

# Travelling showroom beats forecast by 29%

TORONTO — Introducing nine new products at the January floor covering show where all mills are exhibiting a dazzling array of designs and colors could be a little like setting off fireworks against a blinding sun.

Bill Wolfhard, vice-president, sales, at Burlington Carpet Mills, who wanted to make sure retailers would remember Burlington's nine new products displayed at the floor covering show last January, found the answer in a travelling showroom.

Big, rented trailers, equipped with waterfall stands and all displays used in Burlington's showrooms across Canada, were pulled by salesmen's cars to towns and cities across the country.

The four travelling showrooms, one for each district, were passed relay-fashion from one salesman to another. Together, the showrooms completed a cross-Canada tour during the six weeks from Feb. 1 to mid-March.

The usual procedure was for store owner or department manager to visit the showroom during the day while the entire sales staff came in the evening for sell-

ing and product training sessions.

One evening training session at Barrie, Ont., for example, was attended by 40 to 50 people from all stores in the city.

Retailers at Yorkton, Sask., drove approximately 150 miles to attend the showing at Calgary, then drove home the same evening.

Most showings were attended by sales managers who hoppedscotch across their territories while the showrooms were on tour. Executives from head office flew to major centres for presentations.

"The travelling showrooms gave our salesmen a chance to talk with all their customers on a personal basis without interruptions," comments Mr. Wolfhard.

## Obsolete Quickly

"Floor covering is now a fashion business and very competitive," he says. "Technology, fibres, styling, everything, has changed in the last five years. Product knowledge becomes obsolete quickly. Salesmen interested in their careers, want to know about today's products."

The travelling showrooms boosted Burlington's sales 29% above the company's forecast for the first six months of the year. Says Mr. Wolfhard: "The showroom program was the only thing that was different this year from last year. But apart from that, we had damned good carpet."

Mr. Wolfhard considers the 29% increase only "a one-season effect. Results of the sales and product training will go on for many seasons," he adds.

Thirty cities across Canada will be included when the pro-

gram is repeated this fall.

Recalling the decision to launch the travelling showrooms, Mr. Wolfhard says achieving the impact the company wanted for its nine new products was virtually impossible in the January show setting. "First, all customers from across Canada don't come to the show. And with so much going on all at once, those who do, can get confused."

Mr. Wolfhard maintains many retailers want to "just look at the floor covering show and make their decision later when the salesman comes around."

Burlington organized its travelling showrooms with the idea of "being first out in the field and showing its line to retailers before they saw anyone else's."

Letters were sent to customers inviting them to a private showing of the line in their city at a specified time.

Mr. Wolfhard subscribes to the theory retailers should spend the first day at the floor covering show "seeing what's new and getting a feel of the market. The second day, they should settle down and pick out what they want."

He advises every dealer to have key suppliers and get what he wants from them.

He suggests a retailer's main sources of supply be held at three. "When a dealer groups his purchases according to three main companies, he is more meaningful to his suppliers. The retailer who settles down to three suppliers also knows more about his products, about color and styling and how they're made, than someone who buys helter-skelter from anyone."

Mr. Wolfhard maintains the retailer who buys from seven suppliers doesn't know much about any of them or the products they produce.

Every manufacturer should have a specialty, he says. "If every manufacturer would settle down to a specialty he would become good at it, and everyone would be better off."

Mr. Wolfhard points out Burlington specializes in shags and contract fabrics.

## Hybrid Is Different

The one exception to his theory that retailers should have three main sources of supply is the mass merchant, or what Mr. Wolfhard calls "the hybrid. He operates on a much broader source of supply which is good for his business because it means he gets clear-outs from everyone."



BILL WOLFHARD, vice-president, sales, at Burlington Carpet Mills.

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Listing the four types of carpet stores in Canada as carpet specialty shop, mass merchandiser, furniture store with carpet department and department store, Mr. Wolfhard predicts in the long run, "maybe 10 or 15 years", the mass merchant will take business away from the furniture store with carpet department.

"Carpet specialty shops and department stores always will be with us," he adds.

He advises the furniture retailer with a carpet department to assess profit in terms of return on floor space "and go after what brings in best returns for least amount of space. And vice-versa, the floor covering retailer with a furniture department, should analyze sales the same way. Effort put into other product categories, whether furniture or white goods, should be in proportion with returns."

### **Up Can Be Down**

Noting an overall increase of approximately 20% in floor covering sales in Canada this year, Mr. Wolfhard says the retailer whose sales this year are only 15% ahead of last year is really down 5%.

"If a retailer's sales are not expanding with the national increase, he should find ways and means of achieving this growth. In some cases, there are valid reasons a retailer falls behind the national growth, such as lack of installers or limitations on the amount of business a store can do."

For relaxation, Mr. Wolfhard rides his Honda 350. "The Honda is my escape," he says. "It gives me a chance to get away from everything and think."