

Sparkeology

When a long-established library furniture maker, design firm and marketing company get together, sparks can fly when it comes to creative new furniture. Such is the case with Sparkeology, a new West Michigan rooted subsidiary of the Worden Co., and collaborative venture with architecture and design firm Via

Design and its sister company Viable and graphic design firm Square One Design.

There are a lot of cooks in the kitchen, but so far, the recipe seems to be simmering with creativity. Though the company is launching nine new products at NeoCon, the



Flip

most interesting is Flip, a piece of furniture even the company is having trouble putting into a single category.

It all began when Worden asked Square One to help it expand into the architecture and design market. Lin Ver Meulen of Square One said, "We dove into the market trends and found some significant changes in the way people are using libraries and public spaces. Beyond the obvious impacts of wireless networks and portable devices, we noted that these places are becoming community hubs and connection points. Those behavioral shifts indicated a need to rethink product design and business strategy, not just marketing."

Worden, with more than 60 years of manufacturing experience and strong distribution channels, was examining how it could branch out, said Robin Hendrick Lane, vice president of marketing at Worden. "We were already looking at how Worden could expand into other marketplaces," she said. "The idea of starting a new brand to do that made sense. It allows us to focus on new things without taking anything away from Worden."

While Sparkeology will operate independently, it has the advantage of drawing on Worden's strengths. Branding and marketing will be handled by Square One, while Sparkeology's design and engineering will be led by Valerie Schmeider of Via Design and Scott Sikkema of Viable. Delegating these functions allows Worden to maintain its own focus instead of burdening its designers and engineers with a new product line. The process is made even more efficient by the close relationship between Via and Viable, according to Sikkema. "Whenever there's a road block, other designers and production companies have to schedule meetings to work through it," he said. "I can just walk across the room and talk it through with Val. That gives us a huge advantage in terms of time to production, with far fewer prototypes and iterations."

Like Worden, which has carved out a niche in the library furniture market, Sparkeology hopes to do the same for furniture in community and public spaces. "We felt it important to start with a new brand, a fresh idea," Hendrick Lane said. "This all sort of happened last fall. Community space is just huge. People are working in different ways and people are learning in different ways."

Different indeed. The company's first new product is Flip.

Shaped like an "X," Flip can be used in a variety of ways: as a stool to sit on; to hold a user's bag and coffee; or as a table to do some quick work with a laptop. It is simple and easy to use and understand and very mobile for use in a common area. It doesn't have a specific top or bottom and it's made to flip upside or down.

In total, the company has nine pieces to show at NeoCon -- Sparkeology will occupy space 8111 on the eighth floor. The collection is designed to work together or as individual pieces.

Al is the company's next introduction. It is a classic, lightweight chair that can be specified with upholstery, metal or wood. Ty is a piece of furniture used to tie everything else together. It can connect or unify a space in a row, pod or one- or two-sided spaces. It is also a hub for power and can be ganged for long runs of study stations. Ty-Pad links spaces like Ty, but with a built-in seat back.

Ben is a simple cushioned bench that can be used with Ty or dropped anywhere to create short-term seating for one or a group. Manny is the ottoman, built with a sturdy steel base which can be specified with fabric for a seating area or inviting lounge. Stu is a workhorse table that can be used for study, work, lunch or just about anything else. It comes in a sled base that makes it easy to move around.

Pete is another table that can morph depending on the options that include a square, or rectangular top or a short or tall height. The table comes with a resin top and choice of base colors. Finally, Phil is a easy to use bookshelf system.

Sparkeology is in for a busy summer. The first products will launch at NeoCon and then the company will go directly to the American Library Association convention. Sparkeology furniture is flexible for just about anything. "The mix of materials provide a casual and very tactile feel," Schmeider said, "while the finish options give designers enough flexibility to create unique color palettes. I am especially excited about the details that add a touch of playfulness and whimsy into the line."

All Sparkeology products will be made of strong, lightweight materials, making them long lasting and ideal for easy, on-the-spot configuration. Materials and processes are specifically chosen to minimize environmental impact, and the majority of materials are locally sourced in West Michigan, according to Sikkema.

The products introduced this year are the first of many that Sparkeology plans to bring to market on an ongoing basis. Ver Meulen explains, "We want to start a conversation with the A&D market, seeking their input and quickly responding to their needs."

That two-way conversation is just one component of Sparkeology's commitment to uncomplicated, straightforward customer service. The young business is also seeking ways to engage with others who want to do good. "We believe strongly in local community," said Hendrick Lane. "As a company, we're always looking for ways to give back to our own, and we felt that it was important for Sparkeology to do something like that for our customers as well." *Rob Kirkbride*