

Here's a great way to start off the New Year – with some good news for our industry! Finally, after more than a decade of furniture and lighting production going overseas, changes are ahead.

The U.S. component parts suppliers were among the hardest hit when American companies began having their products made in Asia. Cost was the deciding factor for many firms. Simply put, Chinese factories offered similar work for less money.

Recently, however, "similar" hasn't been good enough. With concerns about lead in toys, contaminated toothpaste, milk, and pet food, China hasn't been getting a lot of rave reviews regarding quality standards. Some of the component parts ordered from overseas have been stellar (particularly from factories that are privately held by U.S. corporations and monitored closely), but many others have been inferior. Delays in shipping and the rising cost of freight and labor in China only add to American manufacturers' discontent.

Therefore, a chat with some of our industry's top U.S.-made component parts suppliers has been uplifting. Business, they've told me, has been great. "Domestic interest has picked up because we answer the phone and keep our promises. It's easier to deal [with a company] in the States. We can set up and deliver in days if necessary, while overseas it takes months. Not only can we get a sample out the door in a matter of hours, but we accept quantities from one to one million," explained Peter Zuckerwise of Liberty Brass in New York. "I see a great return to domestic manufacturing because of better pricing and quality, ease of communication, and getting the job done in a professional and efficient manner. These are also reasons why we are celebrating our 90th year in business and toasting the success of the third generation of Zuckerwise ownership and management."

Gregg Morrow, president of family-run Frank Morrow Company in Rhode Island, is equally optimistic. "We are fortunate that despite both the exodus of manufacturers overseas and the negative economic climate, we face no real competition for most of our product line, particularly in decorative metal trims," Gregg told me. "In many ways, we are truly the 'last man standing.' It is tricky and expensive to duplicate patterned trims, especially embossed, perforated galleries. We have 80 years of design and tooling on-hand due to our policy of diligent reinvestment back into the company. This 'niche' keeps us in business, though we are undoubtedly leaner and meaner than in the past. We serve many industries and pride ourselves on quick turnaround time (90 percent of our orders ship between 24 hours to one week with a maximum lead time no greater than 3-4 weeks), competitive pricing, and our responsiveness to customer inquiries and requests."

Ivan Jeffery, president of 104-year-old Crescent Brass in Pennsylvania, revealed, "In today's crazy world where who knows [what will happen] next, in our niche we are feeling pretty good about things moving forward. We are seeing some of the Buy American sentiment, but it comes down to

price and delivery. If customers are planning far enough ahead and have sufficient volume, then they send production overseas. If you have your own people on the ground there, it is no different than managing a factory in this country. However, if they cannot go to China for any of the above reasons, then we are making it for them here in Pennsylvania. My domestic manufacturing has had the best year [out of the] 28 years I have owned Crescent, however, our business is not solely comprised of lighting component parts."

Bruce Guttler, who just celebrated his 20th anniversary as an independent component parts rep based in Florida, has also weathered industry storms. "My grandfather, Benjamin Green, started Clover Lamp Company in South Philadelphia. My father, Joe Guttler, along with my late uncle Al and my cousin Jerry ran that company for many years. I worked on the factory floor part-time while I was growing up. I remember visiting many thriving component suppliers in the 1960s and '70s," he recalled.

"When I first started out, domestic manufacturers and suppliers were running full steam ahead with no end in sight," Bruce said. "There were plentiful domestic component manufacturers to choose from: glass, sockets, cordsets, and other metal component parts. Many customers couldn't wait to see what was new and get exclusives on the offerings. The overseas shift began with cheaper offshore components and progressed to include completed fixtures. Now the tide is turning back to America to have more control over quality, delivery, inventory control, cash flow, and profitability," he noted. "Enhanced automation, new designs, and increased efficiency have made the domestic components parts we represent their first choice for purchasing."

Bruce observed that there have been fewer suppliers, creating a shortage of some parts that were once readily available. "The good news is that I have met with many new companies starting out as domestic manufacturers and have heard of established furniture makers re-opening plants in the U.S. that were recently outsourced. Some companies that were importing are now shifting more of their production back to their American facilities. I believe once production comes back, it will stay. As a third-generation member of the lighting industry, I've had a very exciting – and fast – 20 years and am looking forward to another 20 in this great industry that my father introduced me to," he said.

I agree with Bruce, Peter, Gregg, and Ivan that this is a wonderful industry to be involved in, and I sincerely wish a happy – and prosperous – new year to you all.

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