



HEALTH AND HOME FURNISHINGS
by Carol Milano



Photographs courtesy of Trio, Inc.

In 2020, people all over America were forced to spend much more time at home because of the global pandemic. At the same time, health became a dominant concern. These two trends bolstered new spending patterns that show a vast need and opportunity for retailers or manufacturers who serve the home furnishings market.

Consumer Spending

“We know ninety percent of our time is spent indoors. The built environment becomes a key component not only to longevity, but to the quality of life, whether at home or in the office,” says Angela Harris, CEO and Principal at TRIO, Inc., an award-winning design and visual merchandising firm based in Denver.

In 2019, Americans spent \$134 billion on home furnishings. During 2020 that total rose by twenty percent—and is sure to increase, predicts Harris. “As consumers moved out of office space into their homes, we saw a significant spike in home furnishing spending.”

Americans also want to upgrade their living spaces. Eighty-one percent of U.S. consumers purchased home improvement products between April and November, 2020, according to the NPD Group, spending nearly ten percent more on home improvement projects in 2020 than in 2019. At Sherwin-Williams, record sales last year were partly because of its do-it-yourself and residential repainting businesses. Nationwide, installing new flooring was one of the top three home project categories.

Wellness concerns continue to grow. In fact, seventy-nine percent of consumers said they believe that wellness is important, in a recent survey conducted by McKinsey & Co.

“We estimate the global wellness market at more

than \$1.5 trillion, with annual growth of five to ten percent,” says Harris. “A rise in both consumer interest and purchasing power presents tremendous opportunities for companies! We see a large demand in the marketplace for sustainable products. It can be difficult to find manufacturers who can keep up with current demand, and take health and wellness seriously.”

The Health Connection

Making your living space more comfortable and visually appealing is very popular—but how does it keep you well? Actually, home furnishings and health intersect in many ways. “We are always designing with wellness in mind. We believe good design can marry both beautiful aesthetics and wellness principles,” explains Harris. “This is a huge opportunity for everyone in our industry.”

She stresses the importance of understanding how various categories of home furnishings are being produced, from textiles (such as bedding, drapery and area rugs) to furniture (both upholstered and non-upholstered) to wallcoverings.

These products are also known as “sustainable furnishings.” According to The Spruce, a prominent lifestyle advisement firm, they can be environmentally safe and healthier to live with. What makes furniture sustainable? It might be made of easily renewable materials, such as bamboo, or include something that was repurposed or recycled. Often, it is produced using renewable energy. The furniture’s function and longevity, and how it is transported from its place of manufacture to its retailer, are other considerations.

It all starts with textiles, explains Harris. “Everything you touch and feel—like bedding, draperies, fabric for sofas, floor coverings—relates to overall health. Air quality and ventilation are so important, too. We’re designing spaces that create

OPPOSITE Top: Large windows in the bedroom of the Idea House at Congress Lake links indoors with outdoors. Design by Trio, Inc. Photography by Eric Lucero. Bottom: A super comfy lounge designed features wall art of live plantings. Design by Trio, Inc. Photography by Adrian Tiemens.

MERCHANDISING



A serene outdoor patio is designed to provide comfort and invite contemplation.
Design by Trio, Inc. Photography by NAVA Real Estate Development.

flow and movement from indoors to outdoors, so there's continuity visually and in our connection to health."

Many unhealthy factors are related to chemicals used in manufacturing, which can affect indoor air quality and a home's overall healthy status. "As designers, we need to question and understand how products are being made," Harris notes. It's crucial to utilize products with non-toxic paints or stains, instead of hazardous chemicals.

Avoid 'wrinkle-free' sheets, advises Wellness Within Your Walls, a global firm specializing in health and wellness standards for buildings. They contain formaldehyde that can cause respiratory problems. "Instead, replace them with organic cotton or bamboo bedding. Pillows with synthetic stuffing or memory foam may [contain] benzene. Replace them with non-toxic options such as kapok, organic cotton, or 100 percent natural latex stuffing."

"Consider the possibility of recycling products that are often considered unusable or waste. Our man-

ufacturers might take a discarded piece of natural wood, and then collaborate to design a beautiful dining room table with that piece as the top. A true work-of-art, and even better, it's sustainable," says Harris. "We also make geography a priority in our manufacturing collaborations. Can we design something that will be produced in local facilities, with materials from the United States? We are conscious of the way products are made and distributed, and that can still be accomplished in a beautiful way."

TRIO advises its clients on construction and manufacturing activities. For example, they help carpet manufacturers incorporate wellness features and principles into design and production. "Dyes and fabrics and production methods all contribute to whether a product is healthy or not—even down to shipping! We partner with many manufacturers on how many of their products can be made in America, which often increases the safety level. We will specify and procure all the merchandise."



The soft neutral shades of the living area keeps the eye drawn to the outdoor space.
Design by Trio, Inc. Photography by Eric Lucero.

Next Steps

How can retailers help consumers see the connections between home furnishings and health? “It’s all about education,” stresses Harris. “What will get the consumer excited is that we still design better products—but now they’re better for your health, too!”

Consumer demand has soared. “People want more wellness products. Manufacturers will need to accommodate. Designers and architects have been focused on the wellness movement for ten years,” she says. “American consumers are starting to get educated. Over forty-six percent now say that health, safety and security within their home is the top priority. Once consumers take hold of that, we gain momentum. When demand shifts in that regard, it’s no longer a trend. It’s a necessity!”

Invest the time to understand the health-related factors, so you can talk to customers about constructability, Harris emphasizes. “It’s important to show them more natural, less synthetic products, and explain their advantages. Where and how were they

manufactured? What glues were used? What is this fabric made of? Was the product in a protected environment with filtration and circulating air, without plastic or toxic containers?” (This practice, known as off-gassing, helps strip the unnatural elements off a product, in thirty to sixty days.)

Will healthier products cost more? Not necessarily, as long as, “you’re doing due diligence in sourcing and production, and working hard to develop partnerships that align with wellness principles,” says Harris. “It may take time to integrate all these improvements, but it should not raise costs.

“Retailers are hungry for information—what the demand about health and wellness means, and how to capture consumer interest,” she finds. “So many companies are doing studies on this topic. You’ll see cross-pollination among industries, too—including architecture, health care organizations, manufacturers, designers, hospitality, and green building groups.”

To stay up-to-date, TRIO regularly discusses the

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issues with wellness experts. Retailers can explore wellness principles through several resources, such as Wellness Within Your Walls, Environmental Working Group, and Sustainable Furnishings Council.

Summary

Ultimately, Harris believes, “Manufacturers need to make a commitment to safer products! All of us can take small steps that can make a big difference, collectively. It’s important to educate ourselves—when you know better, you do better.”

For more about TRIO’s work and services visit <https://triodesign.com>. And to learn more about Health & Wellness in Home Furnishings, visit:

- www.fitwel.org, www.delos.com,*
- www.wellnesswithinyourwalls.com,*
- www.thespruce.com,*
- <https://sustainablefurnishings.org>,*
- <https://globablwellnessinstiture.org>,*
- www.ewg.org/healthyhomeguide*



Natural wood accented by shades of green connect indoor to outdoor. Design by Trio Inc. Photography by Eric Lucero.