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# BUILT *for* SUCCESS

Florida shade company prospers as residential and hospitality markets expand.

BY LARRY THOMAS

**AS 2020 BEGAN**, manufacturer FiberBuilt Umbrellas & Cushions had a lot to celebrate. It was the Florida-based company's 20th anniversary, and all signs pointed to another year of strong sales for its signature umbrellas that feature flexible fiberglass ribs.

But as we all experienced, about three months into the year, the beginnings of a worst-case scenario unfolded. A pandemic brought the hospitality business to a halt, and since the majority of FiberBuilt's sales come from hospitality customers, within weeks those stellar sales forecasts became irrelevant.

"Prior to the pandemic, we were on track to have a banner year in 2020," says Chantell Holmes, the company's retail sales manager. "As you might expect ... sales took a hit. But we continued to fill orders that were already in house, and we saw an increase in retail sales for standard and custom products."



Above: Lucaya umbrella from the Prestige Collection  
Top: Venice umbrella from the Euro Collection

Despite the downturn, she notes that the company's CEO, Paul Knapp, didn't lay off any employees and kept operations running throughout the pandemic by implementing a combination of social distancing, mask wearing and remote work procedures for its staff. He also centered sales efforts on the retail market since so many people were now spending all day every day at home. "FiberBuilt's employees have always been there, giving their best for the company, and we were determined to be there for them as well," Knapp says.

The company even forged ahead with plans for a new 88,000-square-foot headquarters and factory in Pompano Beach, Florida, which opened its doors in January of this year. The strategy paid off. As pandemic restrictions have eased in recent months, those 2020 forecasts have already been surpassed.

"The hospitality market is definitely sprucing up and preparing for vacation and business travelers who have a pent-up desire to get away from home," Holmes says.

"As restrictions have eased, which fortunately coincided with the beginning of the casual furniture season, we've been slammed with new business. We're now focused on hiring additional employees, but that continues to be a challenge."

The company also has seen a solid uptick in retail sales for both its umbrellas and custom replacement cushions. "We chalk that up to homeowners' desire to reimagine their surroundings in a more comfortable, colorful, fashionable light," Holmes says. "People began improving their outdoor space when the indoor walls started closing in."

She notes that sales of FiberBuilt's Market umbrellas have remained strong, along with a noteworthy increase in orders for Cantilever, Beach, and Lucaya umbrellas.

According to Holmes, homeowners have come to appreciate the importance of shade products as they refurbish outdoor living space because it allows them to enjoy their time outside more fully. That has resulted in increased orders for larger canopies that deliver shade footprints of 10-foot square and 13-foot diameter.

"There's also a meaningful interest in umbrellas with design options such as scalloped valances and fringe, as well as

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more unique shapes that bring an additional element of architectural appeal or contemporary silhouettes,” she says.

The new Pompano Beach facility includes a showroom geared toward interior designers – a move that proved fortuitous and has helped drive increased business with the design channel. Many designers, in fact, now bring clients to the showroom to see the products in person.

“Designer business has increased, not only for residences, but also for condominiums, HOAs, schools and RV parks,” Holmes says. “When a designer gets involved, the specifications for the umbrellas tend to become more creative with the addition of custom options such as scalloped valances, fringes and logos.”

Plus, they coordinate the canopies with orders for matching cushions to update the comfort of the existing furniture. She adds that designers sometimes choose separate fabrics for the top and underside of the umbrella, which further customizes the client’s outdoor space.

But while the retail segment, which includes e-commerce sites, is showing impressive post-pandemic growth, the

hospitality and contract furniture segments remain the company’s bread and butter – accounting for more than half of sales.

Of late, Holmes notes that the company is seeing increasing numbers of retailers establish contract furniture divisions or devote more resources to market segments such as condominiums, apartment complexes, time share developments and office parks with outdoor seating and dining areas.

“The construction, specifications and durability of products appropriate to these locations are more in line with hospitality for which FiberBuilt’s wide array of shade products are designed,” she says. “We have maintained that commitment to commercial-grade strength. Homeowners appreciate that



*Umbrellas with scalloped valances are increasingly popular.*

FiberBuilt’s umbrellas are made for use in high-traffic and high-wind locations.”

The new headquarters and factory have enabled the company to maintain its domestic production of all cushions, pillows, poufs, and the majority of its umbrella canopies and bases. Holmes says some components are imported, but most come from U.S. suppliers, which has shielded the company from some of

the supply chain woes that have plagued all segments of the home furnishings industry for more than a year.

“Supply chain issues remain a concern, but we’re working with our domestic and overseas suppliers to bring in components as quickly as possible,” she says. “We’re doing everything we can to bring our lead times back to pre-pandemic time frames.” ■