

E-Commerce & Furniture: A New Paradigm

Presented at NeoCon 2000 World's Trade Fair

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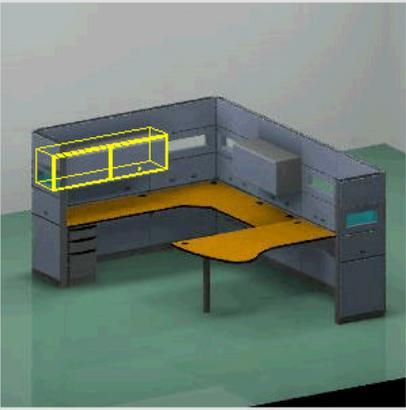
Building Furniture in a Visual Internet Environment

Business-to-business commerce on the Internet will promote a wide variety of new automation aids to the facilities manager and furniture customers in general in the area of design, selection and procurement. With over \$1.3 trillion in B2B business sales projected in the year 2003 (projected by Cambridge, MA-based Forester Research) there is a need to provide Internet tools that give customers the information they need in an understandable manner. Pictorial content and use within the traditional furniture process will provide office furniture customers with a readily understandable and accessible information base that will reduce existing sales inefficiencies and product information voids. Using an image enriched Internet environment that integrates photo realistic renderings, traditional photography, line drawings, video, computer animations and CAD images for the sales, selection, ordering and fulfillment will provide an unparalleled sales medium for the office furniture market.

The Intelligent Picture

Manufacturers are currently building the digital content for their Internet furniture environment. While this process usually is the same information that was traditionally delivered in a printed format, the internet implementation provides additional functionality that makes the material much more useful.

In many cases, pictures can be used to transcend the industry terminology that frequently is a barrier to customer comfort in making an informed buying decision. Use of pictures with the ability to link to associated descriptive information is an efficient methodology that can be used to make the customer feel knowledgeable and quickly attain a basic understanding of products.



Click to unhighlight.

Item Highlighted: HTR T760DNF Qty: 1
 O/H Storage w/Fabric Door/Lock 60"W x 14-1/4"D x 16"H

System as configured:

Hon Terrace U Shape Panel System
 -Color Options: Blue w/ Charcoal Trim
 -Lower Storage: Box Box File
 -Overhead Storage: Flipper door - Matching fabric
 -Conference Top: Reef Shape

[Parts List](#) [Other Options](#)

Save Configuration

You have already saved this configuration with the title shown. You may change the title and save it again if you like.

Title:

Description:

[Parts List](#) [Print](#)

Count	Mfg	Part Number	Description	Show
1	HTR	8055-000	Center Drawer	
1	HTR	870930	30" Tasklight	
1	HTR	870960	60" Tasklight	
1	HTR	PM185-233A	Mobile Ped, Box/Box/File 28H x 22-7/8D	
1	HTR	T52436S	PVC Edge Worksurface 24"D x 36"W	
1	HTR	T52460S	PVC Edge Worksurface 24"D x 60"W	
1	HTR	T53624C	PVC Edge Corner Worksurface 36"W x 24"D Corner	
1	HTR	T54723CR	PVC Edge Reef Worksurface R/H 30"D x 72"W w/Grommets	
4	HTR	T624CB	Cantilever Bracket 24" & 30" Black Only	
1	HTR	T628SC	Support Column 28-1/2"H	

Figure 1: Linking the bill of materials with an image of the furniture allows the customer to understand the components that comprise the workstation.

Pictures are visual glossaries that provide information at the click of a mouse. The business customer may be an occasional buyer or a seasoned veteran in the business of buying furniture and the furniture industry needs to address this wide disparity of user knowledge with information that can be readily filtered to meet each customer's expectations. Internet tools take catalog information and provide side-by-side comparisons allowing customers to see differences in specifications and construction detailing, and price.

Many large facilities have traditionally used corporate standards programs composed of office furniture groupings to assist building users in the space planning and furniture selection process. This concept of "typicals" in an Internet environment makes it possible for company employees to access proposed furniture information, select from thousands of optional configurations and communicate the final design to a facilities manager across any distance.

Pictures can also reduce the need for a high level of skills. Employees typically do not have the CAD knowledge necessary to interact with the CAD-dependent interior design and space planning processes that is vital to influencing the ultimate success in the selection of furniture that is used to supports their work process. New image oriented visualization tools provide workers with customer friendly capabilities that they can intuitively use to customize their office furniture.



Figure 2: Image oriented option selections allow customers to make office furniture choices without need of CAD skills.

The wider availability of three-dimensional CAD data from the manufacturers, what has traditionally restricted to a 2D plan graphics now serves as the basis of custom design tools that operate outside the traditional CAD environment. Linking of the both the marketing CAD images with the production databases is further enriching the pictorial environment for the customer and allowing for increased understanding of furniture products.

Pictures from a variety of sources will be used interchangeably within the furniture process to reduce the comprehension, selection and ordering time required to support the furniture sales and installation.

The Electronic Furniture Process

The traditional furniture ordering and fulfillment process is more quickly becoming a completely automated process from start to finish. Most notable in the process will be the customer access to information from the manufacturer. Manufacturers continue to bolster their manufacturing processes with automation systems that

Electronic Order entry, has formerly been a process that has chiefly been supported by EDI and used mostly for the... Proprietary systems from major furniture suppliers have made it difficult to electronically process orders that are composed of multiple manufacturers' product lines.

Installation will be impacted greatly by the visual information process. With the ever-present need to accommodate change within the organization, the dismantling and reconfiguration of systems furniture and the re-allocation of traditional casegoods including desks and files, makes true inventory and

Manufacturers pressed with the need to squeeze new efficiencies from their fabrication processes have incentive to

A Comparative Process

Traditional information gathering, as the basis of comparing various manufacturers' products will be supported electronically by a wealth of digital information from the manufacturers themselves. New market place Internet sites incorporating new visualization technology will allow facility customers to interact with both national and regional suppliers to get exactly the furniture required. New information standards, such as those being discussed by industry associations such as the OFDA (Office Furniture Dealers Association) are providing consumers with information that transcends the traditional format of the sales brochure and price list.

Information not only on the material content, but visual examples of the construction and finishes will be available through interactive pictures that provide a visual index to selection, finish, pricing and ordering information.

The competitive bid process on a new project has already been enhanced through the transmission of electronic bid documents that includes traditional 2D facility plan drawings. Increased inter-operability of previously proprietary data will continue to be a focus of the industry and the use of traditional CAD application packages will be enhanced by using platform-independent data that will be used to provide 3D product representations.

An Accelerating Information Automation Trend

Initial CAD visualization and documentation data assembly has taken nearly two decades to evolve to its current state. New integrated image and data information sets will

evolve in drastically less time with customer access to the information dependent only on access to an Internet terminal.

Business rules that supported a traditional information dissemination through an established distribution chain are being replaced by the "point and click" environment that both receives general product information and sends proprietary project information. This information cycle will continue to build new, and better, buyer/seller relationships in the furniture industry with an ever-increasing flow of information using pictures as the primary information component.

About the Authors

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