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## NeoCon turnout reflects more than recessionary times

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The contract furniture industry is a reflection of the economy. When the economy is slow and jobs are down, so is the contract furniture industry. When the economy gains strength, so does the industry.

The length and depth of the latest economic calamity has put its footprint on the industry, altering the way it operates. But while the economy may be the big noise, technology also has factored into how the industry is changing.

All of these changes will be reflected at this year's NeoCon, which runs June 14-16 at Chicago's Merchandise Mart.

Mike Dunlap, CEO of Michael A. Dunlap & Associates, a business consulting service company, hasn't missed a NeoCon since 1979 — and this year he will keep that streak alive.

"I'm really concerned about attendance. Last year I know it was down because of the economy, and I don't know whether we're going to see an improvement in attendance or not," he said.

"Hotel occupancy is often the big indicator of how well attendance is going to do. In the past, there's usually been a (last minute) spurt, and some people come for the day rather than do an overnight. Attendance may very well be on par with the last couple of years, but people may not be spending as much time as they may have in the past."

Dunlap said some companies are looking to cut costs and are less likely to put employees up in hotels for several days. "The larger companies that may have sent people for two or three days may only send people down for one or two," said Dunlap.

Velocity Partners, a consulting and business development firm, specializes in contract furniture, as well. Brian Bascom, president of the company, also believes attendance will be down — not just because of the economy but also due to the existence of more regional showrooms and even to better use of websites by the manufacturers.

"Related to talking with designers and facility managers around North America, they're saying that NeoCon is playing less of a major role in the industry. On the flip side, they're demanding more regional showrooms," said Bascom. "They're basically saying that, yeah, NeoCon is important, but they don't want to take the time, spend the money, go to Chicago for two to five days and lose all of that time and dollars these days. They would just as soon skip it and go to regional events."

Velocity Partners spoke with more than 200 interior designers who talked about some of the reasons for their lack of interest in NeoCon.

"Basically, they stated that most of the manufacturers have really good Web sites, so they have the ability to download realistic photographs of products and get product specifications. Their firms are cutting back on travel costs and are increasingly busy. The idea of somebody from the East or West Coast jumping on a plane and heading to NeoCon is not necessarily the highest and best use of their time," Bascom said.

One prediction has NeoCon becoming a biennial event or perhaps more of a travelling exhibit like the auto show. One thing that seems certain is that the down attendance is about more than just the recession. It reflects a change in how contract furniture is sold.

"The Mart itself is a great place to view furniture on a daily, weekly, monthly basis. The question that I would pose to people is, 'Is the nature of how office furniture is specified and sold changing from where it was 30 years ago?'" said Bascom.

Chuck Saylor, founder and CEO of izzy+, understands that the future of contract furniture is changing. Still, he believes NeoCon is more than an opportunity to sell furniture; it also puts office furniture on a global stage.

"I am a diehard furniture guy and I believe that these kinds of events are great opportunities for our industry to show to the outside world our innovation, creative thinking, our commitment to sustainability and the environment," said Saylor.

"I think we have a pretty special industry that once a year gets a chance to come together and show the best of the best — what our capabilities here in America are around contract furniture and the broader context around thinking about work and learning and sharing and the generational changes that are going on around us.

"This is our annual event where we can be the best that we can be. It's incumbent upon the industry to step up to these kinds of events to let the world know that we're adjusting and accommodating the future."