



First Office: STAKS: A Crossover Casegoods

An Interview with Mike Wagner, Pam Light, Dennie Pimental and John Duffy

by Brad Powell

First Office, an **OFS Brands** company, previewed **STAKS** at NeoCon 2010, only a year after its first conversation with **PLD**, whose partners **Dennie Pimental, Pam Light** and **John Duffy** have done a lot of work with the traditional names in the contract furniture industry, such as HBF, Brayton International, Haworth, and Gunlocke. Ms. Light is also a SVP at HOK, Los Angeles, and one of the most respected interior designers in the country.

PLD had a product idea: it's what they do, and because of Ms. Light's day job, she is in a position to see a need when it surfaces. What she saw

was the fast moving trend to, in some way, make a more holistic and integrated design with a single product for private offices and open plan. This idea, to be sure, is not new. Over the past several years, various systems manufacturers have developed all-purpose products targeting both the open plan and the private office.

What Ms. Light saw, as a designer, was that since many of the offerings were created by systems manufacturers, and the transition from the open plan to the private office presented some significant problems, such as, fit and finish detail, a "cubical"



MIKE WAGNER



JOHN DUFFY, PAM LIGHT, DENNIE PIMENTAL

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look and attendant cost. PLD came up with the idea of pursuing the idea from the other way around: pushing the private office into the open plan. Consistent with another growing trend, PLD sought to bring a more residential feel to the product line, modularize the units for flexibility, take advantage of the easy tailoring of wood products, and *VOILA*, there you have it.

Among other things, STAKS transitions from private office to open plan in matching finishes, details and

privileged extras. Here are some of the touted features of STAKS:

- >Upscale residential feel
- >Layered, landscape design using multiple materials, colors, textures, heights, and thicknesses for layered working and storage, while visually opening the space
- >Wood's aesthetics and easy tailoring of modules
- >Low panel heights for visibility, yet sensitivity to "heads down" work
- >Expanded palette of textures and col-

- ors to blend with millwork and interior architecture and reflect a harmonious design, making it easy for a designer to interrupt their client's specific design
- >Multi-material screens that allow easy branding and communications
- >Personalized work areas
- >Great Value

PLD presented its ideas to **Mike Wagner**, SVP of Sales and Marketing for OFS Brands, over dinner at NeoCon 2009. At NeoCon 2010, Mr. Wagner and PLD were kind enough to spare a few minutes to chat with officeinsight.

OI: What did they say to you a year ago today that convinced you that you would end up here today? What was the pitch?

MW: We sat down with PLD and heard a lot about products and it became apparent that they understood manufacturing and how to get products online very quickly. There was never the kind of disconnect that you find with some designers that has to be overcome slowly through the development process.

OI: So, and what was your need or perceived need at the time?

MW: Well, looking at trends, we saw people adapting systems products for placement in a private office. We didn't



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think that this completely aligned with the workplace hierarchy adjustments taking place.

PL: Stepping back, the problem was that some of our clients did not want systems' walls. While they wanted a certain amount of private officing, they didn't want to add more of the 'metal' look to the office. Clients were, however, responding favorably to designs with a private-office look in an open area. We've started using lower panels at forty-two inches to meet LEED requirements.

DP: That also supported the trend to allow natural daylight into the space. Basically, STAKS is a cabinet-based solution that has been brought into the open, but with a bit of privacy. Offices and workspaces are getting smaller, so

it's necessary to provide some places of interest so that the overall design doesn't get too tight. It just makes sense to do the panel at forty-two inches, and then drop it as appropriate.

MW: STAKS is a free standing casegood which is similar to our existing product offering. In essence, we are simply changing shapes, sizes, and heights, then reapplying our products in a novel way.

OI: So STAKS is a modular product?

DP: Yes, modular and very flexible. And, again, because it's cabinet-based, it's pretty easy to tailor the product, make it a little bit bigger, a little bit smaller, and so on. Also, since it's a wood core, there's no metal tooling required.

MW: Fortunately for us, the trend is moving away from traditional panels and toward free-standing casegoods in the open plan. As you can imagine, many manufacturers are heavily invested in panel systems. Consequently their product strategies may have to dance around that predisposition. For us, it's natural to integrate system functionality into our casegoods, so to speak.

JD: It was a convergence of the right product at the right time for the marketplace. Everyone is trending in the same direction.

OI: Is that a good thing?

MW: I think it's going to change the dynamics of the industry and it seems to be a good shift for us.

OI: How will STAKS affect your business?

MW: As you know, we sell a lot of wood case goods, and other products for conference and boardrooms, lobbies, lounge areas, healthcare and hospitality. STAKS blends well with all those markets and applications, as well as being able to help build the landscape, integrating with the architectural details of the open plan and private office. More important, we were seeing a lot of private offices



using systems products, and we were given only the senior VP offices. With STAKS, we'll be able to more effectively compete for the offices of less senior staff.

PL: In today's flatter organizations, even though there may be quite a few private offices, many clients prefer to have the same furniture in the open plan as there is in the office. STAKS and its flexibility and multiple options and finishes significantly reduces the perception that, for example, "I'm in the open" or "I'm not highly valued."

But when systems started moving into the private office, there was the problem of dealing with the walls: what piece was going to go on what wall, and how would the structure of the walls affect placement and installation. As an interior designer, I was looking for a case goods system that would work in an office and in an open area that wouldn't require wall reinforcement.

MW: One of the things that drove panels and systems into the private office was the desire for matching architecture and appearance, but they couldn't get the finish that they really liked in a private office. That's why I think this is the perfect time for STAKS: it meets the quality of the private office, as well as being able to transition to an open space.

OI: How do you distribute?

MW: We have about a hundred and twenty reps throughout the country, and we have many A&D relationships, as well as dealer distribution.

OI: What's been the reaction of your rep community?

MW: There's been a tremendous response today. The momentum of this trend has swelled so quickly, everybody's looking for this type of solution. Yet nobody has come to market with a perfectly balanced solution that would work for the private office. We think that STAKS provides that balance.

PL: Two Fortune 500 companies came through today and were very interested.

DP: To add another dimension, it is easy to scale cost with STAKS. From an all-wood veneer, all the way down to what's called the TFL (Thermally Fused Laminate), mix and match paints and so on. There might be a thirty-five to forty points of differentiation down from the all-wood solution. So you can wisely choose the storage cabinets and do the chassis and cabinet in TFL and wood and really fit your project's design and budget requirements. If an architecture or a design firm is running over-budget and it's time to pick furniture, they might be able to alternate

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the materials while keeping its design specifications and scale the cost of the furniture by as much as 40%.

OI: With a product such as STAKS, is it a benefit that it's being produced by a woodshop, or would it be easier and less expensive coming from someone who bends metal?

MW: Generally, systems manufacturers understand the science of manufacturing, lean engineering and the things that go into a tight production process. Most case good companies, on the other hand, understand the artistic element of furniture making, but they're not as streamlined and do not have state of the art technology. But, manufacturers like OFS Brands have the scale, technology and ability to meet the expectations of large complex projects. Rarely do you find manufacturers that understand the science of streamlined manufacturing, but balance that with the artistic aspect required for furniture making. It is that balance that puts OFS Brands in a unique position in the industry.

PL: The big thing that we felt when we visited the OFS Brands factories for the first time is that the STAKS design is within the First Office core competency. When one of my clients says, "We're stuck with using a module 6" shorter because of our building configuration," I can easily reply, "That's fine." First Office can accept that requirement because it's easy to make those kind of changes in wood.

OI: Interestingly, there has been a very significant increase in the use of other materials in wood products. How does that figure in?

PL: As designers we love to add a little variety to our spaces. It's our way of updating that "little black dress."

DP: In Europe we saw a lot of metal and glass, but recently, we've seen a resurgence of wood.

JD: Europe is very sensitive to



environmental issues and carbon creation. The carbon output from other materials versus wood speaks for itself. Compare Greenguard certified wood to steel, aluminum and some other materials: it's not even close. And people like wood, the character and high-touch value. The use of cleverly designed hardware gives designers the option to integrate other materials, ie. the cast aluminum "saddle clamp" for translucent materials above the 42" wood panel. The non-marring steel clamps allow for overhead and shelf options to balance on a 1" vertical

panel. These other materials enhance the function and versatility of a mostly wood solution.

OI: How do workers respond to this design trend?

PL: It was actually "intelligent" group, who did a study asking workers if they would rather be in the workstation or private office. 75% said they'd rather be in a private office. But when asked if they would rather be in systems furniture or in an open bull pen, most said they would rather be in the open bull pen.

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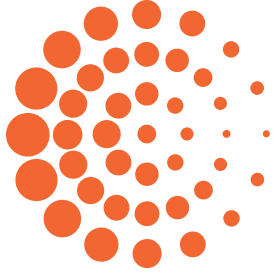
OI: Really?

PL: Yes. There is a strong prejudice against being cubicaled. ■



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