

'Industry players need to assess themselves'



Sundar Subramaniam, Co-founder & MD, Dovetail Furniture Pvt Ltd



Sundar Subramaniam, Co-founder and MD of Dovetail Furniture Pvt Ltd, has been in the fixture business for over 30 years. In a chat with VM&RD, he talks about his journey, the challenges confronting the fixture industry and why a few companies are gradually diversifying their businesses. Presented below are excerpts from the conversation.

You have been in the fixture business for over 30 years now. Tell us about your journey so far. How did you evolve based on the market requirements?

We started our journey in 1985, back in the days when retail design in India was in its initial stages. There were very few workshops that manufactured designs as per specifications. So, we decided to set up our own facility which would translate designs into actual forms as desired. Our first client, Weekender, came to us to design and manufacture a display system for their store that could enable the store to be fitted overnight. From there on, there has been no looking back. We went on to execute 50 stores for the brand and in the process

learnt the basics of shopfitting. The next big thing happened to us was Levis, which came to India in 1994. We fabricated and installed the fixtures for their new Asia Pacific concept, which involved new processes that we had to source and implement. The next phase in our journey began when we got associated with Future Group in late 1990s when they were just beginning the journey. We did the Pantaloons first large format stores in Gariahat, Kolkata and Begumpet, Hyderabad which were about 15,000 sqft each and over the next decade executed a lot of projects for many brands under the Future Group umbrella.

The variation and challenge in work came with Asian Paints Colour World. For this, we designed shop-in-shops and went on to produce kits for over 1000 locations across the country.

Working with brands like Calvin Klein Jeans, FCUK, Puma, Debenhams and Marks & Spencer gave us a lot of exposure to global standards of shop-fit and the process of learning followed with the strict measures of quality standards, prototyping and approvals from these international brands. We started with both wood and metal and we never had a problem of being metal intensive or wood intensive. Anything we do is very brand driven and is very responsive.

What difference do you observe between the national and foreign brands?

Foreign brands are very sorted about their design. They have a manual in place for design and we have to just engineer that. The involvement is more towards developing exactly as per their design manual. On the other hand, the Indian brands know what they want but they do not have a manual. There is thus more involvement in the development of the design to create the final product.

Did cost ever become a problem for you with the premium brands?

In the beginning brands were willing to pay a premium for quality and reliable delivery, but now they have started to look more at cost effective solutions. In the 90s, till about 2009, cost was not such a big issue. For the

international brands particularly, quality was the utmost priority. But now many brands are just looking for the lowest cost, and wouldn't stay with us for very long if they found somebody more cost effective.

According to you what would propel the industry to the next level?

I think infrastructure. Also the trend today is towards metal so the focus needs to be on speeding up metal production processes. Also, industry players have to assess themselves in the context of their business size and ask themselves how much they are willing to hand over to the professional team. I am at a stage of business where my business is run largely by professionals; it is not owner driven. Today many of the younger companies are owner driven.

But overall, it is a difficult industry and now with the cost pressures, everyone in this industry is looking to diversify their business. They are getting into retailing or into furniture business because they have already invested in the infrastructure. The margins are getting tied up. Sustainability in this industry is becoming tough.

Any recent trends you see in the retail industry?

The store sizes are getting smaller and brands are now looking at feasibility and sustainability. Lighting fixtures are given more importance as lighting is getting more integrated in the design. Metallic finishes are also coming in and the demand is for wider range of finishes integrating metal and wood.

What are your future plans?

The challenge like I said is about speeding up the processes, so we are implementing systems to effect that.●