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Outdoor Rugs
Offer Style, Up-Sell

by Laurie Rudd

DESIGNERS DIVE INTO OUTDOORS

CONSTANTLY SEARCHING NEW MARKETS FOR growth is a function of every business. For today's interior designers and decorators, providing customers with outdoor décor consult and design assistance is fast becoming a natural avenue for increasing business.

"Outdoor spaces have

become one of the top areas for growth in my business," said Shelley Rodner, C.I.D., Decorating Den Interiors, Ocean View, Del. "My retail sales for outdoor furniture, textiles, lighting and accessories has grown by 85% over the past two years. If you don't discuss or promote this element in a design project



Rodner



Ferguson



Langdon

Continued

with clients, you are leaving dollars on the table.”

Outdoor is gaining momentum among design professionals everywhere. At a recent international franchisee gathering, Rodner and designer Barbara Taybeck held a workshop on designing for outdoor rooms. The overwhelming response to the workshop proved the degree to which designers are looking to the outdoors for greater business opportunities.

Many of those attending, however, expressed initial hesitance toward the outdoor category due to unfamiliarity with outdoor products, fabrics and techniques. Through her presentation, Rodner was able to express the potential the outdoor category holds.

“When meeting with a client, I bring up the topic of exterior spaces at the time of the initial interior consult,” Rodner said. “I do not wait for the client to suggest it, as it often is too late.”

POWERFUL POTENTIAL

For designer, author and makeover television personality, Libby Langdon, the rise in outdoor design business is seen as resulting from the blurring of the lines between indoors and out. “It is a very exciting time now in outdoor décor with all the amazing products that are available,” said Langdon. “You can be just as creative and dynamic in the design of your outdoor space as you would be in indoors.”

As consumers nationwide are creating the demand for professional outdoor design assistance, design professionals are finding they are often looked to for expertise in areas that are new and evolving. “Our clients want to know how to use whatever outdoor space they have to effectively create not only



McKenzie



Hughes



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a unique environment, but also the elements that will make it feel luxurious and comfortable,” said Stephanie Ferguson, Stephanie Ferguson Designs, Stuart, Fla. “The choices for casual living are overwhelming, but exciting.”

“I find my clients want casual yet sophisticated,” said Steve McKenzie, Steve McKenzie, Atlanta. “I think this is achieved with all the innovative materials in the market both in synthetic woven furniture in interesting shapes and the beautiful solution dyed acrylic fabrics offered in sophisticated weaves and textures.”

Growth within the designer category does not exclude the specialty retail platform. Designers can be found within casual retail operations, and demand for their services also is on the rise. “The casual segment has become an integral part of design projects as the casual space is no longer just a deck or gazebo,” said Shelly Roosmalen, furniture manager and buyer, Madison Fireplace, Madison, Miss.

“Whether the project is a new build or a re-model, the homeowner is considering the outdoor living space as part of the plan, not an add-on for later.”

For some design professionals, outdoor design begins from the ground up and includes hard- and soft-scapes. “In the last decade, we have seen tremendous growth especially in our comprehensive outdoor living business,” said Ryan Hughes, Ryan Hughes Design/Build, Palm Harbor, Fla. “When we take on a project, it is with the understanding that we will be able to provide the client with all the elements for total outdoor living.”

Exterior décor is providing those in design-build firms with an avenue for business growth, also. “Hard structures are placed within the project based on the furnishings that will fit perfectly in the space,” Hughes said. “Without a thorough understanding of the furnishings, including placement and performance characteristics, the overall

TEAMING UP PROFESSIONALLY

In new construction projects, design professionals are finding themselves becoming a valued member of the total outdoor design team. “My clients frequently ask for me to join them in the planning stages for many of their projects,” said Shelley Rodner, C.I.D., Decorating Den Interiors, Ocean View, Del. “It helps to have a good working relationship with the architect, which is something I strive for.”

“When it comes to designing outdoor spaces, I work with the architects of my clients mostly on logistical design decisions,” said Libby Langdon, designer, author and makeover television personality. “I want to make sure that I work on the furniture layouts before the structural or electrical elements are finalized. Sometimes I find that architects aren’t current with all of the wonderful items, or they aren’t aware of how the client will want to live in and use their outdoor space.”

functionality of the outdoor space is not complete.”

CASUAL REQUESTS

Whatever the platform for business, design professionals are on the front lines offering consult and solutions to homeowners’ outdoor liv-

ing requests and concerns.

“My clients are looking for easy care, low-maintenance, high-performance items,” Rodner said. “This is especially the case with the textiles and furniture we select. In addition, they are requesting that their outdoor spaces play a double role – a screened porch that serves both as a place for relaxation and dining.”

Performance is a constant issue for the clients of many designers, including Miami-based designer Sofia Joelsson of Sojo Design. “The clients want to know that their furniture is easy to maintain and will last,” said Joelsson. “A good example is the concern that outdoor cushions dry quickly. This is of particular concern here in Miami where tropical rainstorms come at a moment’s notice.”

Besides durability, Langdon relates requests for the unexpected in products and performance selections. “People are realizing the advan-



Joelsson

Continued



Roosmalen

tage of mixing and matching various materials in the same outdoor space. An artful mix of wood, rattan, woven wicker, metal, ceramic and glass adds depth and design dimension to a space and gets away from that stale feeling of a “matchy-matchy set,” Langdon said. “That’s where I come in.”

McKenzie finds space planning is another primary concern of homeowners. “How to divide the spaces into dining, entertaining and relaxing and how those flow together is the key,” McKenzie said. “It is not a single space anymore but rather more intimate rooms for various activities outdoors.”

Madison Fireplace’s Roosmalen sees client issues as an opportunity to provide solutions. “Customers want low-maintenance, carefree products that will withstand the outdoor elements but at the right price,” she said. “Many clients are also faced

with the issue of working with an existing space or layout. Our goal is to decorate and utilize the space to its fullest potential.”

OUTDOOR SOURCES

Shopping for the latest in outdoor décor often takes interior designers to some of the same spots they visit for interior furnishings. “We have several wholesale manufacturers that we buy outdoor furniture from,” Langdon said. “I usually go to the showrooms during the High Point Market and ‘kick the tires’ and take some pictures of the pieces in person. Since most of our clients will buy items that we show them in a catalog rather than needing to see it in person, I need to make sure that at least I have had the chance to sit in everything and make sure it’s super comfortable.”

Additional trade shows such as the Casual Market Chicago or the Las Vegas

Market, as well as local specialty retailers and online entities, are among the sources tapped by designers. They also rely on the manufacturers’ representatives for product sourcing. “From the trade shows, we have established relationships with a trusted group of manufacturer reps,” Hughes said. “We count on them to keep us current on trending features and constructions.”

In sourcing products, design professionals relate preferences to manufacturers that offer leniency with regard to minimums as well as offering customization for one-of-a-kind looks.

OUTDOOR INSPIRATION

With the integration of exterior décor services, design professionals often rely on new sources for inspiration relative to outdoor projects.

“I love browsing on Houzz or Pinterest to find inspiration,” Joellsson said. “I also

make a point to visit hotels that have spectacular outdoor areas.”

Online sources as well as travel are common inspirations for designers.

Some, like McKenzie, don’t need to travel far from home though. He cites local public gardens or photos of gardens as providing valuable inspiration.

“Online building sites like Houzz or Shelter and trade publications provide inspiration,” Hughes said. “My staff and I will catalog all the product ideas we find and organize them in a way that we have our own large database of ideas to tap into when conceptualizing new projects.”

As an industry, outdoor décor has come a long way from picnic tables, benches and dome grills. The magnitude and magic of professionally designed outdoor living is now providing opportunities across the industry that are making a big splash. **CL**