

MEETING REQUIREMENTS

Custom seating is increasingly being regarded as a necessity rather than a luxury for people who require adapted furniture. *AMP* explores why the custom seating market is burgeoning and how dealers can benefit from offering high-quality adaptive furniture.

The industry is changing its perspective on custom and specialist seating if some in the market are to

be believed. Leaders in the mobility sector and healthcare professionals are being urged to market their seating products as essential medical kit rather than luxury comfort items.

But as well as a change in attitude towards such products, suppliers have realised a change in the products themselves is needed to benefit the end-user and, by extension, reputability for dealers and retailers.

It is now widely accepted in the industry that each end-user's requirements are different and that it is important to engineer flexible, multifunctional solutions that can be adapted. But thanks to increased communication between designers and OTs, and the wider mobility network, there is now a growing understanding that as well as addressing conditional needs, custom seating must also meet the lifestyle needs of a user and fit into their environment.

According to Lisa Wardley, managing director at Birmingham-based Repose, there ought to be three central considerations when it comes to specialist seating: the end-user, the carer, and the purchasers and commis-

sioners. "It is vital to think about the purchaser and ensure the longevity and usability of the chair," explains Wardley. "For example, we have designed chairs with multiple users in mind — ones that can be adapted over time as a condition changes or to suit different users. Our pioneering Multi range helped to focus the market on

the adaptability that can be included within a chair — with the introduction of optional pressure management seat and back cushion solutions."

When it comes to end-users and their different requirements, dealers stand to benefit most if they can stock a range of specialist chairs for multiple needs. Kirton Healthcare is a company which



Repose's Lisa Wardley says longevity and usability are key buying considerations where custom seating is concerned.

CUSTOM SEATING



is striving to bring variety to dealers so they can cater for any client who comes through the door. Its dynamic chairs are designed for those who have limited ability to make small changes in movement. Dynamic seating has a range of adjustments to tailor the chair to the user's physical requirements to prevent the user becoming fixed in the same shape as the chair they are using.

Combining the appropriate functionality and features enables posture and body weight to be adjusted throughout the course of the day to prevent pressure build-up in isolated areas.

Meanwhile, Anthony Thresher, product manager for Electric Mobility's Cosi Chair, believes that design and build quality remain just as important as the medical benefits offered by custom seating solutions.

"As well as providing

great design and comfort, there is an extensive choice of sizes and fabrics available, many from stock on next-day delivery across the entire price range from economy to premium, including the made-to-measure selection to ensure these chairs meet individual, specific needs while complementing existing decoration and furniture," Thresher comments.


What consumers want

While R&D continually drives the design and engineering of custom seating, tastes and trends are also shifting. "Customers are looking for comfort, function, ease of use and high quality customer service. This is a high ticket-priced product and it has to meet their needs and be backed-up by excellent customer service with access to clinicians providing peace of mind and professional expertise," comments Repose's Wardley.

Given the pricepoints of specialist chairs, she believes that dealers have a central role to play in securing end-users' confidence that the solution will deliver. A major part of this is the after-sales support and care. Wardley sees this as essential to ensuring the user and carer maximise the functionality of the chair and know that if they have a problem or need advice that it will be dealt with quickly.

Accentu8, which manufactures specialist seating solutions, puts consumer tastes at the forefront of its designs, alongside medical functionality and comfort. It will even make bespoke solutions fitting the individual tastes of users. Recently, Silvercrest Care Group asked the firm to supply a range of static chairs for each of its homes, designed to complement the colourful brand and to give a modern, fashion-forward feel to its homes, allowing both residents and their families to use them.



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Bikram Choudhary, director of the care home group, says: “Just because our residents are older or have different needs doesn’t mean they don’t care about style. We want our homes to be welcoming and inviting places for both residents and their friends and families. What we love about accentu8 is that their ranges of both rise and recline chairs and static furniture embraces independent living and modern healthcare designs expressed through colour, texture and functionality.”

Commissions like this are demonstrating to dealers that both the end-user in the home care market and operators in the care home market are both looking for tasteful, 21st century designs and that functionality alone is no longer enough. Distributors can hope to benefit significantly from stocking the latest custom seating solutions. In spite of their price points, the market and demand for them is expanding.

For Wardley, a portfolio of specialist seating is an integral part of any retailer’s business. She believes that there are rewards to reap from working with reputable manufacturers who offer sales, marketing and customer support savings.

Wardley comments: “We believe that it is vital to support the retailers as much as possible. We achieve this with well-designed point-of-sale material and brochures to assist them when they are talking to their customers and



UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMER GROUPS

With political and economic uncertainty creating challenges for the market place, it can be difficult for distributors to predict stock patterns and make precise forecasts. But Electric Mobility has identified three main customer groups that are likely to walk into retail stores and place an order.

1. **Economy:** Every pound matters. This group will be looking for value for money as their priority and will only purchase what they can afford.
2. **Need or want:** This group will need or want a new chair. It may be a replacement or just an upgrade. Value for money will still play a part but it will come

down to what they want — this group demands more choice, different fabrics and more comfort. If they are going to spend their hard-earned money they are going to have what they want and need.

3. **Complex:** This group requires made-to-measure, pressure care and often incontinence features. Unfortunately this is a must-have group and so price will be key due to funding. But these clients must have what they require and these are decisions that should not be taken lightly or without the input of an OT, who will identify the specific therapeutic benefits.

we can also attend customer visits for more complex assessments. Further peace of mind is provided through our extended warranty packages and white glove delivery service, which ensures the retailer knows the chair will be delivered safely to their customer and correctly set up. All our retailers are continually updated on our latest products and as part of this we offer product training courses which are backed up by clinical advice to ensure they can offer their customers superb customer service.”

Electric Mobility warns that dealers need an understanding of the pitfalls involved in the sector and extensive knowledge of it to become a force in the custom seating market. For Thresher, it is important that retailers have a good understanding of the movement of the chair, specialised fabrics and pressure care cushions.

He comments: “Distributors will also need to understand how to measure people and understand the client’s conditions to be able to benefit in this area — it is not just simply putting a chair into a showroom and hoping that the client knows what they want. With specialist custom seating the client normally has the input from their own OT who will identify the therapeutic

benefits and realistic goals for using such equipment. To support the dealer, Cosi Chair can provide a modular assessment riser recliner unit. This can have a range of back options that can be changed over quickly. They can also have it with a pressure care drop-in seat to allow them to demonstrate the variety of seating systems.”

It is clear that suppliers of custom seating are doing their utmost to support their dealer partners — not just through ever-evolving product offerings but also by helping them to understand the differences between products and how best this can be articulated to customers.

Custom seating requires a degree of individual assessment arguably more than any other mobility item, making their sale challenging for some dealers. But with a growing understanding of the risks surrounding poor seating and pressure injuries, it has never been more important for sellers of this equipment to understand the specifics of their custom seating stock.

With training and support from manufacturers, this sector can be a fruitful one for distributors willing to navigate it correctly and combine a strong product offering with impeccable customer service. **AMP**