

What does the end user consumer want in a furniture product?

You made mention that the “consumer” believes that hardwood frames are better than plywood frames. I am going on the idea that you mean the end user consumer and not the retail buyers.

In order to learn what the real end user really shops for, I would encourage you to take a couple of Saturdays and arrange with a retail friend to come into their store and observe end users making a purchasing decision.

Normally, I think over 75% of the time, this person will be a female. As most female furniture consumers hate the retail furniture environment, few - if any - come in just to “look around” and see what is new. No, they have a specific reason to be in the store. The reason they hate to being there is that they will have to make a choice of literally thousands - if not millions - of fabrics and other options. Like you and I, they don't have the time to make sure they have chosen the best options and are getting a ‘good’ deal.

So Ms. Consumer comes into the store and starts to look around. She has a need for a sofa or some other product to either replace something that has fallen apart, or she has purchased a home and needs to add furniture. So she comes to the store with the size of product(s) and a color scheme in mind.

She will spot something in the color she desires, or is close to something she thinks will work in her color scheme. Next, she will walk over and feel of the arm - usually. Is the fabric “feel” to her liking? Is the arm padded to her liking? She will then step back and look over the product. She might not know what exactly she is looking at, but if her mind's eye is offended by something, such as stripes not being straight, gaps in cushions, patterns not centered, pucker or staple marks, bad welt, etc., she will move on without even understanding why. Her mind was simply offended by the lack of symmetry in the product.

Next, she will sit on the product. Does it meet her requirements for comfort? Is it too shallow? Too deep? Too high? Too low? Too hard? Too soft? Can she get in and out of it easily?

She will then call over her spouse and ask him to sit on the product. They will discuss it. He will then look at the price and decide if he can afford it, or will it fit on his credit card. If she does not have a spouse, she will undertake this step by herself.

Next, they will check the warranty. Who provides the warranty? What if something goes wrong? Do they trust the retail store to help them?

Normally the spouse will then dicker with the sales person on price and delivery options.

That is the sequence of the end user making a purchasing decision for upholstered furniture. There is no discussion of springing, frame construction, cushioning, fabric construction, etc. Most savvy manufacturers cover this information with point-of-sale displays, and very informative web sites. Many customers come into a store knowing more about a product than does the sales person in the store.

Now, we have the interdiction of our retail genius sales person who says, “Well, this other product has an all hardwood frame.” Then the retail sales genius will go into their understanding of why a hardwood frame is superior. Their customer says, “Well, I just don’t like the fabric, (look, comfort, etc.) does this one I like better have a hardwood frame?” Genius sales person replies, “Well, no, but it is just as good.” Result - customer walks away and is even more confused.

So here’s the simple unvarnished truth. Historically, first came case goods. (Case goods are the term associated with Chest-of Drawers, Hardwood Bedroom furniture, etc.) From case goods evolved upholstery frames. Case goods were made with hardwood, primarily because that was the wood that was available in the North East that would take a good finish. The case goods’ upholstery frame made similar to a case frame was then double doweled, screwed, glued, etc. A case goods frame was and is designed to support a normal vertical load.

An upholstery frame must be able to support a dynamic load such as a teen age daughter talking on the phone to one of her friends. She is on the arm, then on the back, then laying down then sitting up, then jumping on the seat, etc.

If a standard hardwood upholstered frame is built as a case goods frame, once the glue joint is cracked, the frame is in failure. Once a hidden knot is cracked, the frame is in failure. If the hardwood is ‘wind shook’, and no one finds it, the frame will be in failure if dynamically loaded. Once in failure, the dowels will break, the screws will work out, and the frame will start to squeak, then get loose. The arm will wiggle, etc.

If you don’t believe this, I suggest you have a true case goods type hardwood frame made, then have a true engineered plywood frame made to identical specifications. Take them to a reputable testing lab and have both tested to destruction. I have found the dynamic loaded case good type upholstery frame will fail between 15 and 20,000 cycles. The testing lab will turn the testing machine off at 100,000 cycles and call it a day for a well engineered plywood frame..

So how do we get the true information out about upholstery frames? The major plywood suppliers, or their associations, need to get the tests done and then make this information available to the retail sales people and to the general public.

The last thing our industry needs to do is to confuse another ‘end user’ customer more than we already have by our millions of options, fabrics, etc. Mrs. Consumer might just turn to her spouse and say, “To heck with it, go ahead and get the plasma TV you wanted..” And, our upholstered furniture industry loses another sale.