dealers that wrote large orders and that gave us confidence in the new products we developed.”

“It was stronger for order-writing than January 2014,” said Diana Sisto, creative director for upholstery specialist Brentwood Classics, one of nine official outside showrooms participating in CFS.

“It was a good market for us,” she continued. “We were very pleased with the outcome and felt it was an ‘efficient’ show for us. We signed up many new accounts as opposed to previous Canadian markets.”

“We saw our key customers and wrote business for significant new floor placements,” Stylus’ Harris reported. “This is our only exposure to the eastern [Canadian] market, so that is our prime objective for the CFS. Our written orders were the second-highest total over the last five shows.”

WHAT’S NEXT FOR 2016?

Almost every exhibitor said they would be back for the 2016 edition of the Canadian Furniture Show.

Harris made a typical comment: “I am committed to supporting this show. I believe it is very important for the Canadian furniture industry to have a show of its own.”

Several exhibitors advocated returning to the Toronto market’s traditional schedule, with opening day on Saturday and closing Tuesday afternoon. A minority even advocated a return to January; something the QFMA’s Richard said is unlikely to happen. “Will we go back to January? No, unless something drastic happens,” he said.

The next Canadian Furniture Show will be held at the International Centre from May 28 to 30, opening on a Saturday but closing on Monday.

“We know 73% of surveyed show participants don’t favour a January show; 71% prefer a ‘trade-only’ event, without a Consumer Day; and trade visitors spent an average of 2.8 days in Toronto for the show,” Richard said, adding that 91% of show participants surveyed indicated they plan to return in 2016. “Next year’s will be an even bigger and better event.” **HGO**

Michael J. Knell, the publisher and editor of Home Goods Online and all its platforms, has attended every Canadian Furniture Show – under whatever name – since 1986.