

The Business of Furniture | March 30, 2016

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Looking Ahead: **OM**'s Next 30 Years

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The Business of Furniture
March 30, 2016

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Suzanne Tick is off to a great start in 2016. As head of Suzanne Tick, Inc. the prolific textile designer in January notched a strategic partnership with Tarkett, a provider of flooring and sports surfaces. But wait...there's more.

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If the Chinese economy is in meltdown, one wouldn't know it based on attendance at the show. Halls are mobbed with people, seemingly more than in recent years. Rob Kirkbride reports from the show.

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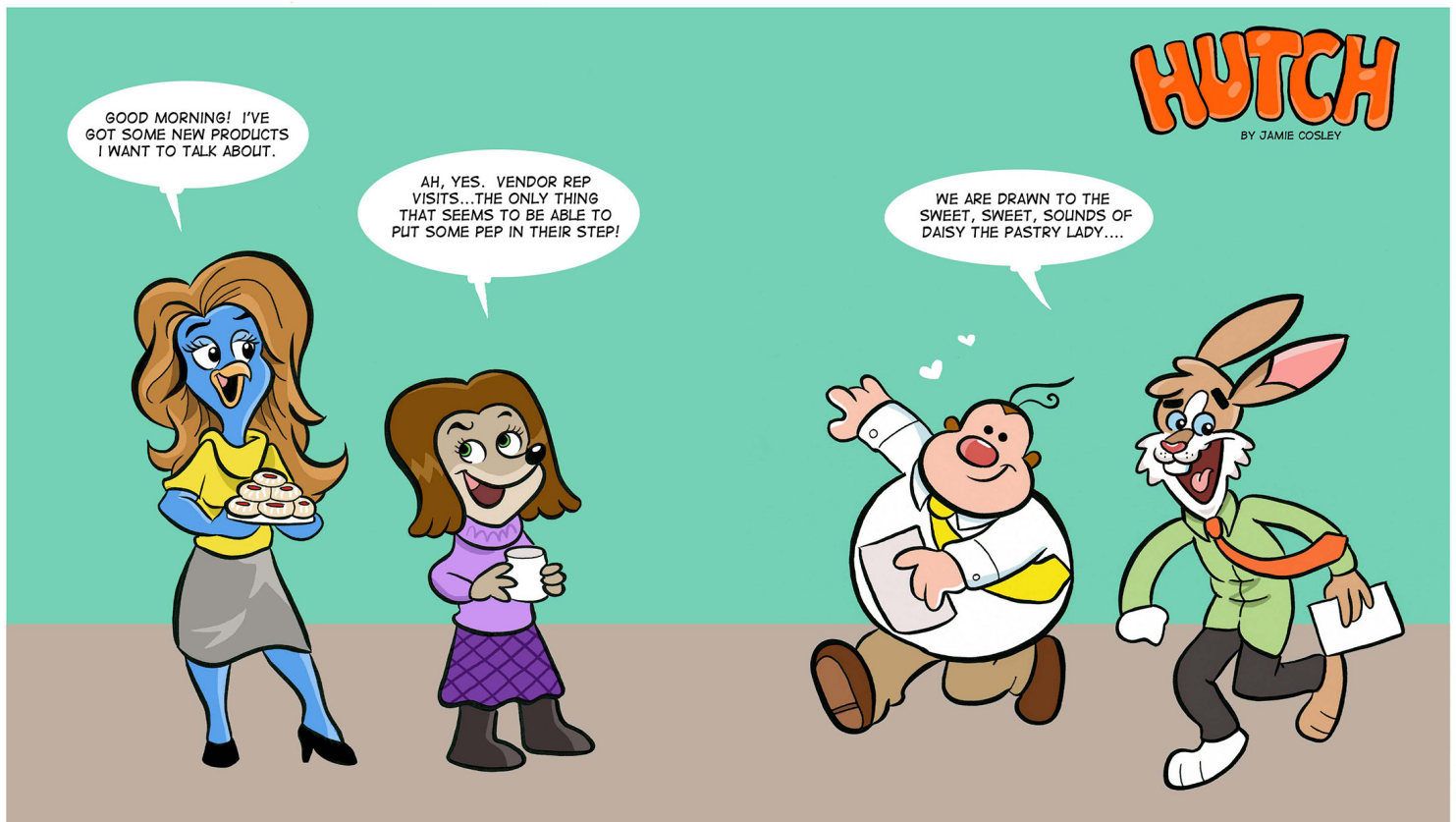
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ROB KIRKBRIDE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF





History is Important but OM i

So how do you get a product like seating to be thought of as exciting?

By Rob Kirkbride



s Ready for the Next 30 Years

When you talk to Wilson Chow about the 30-year history of OM, the word “family” comes up a lot. The CEO of the fast-growing seating company talks about the company throwing a carnival for its employees and their children. A dinner was held for employees to celebrate three decades in business. It was once again a family event where, ironically, they played a big game of Family Feud. They also laughed a lot.

There is much to celebrate. Office Master (as it was called then) has come a long way in 30 years, starting as a regional firm and growing into a national power with arguably the most complete line of seating for the office and health care markets in the industry. If you want a seat, chances are OM has it. And if it doesn't, chances are the company's working on it.

The vision for the company started with Wallace Hwang, who retired a few years ago. He mentored his nephew Chow, who is relatively young to lead an office furniture company but very experienced, having been around furniture his entire life. His father was an executive at a large Los Angeles furniture retailer and later joined Hwang in the creation of Office Master.

“We talk about family a lot,” Chow said. “We have our work family and our personal family. I think both families enable the other — the work family enables the personal family, and the personal family enables the work family.”

Chow enjoyed the anniversary celebrations, but he is not the kind of guy who dwells much on the past. In a meeting with employees, he told them it is important to remember the company's history, but a new chapter is being written. In many ways, the company is at an important crossroad. When the company was just launching, it would celebrate with a meal on an improvised table in the plant. Staying

true to your workforce takes a lot more effort when you have 280 employees instead of the handful it had then.

“It is humbling and exciting at the same time,” Chow said. “I'm not used to slowing down and resting on our laurels, but it was good for us to pause and meet with our families. We talked about the fact that this is now — the ground floor for the next 30 years. If we want continued success, we can't stand still.”

Chow has learned what works and what doesn't. He also has honed his management skills. One of the lessons he's learned: Sometimes the little things still matter, no matter how big the company has gotten. It is important to stay lean and stay connected to the OM family. “You wonder why we don't have 20 vice presidents of this or that? Because it's so important to have that human touch. You can't do that with so many layers of management,” he said.

It is important for OM to stay an original as well. It is OK to admire and even learn from competitors and improve upon what the industry has done, but it is not OK, Chow believes, to copy every approach a competitor takes in the market. “That's for them,” he said. “For me, I've got to come from an original place. It might lead back to what others have done, but if there's a better way, I'm always looking for it.”

For example, who is the chair industry's Uber,



Chow asks? Though he doesn't agree with everything Uber has done, he understands they have revolutionized a process. They have taken something mundane, unsexy and boring — taxi rides — and made it an interesting, exciting process. Chairs are held in about the same regard as a taxi ride. How can the industry revolutionize how chairs are designed and sold? That's the kind of question Chow wants to answer.

He brushes aside all the scorn that has been heaped on by the "sitting is the new smoking" crowd. While he acknowledges the need to move in the office, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with sitting. "If we can just bring chairs back to being sexy again," he said. "We need to be iterative; give seating its good name back again. Some of the stuff going around is preposterous. It's not a bad thing to be sitting, especially when it is in a great office chair."

So how do you get a product like seating to be thought of as an exciting product? It's certainly not going to be easy, but Chow believes if OM can show some personality, it'll go a long way. Customer experience is also critical, as Chow learned with his son during a recent trip to Disneyland.

Disney is a huge corporation, yet Chow argues it has found a way to be soulful and customer-oriented at the same time. "I went into the trip there all cynical. I'm going to be tired, and it's going to be mobbed with people," he said. "Yet there was something intimate. You think it is going to be forced happiness, but it was just this day that left me with wonder. If as a company, we can show a little personality and humanity, customers will know you are genuine about it. I've learned how not to be afraid to show some personality."

Chow wants to add to that balance. Even though he is excited about the future, he



knows he has to temper his enthusiasm with balance. Chow said he wants to build a balanced furniture line with multiple products because he wants OM to be a complete service provider to the industry.

OM is launching two new products this year, and Chow is “comfortable and confident” with what the company has slated. At the same time, the company is launching a website with brand new elements.

Chow’s father, William, and Wallace Hwang started the company to bring reasonably priced ergonomic chairs to the market. While the company always will focus on giving its customers the best value possible for its seating products, the company also has focused more on design and uniquely meeting customer demands over the past several years.

The company has shortened its name to OM and created a new logo composed of a circle with seven threads. The threads represent the

various parts of what Chow believes makes the company strong. One thread of the logo represents its manufacturers’ reps, who Chow sees as truly part of the OM family. Its end users represent another thread. The dealer network is an integral part of the logo as well. Influencers, like architects, ergonomists and designers, represent another thread. Vendors, and the symbiotic relationship with them create another thread. Employees are another thread — the company couldn’t get anything done without them, Chow notes. The final thread represents the company as a whole.

“I want OM to be an original and let the process take it,” he said. “We need to show personality and balance, which can guide you into the future of what you do. This year is important for us because it is the 30th anniversary of the company. But it is also important to remember that it is just the start of another 30 years.” **BoF**

