

Holland's Sparkeology Co. will make first public appearance at NeoCon

By Julia Bauer | The Grand Rapids Press

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HOLLAND -- A rare event will unwrap at the big NeoCon office furniture show in June: Sparkeology Co., a hip new furniture company from Holland, will make its first public appearance.

Even stranger is its parentage: the new business springs from Worden Co., the traditionally quiet maker of library furniture at 199 E. 17th St.

"We wanted to diversify, but not within the Worden brand," said Robin Hendrick Lane, who runs the family business with her brother Tavan. "We looked to expand beyond that, and really tap into the next generation of designers."

One of the start-up's first products is tough to pigeon-hole. "Flip" is part table, part stool, and part storage, depending on whether it's used bottom-up or top-down.

Just six weeks ago, the team who developed Sparkeology decided to jump into the June 14-16 NeoCon, and enter their Flip design in a "Best of NeoCon" contest for furniture accessories. Other members of the inaugural lineup include Al, the aluminum chair; Pete, the trumpet-base table; Manny, the ottoman; and Ty, the free-standing storage unit that ties the pieces together.

"Coming up with all that is fun," Lane said.

Ideas for the new direction began evolving last fall. First, Worden turned to longtime marketing partner Lin Ver Meulen at Square One Design in Grand Rapids for research and brand development. Then, Square One recommended Grand Rapids-based Via Design's Valerie Schneider and sister company Viable, with Scott Sikkema, for engineering and design.

A separate company made sense, Lane said, so Worden's expert library furniture designers weren't distracted from the parent company's core mission.

Sparkeology will target markets in higher education and community spaces, an environment Worden knows well from the librarian's viewpoint.

The start-up has a very recent **Facebook page**, **Twitter account**, and Web site at **sparkeology.com**. Although the designs aren't online yet, a link to e-mail is on the Web site. More is coming, Lane said. Meanwhile, several decisions are still on the drawing board, including how to distribute the products and how much they'll cost.

"We just think it's important" to make the move, Lane said. "It has been a while for anyone from around here to start something new." After NeoCon, the young business will be on display with Worden at the parent company's prime annual showcase: the American Library Association convention June 24-29 in Washington, D.C. Sparkeology products will hit the market in September, just a year after its journey began.

"It's the fastest thing I've ever done," Lane said. She isn't worried about the mechanics of making Flip, Al, Ty, and other characters in the cast.

"We know how to make furniture," she said. So far, three employees are dedicated to the new brand in customer service and engineering. Other functions, including sales, production, and purchasing, will be shared by Worden and its start-up.

"We'll do that until we have a better understanding of what the demand is," Lane said.

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