

## OFFICE INTERIORS

# More furniture firms furnish Web presence

BY AMY MINDELL

Special to CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

A Troy firm's survey of the nation's top business-oriented furniture manufacturers revealed that 86 percent now use the Internet for product marketing and sales.

The survey, conducted by the design and consulting firm Ford & Earl Associates Inc. and Web Elite, an Ann Arbor Web development company, revealed that companies are spending about \$10,000 or more each year to build and maintain Web sites.

"Web sites will continue to grow in

importance because furniture companies intend to maintain and improve their sites," said George Sepetys, vice president and director of graphic consulting at Ford & Earl.

"Fifty-four percent of the respondents consider a Web site 'very important,' 67 percent said the Web will have a significant impact on their future business, and 77 percent said they plan to redesign their Web sites.

"When coupled with the fact that the average respondent's Web site is only 2 years old, these indicators show the Web has become an important tool in the furniture industry," Sepetys said.

Said Jacques Habra, general manager of Web Elite, "The survey confirmed what we knew about the Internet in general: That furniture companies are online, but for the wrong reasons. . . .

"They basically put their brochures online. Most still think of the Internet as a broadcast medium like television and not an interactive one, like the telephone. They are not aware of the potential operations that can be performed over the Internet. For dealers, this can mean a password-protected area where they can request literature and pricing information or read the manufacturer's newsletter."

Although most furniture manufacturers do not sell their wares directly on the Web, the implications of electronic commerce concern people in the industry.

"A lot of dealers nationwide are very fearful and intimidated by the Web, but it's not going to go away, and we have to figure out how we can use it," said Steve Edwards, executive vice president of Facility Matrix Group. The Bloomfield Township-based company launched a Web site in 1996 and has averaged just 15-20 visits a month. The visits re-

sult in one or two transactions each month, an almost negligible segment of the company's annual revenue, which in 1997 totaled \$55 million.

But Edwards expects the site's importance to increase.

"We are holding a strategic-planning meeting ... to discuss the impact of things like the Internet on commerce," he said. "We don't have the answers yet, but the implications are profound."

Facility Matrix's main supplier, Herman Miller Inc., has a Web site but sells only home-office furniture through it. Any other requests are redistributed to local dealers.

John Anderson, president of Solutions@Work Gorman's, is building a Web site for his Southfield business. He plans to link to his supplier's Web site, as well as other Internet sites.

Initially, Solutions@Work's site will be for information purposes. But Anderson has plans for a series of sidelines, such as direct selling of low-maintenance products or offering deeply discounted items from an inventory of returned items.

"You can't design an individualized office system over the Web," Anderson said, referring to his main line of business. "But we

can't ignore the fact that the Internet is going to be a major venue of business in the future."

While Anderson estimates his total expenditure will run less than \$5,000 for his Web page, the survey indicates that larger manufacturers can spend up to \$250,000 for their initial Web site, with nearly one-third of respondents spending \$100,000 to \$250,000.

In addition, respondents report that Web site maintenance averages \$2,500 a month. **CDB**