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Manufacturers team with stores for e-sales

By Heath E. Combs -- *Furniture Today*, 11/27/2006

Holland, Mich.— Sligh's Web site at www.sligh.com has what you'd expect from an upscale home office resource — it's classy, easy to use and up to date.

But it also has features you wouldn't usually associate with a furniture manufacturer's site, like Add to Cart and Continue to Checkout. A retailer's, maybe.

In July, Sligh and specialty bedding maker Natura World said they would implement software on their Web sites to enable direct-to-consumer sales in a way that doesn't cut retailers, salespeople or sales representatives out of the transaction.

The companies are using patented Distribution Relationship Management software from Reshare of Minneapolis, marketed by Furniture Triangle, a business owned by Jim Gabbert, chairman and CEO of Minneapolis-based retailer Gabberts.

Sligh and Natura World contend that Internet and store shopping are not mutually exclusive, with consumers looking in both places for information on furniture purchases.

Gabbert said two other furniture manufacturers — which haven't made their programs public yet — and two lighting companies also have signed on for the software.

"We're still early in the curve and people are getting comfy with the idea. There's a lot of interest and acceptance conceptually. There's few things people can find to object to," Gabbert said.

Sligh, which has already sold product using the program, has signed on more than 100 independent retailers to the company's online Brick N' Click partnership.

One of the biggest selling factors of the online system is convenience, Sligh said. Consumers can click onto Sligh's site, research product at their own pace, find links to local dealers where they can see product in

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person, and purchase online whenever they choose.

Service and delivery options are offered from participating Sligh dealers. The dealer selected by the consumer is responsible for filling the order. Consumers can pay online by credit card or debit card, then get an e-mailed confirmation.

"The consumer gets superior service, professional delivery and installation, an instant relationship with a local dealer who can then work with them on additional purchases, and they've not sacrificed any of the independence they obviously wanted as an online shopper," said Rob Sligh, president of Sligh.

After choosing what to buy, the consumer selects a retailer from the manufacturer's distribution network, who completes the sale. The selected dealer gets an e-mail and assigns a salesperson who contacts the consumer and can verify measurements or validate sales.

Natura World President Ralph Rossdeutscher said his company will launch its e-commerce program next year. He said the company has been making its pitch to sign up retailers to take part in the online order program and will connect about 1,000 stores with its Web site.

"We haven't had one negative comment on it yet," he said.

Rossdeutscher said some manufacturers may hesitate to use the software, thinking their retailers won't like the idea. They may also be wary of the up-front cost of the software — in the mid-five figures with a transaction fee of 1%, according to Gabbert — as well as investments associated with refreshing and adding product lines to Web sites for use by consumers.

While Natura World's main thrust is still in-store display, Rossdeutscher said manufacturers' Web sites will have to pay attention to Internet consumers.

"I was looking at a way to do this three and a half years ago, how to link up with retailers and allow us to still take advantage of the Web," he said. "When Jim came along, it was exactly what I was trying to figure out how to do."

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