

taking orders

BY PAULINE TINGAS

NEW STANDARDS PROMISE TO UNIFY COMMUNICATIONS IN THE

ORDER-TO-DELIVERY OFFICE FURNITURE PROCUREMENT PROCESS.

ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES in corporate design is in the furniture procurement stage.

An interior designer can spend hours sifting through mountains of books and electronic catalogs to visualize, select and customize the right furniture system. Competitive market conditions complicate the matter by driving manufacturers to expand their product lines and introduce more fabrics, finishes and other

options into the consideration set. Limited client budgets also add layers to the tedious process, as they often demand multiple bids in an effort to drive down costs.

These challenges have long been apparent, but it wasn't until now that an industry-wide solution seemed plausible. Since 1999, the Office Furniture Dealers Alliance (OFDA) has been working to streamline the information that passes back and forth

Director of Technology and Research.

SIF is the data-interchange standard currently in use. Its weakness is that it exists in many variations, making it difficult for different parties to communicate with one another across different computer platforms and software programs. "It is disjointed," Duros says. "Every manufacturer has its own flavor."

To counter this, Duros and the OFDA technology committee mem-

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—Mark Duros, Director of Technology and Research, OFDA, Alexandria, Va.

between designers, dealers and manufacturers, and the fruits of its labors are beginning to become apparent.

Working with software developers and leading office furniture manufacturers such as Herman Miller and Kimball Office, the OFDA's efforts began with a technology committee whose task it was to develop standards that could provide a consistent way of sharing data in everything from publishing manufacturer catalogs to placing and shipping of furniture orders. "Our original purpose was to come up with a model that could replace Standard Interchange Format (SIF)," says Mark Duros, OFDA's



members are working to migrate the industry from the current SIF standard to a single platform called OFDAXml. OFDAXml is based on XML, a universal format that works with office programs like Word and Internet Explorer. "We're trying to make the industry easier to do business with," says Kevin Messmer, Director of e-Business for Kimball Office, an OFDA technology committee member.

For designers, one of the biggest benefits of OFDAXml is that it will eliminate their mountains of cross-pollinated books and paper and enable them to create custom catalogs in any combination of manufacturer and product. "What designers need to realize is that they're not bound by whatever printed catalogs they receive from manufacturers," Duros says.

OFDAXml will essentially create

the human error perspective and speeds up the process."

The technology also has the potential to reduce order-fulfillment lead times by operating in real time and tracking catalog changes as they occur. Under the current system, catalog updates can take a month or more to complete. And because XML readily accepts graphic images and jpegs, OFDAXml will help designers better visualize products

manufacturers more accessible to the design community. "It's going to level the playing field," says Matt Austin, a Technical Analyst with Kimball Office.

Austin says that in the past, only larger manufacturers with substantial budgets could spend money on electronic development. Therefore, their findings often were proprietary, and required unique protocols for conducting transactions with



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a library of information that designers can electronically search to generate a list of products that fit their specifications. That streamlined approach will carry through to the ordering phase, allowing them to bid out orders to multiple entities at once. "It will make designers' lives more efficient," Messmer says. "Enabling the designer to specify a product and pass that along to the dealer or manufacturer without having to retype it eliminates

and associated marketing information to make more informed decisions. "Designers will have a richer data set," Messmer says. "With XML, we'll be able to attach not just a model number but items like jpegs and scanned imagery to a product line. Instead of AutoCad and three-ring binders with marketing materials, let's house it all in one source."

One unintended but positive byproduct of OFDAXml is that it promises to make smaller independent

different business partners. In fact, Duros says the existence of so many exclusive protocols was an early test for the OFDA technology committee. "A big initial challenge was to get manufacturers to share their data," he says. "For them, it was a proprietary marketing tool. It took a bit for them to realize that data wasn't something they could hold close to their chest."

It's only logical that manufacturers

who are knee-deep in proprietary development costs might be resistant to change. But the fact that industry leaders like Haworth, Allsteel and The HON Company backed the idea of a common platform seems to have eliminated the balking.

The first OFDAXml release, a milestone in the path toward industry standardization, took place in 2002, when the OFDA technology committee introduced a purchase-order

members say they are wasting no time in transitioning to the new platform. "Within the next six months to a year, we'll be completely on XML in terms of purchase orders," Messmer says.

Others are following suit. "HON has already converted onto the order schema; Herman Miller is in the process; and Haworth has it on their schedule to convert over," Duros says. "Everybody has com-

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model incorporating order, acknowledgement and advance shipping notice transactions. A second introduction, the release of a model delivering electronic catalogs consistently and in real time, was introduced last June. While this schema is expected to go through some modifications (a typical scenario in the development process) version 3.0 of the purchase order model was accepted as a standard in November.

OFDA technology committee

mitted to it."

The fact that such major furnishings companies (and fierce competitors) are coming together to support the standards signals huge potential for the new technology. But OFDA technology committee members aren't celebrating just yet. It will likely be five years before each stage of procurement has received a proper OFDAXml solution and before the entire industry has migrated. ■

For more information on OFDAXml, e-mail perspective@iida.org.



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