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Hand-me-downs smart thinking for today's offices

Plush furniture from dot-coms gone bust finds second life in area business suites

By Kathy Sciacca
Staff Writer

The \$100,000 office-furniture suites of the 1990s dot-com boom are finding second lives in the offices of smart-thinking and penny-wise businesses in the Merrimack Valley.

Instead of opting for new furniture from high-end manufacturers, cost-conscious businesses are choosing nice, flexible and durable furniture that's lived beyond its high-end price tag, according to James W. Henry, president of Work Place Furniture Solutions of Andover.

The change in approach represents just one more way that businesses are working smarter to succeed in a challenging marketplace.

"Businesses today don't want to spend 20 percent or more of their budgets on office furniture," Henry said.

With plenty of high-end dot-com companies going out of business, there's an abundant supply of furniture that can be re-used and recycled.

And that's where Henry and his company come in.

"I'm not just a salesman. I'm a problem-solver," said Henry.

Henry is currently trying to buy up an eight-room suite of high-end furniture that belonged to a Boston consulting firm that has lost its government contract and is leaving town.

"The furniture cost \$100,000 for basically eight offices and a reception area," he said. "I've offered them 10 cents on the dollar. I don't know if they'll go for it or not. But, what are they going to do with it?"

While \$100,000 for eight rooms of new furniture may seem expensive, office furniture often costs more because of its function, design and durability.

To save money for his clients, Henry consults on converting existing offices to new uses, interviews staff about their new needs — and scours the market for hand-me-downs to meet them.

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Thus, he will contact his many sources for recycled, but still-serviceable furniture and create a whole new, more workable office space.

Clients are happy to save 75 to 80 percent of the cost of new furniture — and add dollars the bottom line.

Another bonus: Pre-owned furniture has withstood the test of time.

"The surplus business was invented by Murphy's Law," Henry said. "With new furniture, anything that can go wrong will go wrong."

"With new furniture, you have to measure it, coordinate the proper measurement with the manufacturer, make sure it's not too big and then be there for the set up," he explained.

With used or recycled furniture, the designer already knows the size and dimensions and how it will work best beforehand.

"It may not look that good at first glance," he said. "But we come in, set it up, wipe it down — and it looks great."

Cost-conscious businesses have other options as well.

For instance, Henry helped a group of three lawyers set up their new office with previously used furniture. The attorneys got

the formal look their practice demanded without the high price tag a startup can't afford.

The solution? "Container furniture," which comes in several sections and can be assembled easily to create the look of a luxury office suite at a more reasonable cost.

"It comes up in containers from Brazil. It has a nice cherry finish. It looks great when it is all put together," said Henry.

Henry also helps clients to choose furniture that matches their personal preferences.

In many offices, big spaces are carved up into smaller offices through use of a cubicle system. But not all cubicles are the same. In fact, there are two styles: European and American.

European-style cubicles are open with shorter partitions and are designed for use in smaller space. American-style cubicles tend to have higher walls — up to 65 inches high — and provide users with more personal space.

"With the higher walls, you cannot see anything in the cubicle next to you," Henry explained. "I, personally, like the European style because I'm more social, as are most salesmen."