

BEST OF MARKET ■ FASHION FORWARD

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Strength of interior design drives discussion at Home Accents Today Retail Breakfast

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HOME ACCENTS TODAY'S buyers breakfast this market brought together a group of talented design and retail professionals from across the country to discuss topics ranging from products to profits.

Held at the String & Splinter Club on Oct. 18 and sponsored by the High Point Market Authority, guests included Claire Bell, founder and principal designer, Chic Abode Interiors & Remodeling, Atlanta; Jamie Drake, Jamie Drake Design Associates, New York; Denise McGaha, Denise McGaha Interiors, Dallas; Roxanne Lumme, Roxanne Lumme Interiors, McLean, Va.; Bobbie Cox, Dragonfly Designs, Charlotte, N.C.; Kathy Hynoski, Studio 138, Charlotte, N.C.; Ross and Marie Feltz, Decorating Den Interiors, Easton, Md.; Christina Ishida Doherty and Denise Wenacur, DW Design & Décor, Croton, N.Y.; Rich Schell, Rich Designs Home, Colorado Springs, Colo.; Jennifer Leonard and Kristina Bonadurer, Nifelle Design Fine Interiors, Portland, Ore.; and Susan Bay, Bay Design Store, Naples, Fla.

Jenny Heinzen York, editor in chief of Home Accents Today, moderated the discussion, which was

also attended by High Point Market Authority President and CEO Tom Conley along with staff members from the HPMA and Home Accents Today.

The talk was as lively and varied as the guests, whose design services range from moderately priced to the extreme high end, the East Coast to the West Coast, and all points in between. But across the board, the message was clear:

"FOR MY CLIENTS, HAVING A DESIGNER ISN'T A QUESTION AT ALL — IT'S A NECESSITY." — JAMIE DRAKE

It's a great time to be an interior designer — the housing market has rebounded, consumers of all ages and income levels are seeking the help of design professionals, and manufacturers are doing a better job at delivering the goods.

All of the designers in attendance reported that business is strong, with whole-home projects especially prominent. "For me, whole home protects your identity," Rich Schell said. "I tend to be a little territorial. When I leave, I don't want it to look like I'm the third designer coming into it. I want it to look like I put my stamp on the project."

Denise McGaha has seen her Dallas-based business increase by 40% to 50% over the past several years.

Susan Bay, who is based in the resort area of Naples, Fla., said a lot of her design jobs are in the \$3 million to \$20 million range. And in the store, her retail sales are booming. "Our major profit comes from our accessories — we are the go-to place for art. Since July, our store

of years to complete.

But smaller, mixed-use spaces are on the rise in Charlotte, N.C., where her firm is based, and those dwellings are popular among her Millennial clients who are investing in their first homes. "They literally just show up with a toothbrush and we do everything from scratch," Cox said.

Conversely, Marie Feltz, who owns the Decorating Den Interiors franchise for Western Pennsylvania, said many of her projects in smaller spaces are Baby Boomers who are downsizing. "My clientele tend to be age 65 and above. I recently helped an 86-year-old with a whole-house redo."

Ross Feltz, who works in Decorating Den Interiors' corporate office, said that among the company's some 300 franchise owners, every month continues to be better than the previous month in average sales per client and per franchise owner, with a significant pick-up in furniture sales helping to drive that.

Denise Wenacur of DW Design & Décor said she now has a vast diversity of projects, from families moving into a brand new home to parents who want to redesign a teen's room. "Everyone wants a change now, and they're willing to invest in it," she said.

business has more than doubled every month."

Drake Design Associates is seeing business from a large influx of foreign clients in New York City, Jamie Drake told the group. "They're also contacting us to do projects overseas. I'm working two in the Middle East and one in China, so it's a vast diversity."

Bobbie Cox of Dragonfly Designs said the duration of her projects has changed dramatically in recent years. While she designed smaller spaces during the recession, many of her current projects are entire houses that take a couple

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Susan Bay said her business has adapted to a customer base that demands instant gratification. While her store business has grown, she finds clients are less willing to wait for special orders. "They want it now and they want it fast," she said. "Our major business comes from accessories, but we do a lot of upholstery as well. We've developed a fast design process for them. They don't want to order; they just want it done."

Bay said she is doing most of her design business off the floor, and several designers mentioned a decrease in requests for custom pieces because their clients don't want to wait for their new décor to arrive. At the very high end, Jamie Drake said about 95% of his projects include special orders.

Denise McGaha's trademark is "design with a deadline" — a promise to complete projects within about 90 to 120 days. For projects with a fast timeline, she said quick-ship products are imperative. "Manufacturers are catching up, and there are a lot of ready-to-ship options," she said. "If you look at the finances of that model, you make money a lot faster."

"I don't even spec anything that's not in stock," added Claire Bell of Chic Abode Interiors & Remodeling.

One attendee shared the story of an interior designer who offers a fast design program that she refers to as "Booty Calls."

Several of the designers said the internet and the Millennial generation are key drivers of the instant gratification trend, and some noted the popularity of shows on networks like HGTV that depict home makeovers in a seemingly short amount of time.

But the attendees also cited the importance of HGTV in introducing the general public to interior design. "They see it on HGTV, they try it, they see it's harder than it looks, so we come in and take away the anxiety and uncertainty," one designer said.

Some of the designers mentioned clients who tried to design rooms on their own, but purchased pieces in the wrong scale and didn't want to risk making another mistake.

"There is more appreciation for what we bring to the table,"



"THIS IS A WHITE-GLOVE SERVICE, I'M RESPONSIBLE FOR IT UNTIL I GET IT IN YOUR HOUSE AND LOOKING NICE."
— DENISE WENACUR



said Roxanne Lumme. "If they say they've made a mistake and they now get that they don't get it, I'm all over that. ... There is an appreciation for the added value we bring."

"For my clients, having a designer isn't a question at all — it's a necessity," said Jamie Drake. "What they want can't be done quickly. Sometimes it's a third ... seventh or eighth home. More of our profits are from construction design and management."

Some of the designers said clients are more involved in the design process today, partially because of the vast assortment of resources available to them online and on television — and their involvement can be a benefit and a challenge.

Susan Bay said she works with some clients who want the freedom to make their own design choices,

but they need help from a professional to develop the look and find the right scale. Dragonfly Designs' Bobbie Cox said nine times out of 10, her clients are on site during the design process. "You have to be completely transparent," she said.

Rich Schell said the internet also enables clients to do more research about product and design than ever before. "They're coming in far more educated and bringing tear sheets and asking 'Can I have this?'" he said.

Many of the designers agreed that some clients' propensity for online research is a challenge when they find product online for lower prices than the designers are able to offer. Some designers said they now allow clients to find product somewhere cheaper if they want it, but the client is responsible for the

delivery of that product and all the challenges that come with it, such as damage to the item.

"This is a white-glove service," Denise Wenacur said. "I'm responsible for it until I get it in your house and looking nice, but if you want to find it somewhere cheaper, then you're responsible for the delivery and the dings."

Some said they work with retailers and local vendors to obtain better prices, and others insist on clients backing away from online research after a certain point.

"I tell them, 'If you want to work with me, you've got to stop shopping,'" said Marie Feltz.

In recent years, the home furnishings industry has become more accommodating to interior designers, evidenced by the increased programming, promotions and services geared toward design professionals attending the markets. "The industry is going more in the direction of designers instead of retailers — how we're welcomed in showrooms, how much more accommodating the reps are, what the vendors are offering," one attendee said. "The service aspect and the rep is the big deal. They must be ready to deal with the issues we work with."

The group concurred and said that when working with their vendors, it's all about customer service and quality of product.

"To me, it's relationship-driven," Claire Bell said. "I will try harder to meet with a rep who's willing to meet me at Starbucks with samples. I want to celebrate my great reps."

"We make a lot of our decisions based on the quality of the product, the work ethic, the service," said Jennifer Leonard. "We have clients that have been with us for years. They're willing to wait for good quality, timeless pieces, but need someone to stand behind the product."

"At Decorating Den Interiors, we have a network of approved suppliers," Ross Feltz said. "We tell our franchise owners that by working with preferred suppliers, you're working with someone who knows our company and our concept."

Asked about product voids they're seeing in the market, the group responded, in unison, "case goods," particularly small, functional pieces and end tables. ■