



GROUPS, EVENTS

INDEAL Evolves Beyond Buying Group to Serve the Dealer Community

THE GROWTH OF INDEAL COMES FROM A VACUUM IN THE INDUSTRY.

BY ROB KIRKBRIDE

If you haven't been able to keep track of the changes taking place at INDEAL, you are excused, at least until you finish reading this article. It is a lot to take in.

INDEAL, which started as a dealer buying organization but has turned into so much more, continues to go through massive changes and growth, adding to the scope of its original mission to be the premier purchasing organization for the office furniture industry and turning it into the de facto office furniture dealer group.

An important merger, the addition of key managers, the development of a world-class conference, and now, the addition of a comprehensive training program for dealers and those who work for them, and a total rebranding are making INDEAL one of the most important groups in the industry.

The growth of INDEAL comes from a vacuum in the industry. The Office Furniture Dealers Association, which used to hold industry events and act as the voice for the dealer community has seriously shrunk. According to INDEAL co-founder Dave Bloch, there is simply a need in the industry.

INDEAL has morphed from a buying group, which is all about return on investment, to an organization focused on the plight of the dealer, where the dealer is going to be and what the dealer needs to do, he noted.

"It has gone from an ROI to an ROR (return on relationship) and the things that we can do," Bloch said. "I think this sets us up perfectly for us to do that. There's a number of things we can do. There's a whole lot of pain points in the dealers' lives, still. Their margin is being forced down day by day. Their sales stream and their profitability are really being controlled. It's gone out of control."

To do that, INDEAL merged with Workplace Furnishings Sept. 30. Since then, the two dealer group powerhouses have worked to merge the WPF operations into those of INDEAL to create a single contract furniture dealer organization with significantly enhanced resources and market coverage.

Of course, the idea is to combine the two groups to create even more buying power and marketing capabilities and stronger programs and services for its members. It allows the combined INDEAL group to leverage its collective resources instead of using them to compete against each other.

The merger creates an expanded portfolio of suppliers and products that provides an even broader range of options for dealers, especially in the all-important ancillary segment, said Jodie Ryndak, who served as WPF president and CEO and now is vice president at INDEAL.

Ryndak said she thinks the feedback from former Workplace Furnishings dealers, solicited and unsolicited, has been very positive.

"Bringing the two organizations that had unique strengths on each side, and being able to leverage those and take all the time, energy, and talent that we had in competing against each other, and redirect that time, energy and talent toward supporting our dealer members, I think has been the greatest benefit, and I think members have already started to see that," she said.

All in all, the merger is going exceptionally well, Bloch said. Like every business change, there are always a few challenges, but the merger was well accepted, and the dealers are very excited about having one organization to work with, especially the manufacturers the two separate groups shared.

“Almost every dealer has said this seems to be a better opportunity and a deeper organization with more services available to the dealer than either of us had in the past,” Bloch said. “I think it’s very good.”

The conferences will be the first major introduction for both dealer champions — the on-the-ground troops in dealerships that act as the contact point for the group — and the dealer principals.

The larger, combined organization has allowed INDEAL to clearly define its programs, which are separated into Elite, Latitude and INDEAL Canada. The Elite program is designed for dealers aligned with one of the major manufacturers; legacy dealers in major markets looking for products to fit a supporting role to its connections with its main manufacturer. Latitude is for another type of dealer that may have an aligned relationship, but the majority of their sales are happening outside of that or they may not have an aligned manufacturer. INDEAL delineates the two as one having 50 percent-plus of the dealer’s business with its aligned manufacturer — part of the Elite program — and the smaller dealers who may or may not be aligned in the Latitude program, which gives them the latitude to be able to make their own purchasing decisions. Canadian dealers fall under the INDEAL Canada program and can be either Elite or Latitude.

“It made a lot of sense for us to bring the two organizations together and then work to classify the dealers,” Bloch said. “Neither dealer is better than the other. They’re just really geared for two types of dealers that operate in a different way. That’s the way we do it.”

“A combination of those three factors will help us determine where the dealer is, but you’re going to see a growing list of program benefits on both sides, depending on how the dealer runs their organization. We’re trying to stay away completely from transactional dealers. We like to think that our dealers are all people that go other market with a plan and are not shopping product but rather deciding to pick up the INDEAL portfolio as a package of products that make sense and go to market selling that.”

Going forward, training is going to be increasingly important. The INDEAL training platforms will be under the INDEAL U umbrella.

If you ask dealers what one thing they’re short on, it’s certainly training. It’s something the majors have gotten away from as far as general information on the industry. It’s something dealers say they can’t get enough of, and that’s become even more critical now with more younger people coming into the industry and trying to educate them.

“We understood very early on that our training has to be about teaching people about this quirky industry, as opposed to teaching people about general selling skills,” Bloch said.

A lot of people are doing that and a lot are teaching people about specific products, he added. “Our training is all about just general industry information and an education, so

talking about the product categories and the pricing structures and the lengthy process and being able to sell products,” he said. “Doing things like that, there’s such a need.”

INDEAL wanted to approach its training a little bit differently. The group brought on Lori McConnell, who has spent a number of years training and she uses a unique, interactive approach.

INDEAL’s training is going to be three-fold. The group has launched video training, which its dealers can subscribe to and use any time. Starting next month, it is launching live webinars where McConnell is going to be walking people through various industry topics for an hour a couple of times a month. Finally, it is offering live training where McConnell visits groups of salespeople.

INDEAL also launched a rebranding program which updated its logo and includes a new website reflecting its efforts to clearly define the Elite, Latitude and INDEAL Canada programs and add to its efforts to provide new solutions to its members.

Additionally, INDEAL continues to see its Champions Conference grow from an event where it was difficult to get dealer INDEAL champions to attend to a conference that is nearly full, though it is still months away from being held. A second conference, designed for dealer principals from the WPF merger will take place this spring. Next year, the dealer principal conference will be in the fall so the events do not conflict.

The conferences will be the first major introduction for both dealer champions — the on-the-ground troops in dealerships that act as the contact point for the group — and the dealer principals. They will have different content as well. The Champions Conference is designed to get dealer champions up to speed on the latest INDEAL programs and help them make the most effective use of their INDEAL membership. The other conference is designed for dealer leadership and will provide programming to help them understand changes in the broader industry and tools to help them better run their businesses.

It will be Ryndak’s first time at the Champions Conference. She is looking forward to seeing it firsthand and soaking up the excitement that comes from it.

“If you’re not changing what you’re doing in the conference with what’s going on in the industry and what the needs of the dealers are, then it doesn’t bring value,” she said. “We were starting to evolve with that. INDEAL has talked about making this conference the best conference in the industry, and I know we can accomplish that. There’s a need. Now dealers are looking for those opportunities to get together and network and talk about the future of their dealership.”

Kristi Rubino, vice president of marketing, said it has been fantastic to watch the Champions Conference grow and develop.

“It’s been really just amazing to see how they have taken the opportunity to use that to their own advantage,” she said. “It’s not just us explaining and training. It’s also a lot of networking and a lot of connections made with people who wouldn’t otherwise have that opportunity.”

So where does INDEAL go from here? That depends entirely where the dealer community takes it, but expect more leadership in the industry. Instead of simply acting as a buying group, INDEAL will dive deeper into the serious changes going on in the dealer community with its goal to help them to be even better. And that is a development worth watching. **BoF**