

FORM

FRANK
NOVEMBRE

Daniella Casamento

At the DOMO furniture showroom in Sandringham there is an atmosphere of calm efficiency as staff attend to the set-up of new furniture displays with an impromptu team discussion of the merits of this and that. As sales staff move to greet a client and respond to queries, the visual merchandiser returns to consider the design of a room within a room. Customer focus is the first priority.

A tour of the showroom with owner and Managing Director of Domo, Frank Novembre, becomes a lesson in the production of a quality piece of furniture. It also becomes apparent that Frank has an unwavering passion for the business in which he has found himself to be involved after almost three decades. An earlier career in banking prepared Frank for some of the practicalities of running a business but detailed knowledge of the furniture industry and trends is something that can only be gained through time and experience.

Frank stumbled across Grange, a French manufacturer of classic furniture, in 1984 while studying interior design part-time at the Melbourne College of Decoration and Design which later became the RMIT TAFE School of Design. "I was renovating a Victorian home in Moonee Ponds and wanted to learn about colours and design. Back then most people didn't appreciate the detail in these older houses and were butchering them, removing all the detail and atmosphere. I sourced a coffee table from Grange and found that there was no local distributor." It was a serendipitous moment.

Grange was looking for a distributor in Australia and offered Frank the opportunity to represent the company locally. After initially declining the offer, he decided to take a chance on this new venture and established Grange Furniture Australia as a wholesale supplier. "We launched the business at the Herald Home Improvement Show in April of 1984. The furniture delivery didn't arrive on time so for the first day or so we were left with an empty stand. People thought we were selling the carpet on the floor!" Showing tenacity and belief in the product, Frank displayed pages from the Grange catalogues on the walls and provided visitors to his stand with free passes to return to the show to see the furniture once it had arrived. It was here he met a "mad cyclist who mentioned that he had seen the furniture while travelling overseas following the Tour de France the previous year. At the end of the show we had sold only one secretaire. Ten days later the cyclist rang to place an order for a range of pieces with a value of twenty times what was sold at the show. I'm now selling furniture to his children."

Having survived the economic and

commercial challenges of the late 1980s and early 1990s recession and surpassing his initial five-year business plan, Frank re-invented the company in 1994 and established DOMO as a retail business selling Grange furniture directly to the end user. In 1997 DOMO added the contemporary Ligne Rose furniture collection to the range on offer.

"We are now the longest serving distributor of Grange world-wide. Ligne Rose is the number one French exporter and Grange is number two and we have also supplied the Dedon range of outdoor furniture for 12 years. Dedon is the number one company in outdoor furniture and has grown from a staff of seven since we first become involved with them, and they now employ 4500 people."

Frank says that accessories and outdoor furniture have become a large component of what DOMO have to offer as he goes on to explain the qualities of Dedon furniture that allows this company to guarantee their products for 10 years.

He is especially excited to receive a new piece from Ligne Rose on the day we visit the showroom. "Ligne Rose has won 10 to 12 Red Dot Design Awards over the years. Our new display has the PLOUM sofa which won the 'Best of the Best' award in the living rooms and bedrooms category of the Red Dot Awards for product design last year and was designed by the Bouroullec brothers." The Red Dot Design Awards is an international competition that celebrates product, communication and concept design.

Frank travels overseas up to six times a year to visit European trade fairs which he finds invigorating. Understanding that it is important to maintain relationships with his suppliers, he also uses these trips to visit the manufacturing plants to continually update his knowledge and meet the master craftsmen who make the fine timber furniture with intricate timber inlays, and to see the production techniques first hand. "Our sales staff have factory tours every two years and the administration staff travel every three years. This helps them to appreciate the quality and skill that goes into making every piece of furniture and helps them to understand our pricing. Handmade furniture is time-consuming to finish."

He laments the fact that factories in Italy are closing down because of the economic downturn. "Skills are being lost because people are moving on and there is not enough work to train younger people in the trade. When people buy on price only, it can wipe the industry out."

The suppliers also travel to Australia to visit the DOMO stores to support their new products. The Sandringham store is perfectly set-up for launch events with a working kitchen imported



from Italy. The kitchen is open to the showroom and sits on a feature floor of marble cobblestones that add a touch of European ambience. The large commercial coffee machine which sits on the bench is a surprising and impressive working accessory that Frank included in negotiations to take over the site from the previous business in 2009.

With stores in Hawthorn and interstate, Frank sees DOMO Sandringham as the

culmination of his years of experience in the furniture industry and his understanding of his clients' expectations of service. "We have learnt many things along the way and the business has developed alongside our relationship with our suppliers and clients. The furniture industry is like the fashion industry. It is just as dynamic as fashion and you need to innovate to remain strong. It's also important to learn not to beat yourself up when mistakes are made."