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## Kimball Office's Select Dealer Program: A Closer Look

by Brad Powell and Eva Elastique

**K**imball Office and chiropractors see key-to-eye: alignment can be a good thing. In 2001 Kimball Office started developing its **Select Dealer** program, and this, of course corresponds to Kimball's expansion into a full-line contract furniture manufacturer, building – significantly – on its wood casegoods roots. Seven years later, the seeds it planted is bearing considerable fruit. officeinsight came around to ask, how much fruit? Is it sweet? Is it healthy? And can we have some?

We spoke with four people who would be able to give us some of the juicy details: **Dan Miller**, Executive Vice President; President-Furniture, Kimball International; **Jeff Fenwick**, Vice President/General Manager, Kimball Office; **Bob Theodore**, Kimball Office's Director of Dealer Development; and **Bob Rigby**, one of the founders of **Office Furniture Partnership** (OFP), one of the first and most successful dealerships in Kimball Office's *Select* program.

In the past, when Kimball Office was known chiefly for its wood casegoods, dealer alignment was not necessary. But, with the expansion of its lines came

the additional layers of complexity that can benefit from deeper manufacturer-dealer relationships. Now, along with casegoods, Kimball Office has systems, seating, filing and storage, and multi-purpose tables. Kimball's introduction at **NeoCon 2008 – HUM, Minds at Work™** – will take another hefty step forward, one that will delight its dealers and customers and surprise the rest. (More to come on this prior to NeoCon.) So, the game has changed, although Kimball, believing in building on rather than tearing down, still does much of its business through its non-*Select* dealerships.

What does alignment mean for Kimball Office? Fundamentally, it means that its *Select* dealers will be sufficiently prepared to represent the full capabilities of Kimball Office's expanded line. "With proper training, they will be more effective in finding the best solution for the customer's needs, says Mr. Theodore. "When they present our products to the customer, they will be able to explain their capabilities in great depth, detail what they can do and what they can't do. Dealers without that kind of alignment may not grasp the product solution's full



Dan Miller

capabilities quite as well." This added know-how applies not only to sales, but also to internal operations and the entire order fulfillment process. The general idea is nothing new; it's the implementation that distinguishes Kimball Office's approach.

Probably the first and most important distinguishing factor is the way Kimball Office views its *Select* dealers. In this industry, dealers usually get less credit and more scorn than they deserve for the degree to which they represent the manufacturer's product. Not so with Kimball Office. "We always talk in terms of what

*Cont'd on page 4, Kimball. . . .*



Jeff Fenwick



Bob Rigby, OFP and Bob Theodore, Kimball Office

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we can do for our partners," Mr. Theodore states. "I know 'partner' is a cliché in this industry, but our dealers have chosen to do business with us and continue to do so because we treat them with respect. We have plenty of competition and many customers to satisfy; we can't waste time or energy on adversarial relationships."

This sentiment is expressed in more than words. In its planning for the *Select* program, Kimball Office makes a marked effort to be conscious of its dealers' points of view. All the Kimball Office dealer development consultants that work on this program have a depth of experience with dealerships, having owned or worked in one, a subtle detail, but one that serves to lay a foundation of mutual respect for the working relationship.

There are a number of ways Kimball Office lends a more quantifiable kind of support to its dealers. Their first recourse is to Kimball Office's extranet site, **KimballOfficePartner.com**. The information and services on the site are aimed towards dealers, with things such as research and advertising materials, as well as the capability of checking on order status. Several years ago, Kimball Office also developed a software tool for its dealers called *e-magine*. With *e-magine*, dealer salespeople can immediately provide their clients with rendered typicals; customers and designers respond to this very favorably. "It makes a big difference to clients when they can see the product right away in 3D," says Mr. Rigby of OFP, "Most Select dealers use it very effectively."

As a manufacturer, Kimball Office also provides services to A&D professionals in ways that bring benefits back to the dealer. Kimball Office offers CEU-type courses on sustainability and other topics that can be held at dealerships, bringing the design community into their facilities. Even more important, Kimball Office provides comprehensive information materials on its public website. In this day and age that may seem like no big deal, but it makes a noticeable difference when a client approaches the dealer with a fully educated mind. It makes the dealer's job easier, and A&D professionals are more likely to choose Kimball Office's product when they know they can get instant answers to simple questions.

Dealers also know that a live customer service person will answer the phone every time they call. This is a point of pride for Kimball Office: the company feels it makes an immediate difference to the experience among manufacturer, dealer, and client. At its headquarters, Kimball Office has customer service teams dedicated to dealers, and each has a trained backup that is familiar with the case and the parties involved. So even for more complex questions, a designer can expect quick and accurate answers.

The services named above are available to all of Kimball Office's dealers. "We have a lot of good dealer partnerships outside of the *Select* program," says Mr. Theodore. "*Select* is a critical initiative for our future, but people shouldn't think that we're abandoning relationships with other committed dealers."



**Keith Cron, Joel Osterman, Osterman Cron**

So what is the incentive to become a *Select* dealer? "There's a certain pricing advantage, but more importantly, Kimball Office and the dealership really make an active investment in each other," says Mr. Rigby. Kimball Office takes that investment seriously, in good times and in bad. "When we see a softening market," said Mr. Theodore, we may create tactics for expanding into other markets in ways that dealers can take advantage of. For a number of years now, our *Select* dealerships have grown at a multiple of the company's growth."

*Select* dealerships are also allowed (and encouraged) to send their salespeople through the same training that Kimball Office provides for its own employees. It was a recent decision to group them together; previously, dealer salespeople were trained differently. Mr. Theodore and his colleagues at Kimball Office feel that this new way imparts a much deeper cultural experience, and also allows personal relationships to develop among people who would otherwise only know each other as a voice on the phone.

Kimball Office also provides help with cooperative advertising, showroom design, and other features of internal support, such as its private security network. This enables dealers to enter orders directly into Kimball Office's operating system, and receive acknowledgments directly to theirs, upping operational efficiency all around.



**OFP NY**

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Since the *Select* program's inception in 2001, Kimball Office has clearly come quite a ways. *Office Furniture Partnership* was one of the first in the program, and was founded with the intention of being an aligned Kimball Office dealer. Since then, it has become a model of success for other Kimball Office dealerships. "They see that with talent and energy, you can open a dealership without too much capital and really do well with it," said Mr. Rigby. With two new showrooms opened over the past year and thirty-three people throughout New York, New Jersey, and Philadelphia, OFP has become a well-established presence in the market.

What type of dealership joins the *Select* program, and where does Kimball Office find them? Some are start-ups such as OFP. In other cases, dealerships change product lines or decide that they prefer Kimball Office to their previous manufacturer. Or they simply elect alignment and choose Kimball Office. But wherever the reason, there are certain things they have in common.

First, and as a matter of course, Kimball Office looks for dealerships with a strong focus on customer service. "If you ask a dealer what distinguishes them in this industry, almost every one of them will say customer service," said Mr. Theodore. "The difference, however, is about how they invest to provide a differentiated experience for the customer." Kimball Office wants dealers who, like us, care enough about your call to have someone answer the phone. Kimball Office puts a lot of weight on that kind of cultural fit. *Select* dealers must also be full service

dealerships; services don't need to be in-house, but the dealership has to be good at bringing a full range of services to the customer. Lastly, they must be growth-oriented; this might sound easy, but they need to demonstrate that they are willing to invest time and capital, and are capable of growing their business.

High expectations are a two-way street, and as *Select* dealers grow and multiply, Kimball Office must expand its offerings and adapt to address the dealers' needs.

**OI: What do Select dealers want from Kimball Office right now?**

**BT:** Lately, they've been asking for help in leadership development. We recently launched a new two-day course that we designed especially for our dealer principals. It has two basic components: one is centered around Covey leadership principles; the other aspect focuses on interviewing techniques and developing your people.

In terms of product, seating is probably the area they would like us to focus on. The general consensus is that with the last round of enhancements to our systems products, they've got a very complete systems offering for their market. They recognize our leadership in the wood casegoods arena.

**DM:** Another arena that dealers would love to see developed, and that Kimball Office is actively pursuing, is image and branding.

It's hard to go from zero to sixty when you have a company with decades of, "If we just do a good job everybody'll know and they'll understand it." I think we now have a much clearer understanding of

the story we want to tell than we did in the past, and we're going to be less reluctant to let our light shine.

**OI: How does Kimball Office plan to tell its story?**

**JF:** In some ways, it's just about working smarter. There are the CEU classes we can provide at dealerships, and at the end of a fifty-minute lunch, we can take ten minutes to talk about our brand and our products.

Also, like all large manufacturers, we've developed an effective strategic accounts program. We've really gotten a lot of traction on that front. We're spreading the word to end users. Additionally, telling our story through aligned distribution has helped us a lot. We've doubled the number of our *Select* dealers over the last three years. We're also working with a new marketing agency, so you're going to see a lot more information about us in the media and marketplace.

**BR:** The larger design firms tend to think of Kimball Office as an open market product, but that's shifting now. We've done some good work with firms such as Gensler, and that piece is growing now that they've seen more of what Kimball Office can do.

Kimball Office's *Select* dealers have also formed an independent organization centered around sharing best practices and discussing how best to represent the Kimball Office brand. All of the *Select* dealers are involved in this association, ranging in size from small to large. They gather three times a year, with one meeting at NeoCon, one at the Kimball

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OFP PA



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Office headquarters in Jasper, IN, and one at a dealership location. "They use these meetings to gain ideas from each other that may be new to their market, or that they might not otherwise have come up with," adds Mr. Theodore about the association. "It's energizing for them to be in a room with that many other principals who are so heavily invested in this industry."

**OI: So then the question falls to the dealership: Is it working? Has the Select program improved your business?**

**BR:** Absolutely. Kimball Office provides so many open plan and private office solutions now; we don't want to sell Kimball Office part-time anymore. And their internal design support is essential because of the depth and flexibility of their product lines. The responsiveness and speed of their customer service has meant huge cost savings for our clients and us.

**OI: How does the future look for Kimball Office?**

**DM:** I think the next five years are going to be a lot more exciting than the last five, even in light of the coming economic challenges. We tell our people not to worry when the pie isn't growing quite as fast as we hoped, which is the case right now. There's just too much opportunity for us, especially with our devotion to our sustainability story. We really believe that is going to resonate.

Each year, we'll be doing at least one signature product introduction. This year's signature product is a hybrid solution call **Hum. Minds at Work™**. Hum is the result of research into how people work – continually shifting between concentration and collaboration – and what they need to work better. This product is already generating a lot of interest and excitement. We've pre-sold several major projects, and we haven't even officially launched it yet. Our next big intros will be in seating and then casegoods.



**Rebecca Denison-Schultz**

All these things put together – aligned distribution, a focus on strategic accounts, and a commitment to innovative signature products and sustainability – are why I think we're going to be recognized differently in the future. I really feel good about our next five years. ▲



**Kimball: HUM. Minds At Work™**