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## NeoCon 2010 Day One

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by [Rob Kirkbride](#)

For all the hand wringing, consternation and worry about what the first day of NeoCon would bring, exhibitors and attendees were treated to a solid day of new furniture, new ideas and new thinking. Overall, it was a good day in Chicago, much like last year in terms of attendance and innovation.

It seems the industry has learned to live with the new reality -- flocks of people are not going to pack the halls of the Merchandise Mart to see the latest and greatest the industry has to offer. Manufacturers are going to have to work for the crowds.



Nowhere was that more apparent than on the seventh and eighth floors, home to the show's temporary booths. By early afternoon, some were nearly vacant. Still, those that worked to attract the attention of architects and designers at the show found success and strong crowds. Take Sparkeology, for example. The tiny West Michigan company was swamped all day because of its strong marketing plan, attractive booth and promise of new products to show off.

The company's Jamie Stuursma said the temporary showroom was packed from the moment it opened -- and even a bit before. Chalk meant for scribbling on a chalkboard in the booth was raided before the show opened. Attendees wrote notes of encouragement to the company for its first NeoCon show. "It has been amazing throughout," he said. "People are loving the furniture, space, everything. Our message is hitting at a lot of different levels."

From small companies to large, the mood was generally good on the first day of the show, which runs through Wednesday in Chicago. Haworth Chief Executive Officer Franco Bianchi said NeoCon was shaping up to be a little better than last year. "I was concerned we would have fewer people at the show this year," he said. "I'm feeling very positive and very surprised. There has been a very positive reaction to our showroom space."



Indeed, Haworth still has one of the most stylish showrooms at the Merchandise Mart. Though the company kept its water feature, much of the showroom feels new, though only 20 percent of the showroom is actually new. If you haven't seen it, check out how the heavy ropes hanging from the ceiling are used to define space. It is worth a look.

Regardless of the happy talk that is sure to come at every NeoCon from the optimists in the industry, there is a dark undercurrent to the event. Six month ago, many executives believed that they would have a clearer picture of the economic outlook by now. Financial conditions remain maddeningly murky, though some are reporting stronger sales to start the year.

Though a few products shine -- make sure to see the Steelcase node student desk and Knoll Antenna benching system if you need inspiration -- this year certainly won't be remembered for its strong slate of new products. There's not much new to see and many of the new products released don't add a lot of pop or innovation to what's been done before. If there is any trend when it comes to new products, it has to be the introduction of lower-cost additions to companies' lineups. The HON Company has a new lower priced office chair as does many others. The sweet list spot for ergonomic task chairs seems to have dropped from about \$1,000 to \$750 or \$700.

Vitra, with its greatly expanded showroom on the 11th floor doesn't worry about cost. The company believes its value is in its quality, said the company's CEO Hanns-Peter Cohn. Too many companies worry about environmental finishes and veneers without looking at the true environmental cost of the product. Vitra believes that if a product lasts 30 years and remains stylish and valued by its owner, it is much more environmentally viable than a product that is measured by how it is constructed.

That, along with a host of furniture that is gaining popularity in North America (Vitra pushed benching in the U.S. market more than 10 years ago). Overall, the company was having a strong show. "We had a full house almost at once," said the company's lead executive for the U.S. market Jo Kaiser, who outlined the company's major projects at Hyundai, BMW and Cal Tech University.

Though the company will never be a major player in North America and has no such ambition, it does hope to triple its sales here in the next five years. It is doing well to achieve those goals. Vitra is more than 60 percent ahead of its takings compared to last year.

Innovation always sells and it is not always found through the industry's largest players. Group Dekko has a new program called Project Greenback and allows for power distribution and power management at the workstation level. With its partner in the project, Watt Stopper, the company has a new product that will fit in any standard cubicle outlet space that can control energy output based on occupancy of the individual space.

Though there was a positive vibe on the first day of the show, many are holding their breath to see how the second day will turn out. If last year and Monday's crowds are any indication, the show will see a major drop off on day two.

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