

Deeper Shade of Green

By Holly Barbo

Chipping Away at the Landfill Problem

Looking at the green equation brings up a number of issues. One is the landfill concern. There is an interesting dichotomy that has been occurring with our waste habits. In 1960, 1.3 pounds of stuff was thrown away each day per person. Today the amount is 4.2 pounds per day for every man, woman and child. We could respond by saying that we are now recycling, which we were not really doing in 1960. Recycling is good, and some of the recycled material gets used in the new green furniture, like recycled fibers in cushions or fabric and recycled steel in springs, but that doesn't change the pounds per day increase. What happens to the rest? We're back to the landfill issue.

As an industry, we are trying. The American Home Furnishings Alliance (AHFA) has a program that some of our manufacturers have been a part of, "Enhancing Furniture's Environmental Culture" (EFEC), which is aimed at reducing a company's environmental impact and landfill costs.

As retailers, we have similar challenges when we deliver something to a customer's home and take away an old piece. What do we do with the rejected furniture? If it's simply not wanted but is still usable, there are any number of organizations like "Help1Up," "1-800-Got Junk," the Salvation Army and Goodwill that specialize in getting the unwanted (but still usable) furniture to shelters and to people with needs. These organizations are still our best and first choice. But what happens to the broken furniture that really can't be used again?

I understand that some larger furniture retailers have giant grinding/chipping machines that can reduce a sofa to a pile of bite-sized pieces which takes up less landfill space. There are also some landfill companies that take the particle boards and wood parts and grind them up into ground cover chips for people to use in their yards. These two solutions are laudable efforts. Yet they still are imperfect answers to the problem. What goes on the ground, either in a landfill or as ground cover chips, still breaks down and eventually gets into our ground water. If those wood chips have chemicals like formaldehyde in them, then we are still passing that into our environment. We need more creative, innovative work in this area.

It is not just we, as retailers, working with this problem. Our consumers are wrestling with the dilemma also. I have a friend who had an old bent, ruined sleeper sofa. She and her husband worked hard tearing it apart to recycle what they could. They still ended up taking what was left to the landfill. Many people don't put out that much effort. We all have seen abandoned furniture left at the side of the road or littering a field.

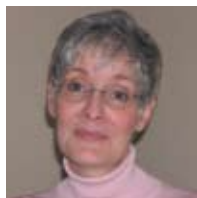
I live in a small, "green"-minded city. Our landfill supports the city and the surrounding

area, serving 185,000 people total. The "sanitary site managers" report that 10 to 15 sofas a day are dropped off at that landfill. That doesn't count the chairs, shelving/storage pieces, etc., that are also thrown away daily. That mind-boggling number is just for sofas.

Let's turn this problem another way. Why

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is this furniture "unusable"? The cause could be an "Act of God" like a hurricane or a landslide. Those catastrophic phenomena are definitely hard on furniture. Another possibility is simply that the furniture is designed to be thrown away in five years. Taking shortcuts in how the furniture is constructed—and what it's made of—has put us in this unhealthy place. How did we get here? It doesn't matter if it was economics or simply a relaxing of our standards—we have done it to ourselves. If we are truly concerned about our environment, we need to take a hard look at that trend. As retailers, we can start looking a little more closely at what's available to us and to our customers. The better our choices, the better the product we can offer our customer and our environment. **HFB**



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