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New Eastview Location, Product Mix Prove Successful for Viking International Furniture

In March of 2004, when Viking International Furniture left its Henrietta location on Jefferson Road for a new freestanding location in Victor at Eastview Mall, owner John Buchheit (pronounced boo-hite) knew he was taking a calculated risk.

A home-grown retail furniture business that got its start in Rochester in 1980, Viking International Furniture – first located in Greece and then in Henrietta - built up a loyal following among home owners and select commercial clients. So a move to Victor in 2004 was a radical departure from the past. But as the first five months in the new location have shown, it was a departure well worth it.

Those first five months at the new location – April through August – have generated a 26% increase in Viking's retail sales over the same five months in 2003 at the old location (Henrietta).

Internet sales have also improved, with an increase of 60% in 2004 over the same five month period in 2003. Internet sales represent between 10 and 15% of Viking's total sales volume.

Ninety-five percent of sales (showroom and Internet) are to the residential customers.

Based on these increases, and a conservative forecast for the remainder of 2004, Viking owner John Buchheit expects an overall annual sales growth of close to 30%. Though he declines to give sales figures in dollar amounts, he deems the store's sales increases a success.

The reasons for these increases are simple: new location and an evolution in the product mix.

New Location

The demographics in the region are changing, with both new home construction and existing-home sales growing rapidly on the eastside of Monroe County. "There continues to be strong growth in residential development and we find that many of our customers are building in the eastern suburbs." says Buchheit. Viking International is also drawing a growing number of customers from the Finger Lakes and points east as far as Albany.

The location and setting of a retail store are among the most important decisions a business owner will make. Eastview Mall is seen as *the* upscale shopping destination in the region, as evidenced by the exclusive stores within the enclosed mall and those, such as Viking, situated on mall property.

“Eastview Mall and Viking International Furniture are a natural fit as we share the same customer demographics and are both dedicated to providing an upscale, unique shopping experience,” says Buchheit.

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The new Viking showroom was custom designed by SWBR Architects based on concepts taken directly from European retailers and manufacturers. The showroom is open, friendly, warm, welcoming, and, above all, modern. Upon entering the store, the customer is greeted by a mini waterfall and soft lighting and music, which sets the tone for a relaxed experience.

Another factor working in favor of Viking is its location among other furniture stores, a concept known as cluster shopping or cluster retailing. Foot traffic is often generated by those who have looked at furniture in adjacent stores and want to see what else is available. “These customers have furniture on their mind and want to explore all of the possibilities. The Eastview Mall cluster gives them that opportunity,” says Buchheit. “And our store gives them some unique choices.”

Cluster retailing is also common among car dealers and is seen as an advantage to both retailers and customers.

Product Mix

Viking is known for its “soft contemporary” lines of furniture that fit into today’s modern home. After John Buchheit purchased the business in 2001, he changed the mix of product lines and added different international manufacturers (such as those from Italy, Germany, Norway and Sweden) to supplement the Danish teak furniture and accessories he still carries.

Viking’s upholstery offerings include the popular Natuzzi line from Italy as well as a number of other manufacturers. Its dining and bedroom suites feature modern designs in multiple wood finishes and other materials. Its living room and den ensembles feature similar styles and materials.

“Contemporary furniture should not suggest cold glass and steel, hard lines, and a general lack of warmth and comfort,” he says. “The lines we carry at Viking are ‘soft’ contemporary – wood, leather, stone and other natural fabrics and materials. The overall feeling is warm, comfortable, soft, and modern,” says Buchheit. “And we find there is a strong market for this type of furniture.”

Other background

Viking International Furniture is not part of a chain or franchise arrangement. It was begun in Rochester in 1980 and has remained independent since.

John Buchheit is just the second owner of this 24 year-old business. Prior to purchasing Viking in 2001, John has worked in completely different industries, holding sales and marketing positions with Warner-Lambert’s Consumer Health Division and Bausch & Lomb’s North American Vision Care Division.

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