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## See the light: A multi-faceted effort by Mississippi State University aims to keep U.S. manufacturers competitive

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### Repository Citation

Bullard, Steven H., "See the light: A multi-faceted effort by Mississippi State University aims to keep U.S. manufacturers competitive" (2003). *Faculty Publications*. 107.

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# See the light

## A multi-faceted effort by Mississippi State University aims to keep U.S. manufacturers competitive

**P**eople and organizations change for one of two reasons — when they see the light or when they feel the heat. With global competitors providing the heat, U.S. furniture producers today must be willing to change and innovate if they intend to stay in business long term.

The Institute of Furniture Manufacturing and Management at Mississippi State University can help. IFMM exists to document and develop strategies that enable U.S.-based furniture manufacturers to achieve and sustain competitive advantages in the global furniture marketplace.

### Address industry needs

To help secure the future of furniture manufacturing in the United States, the institute plans to expand fundamental and applied knowledge of furniture production and management, disseminate new knowledge and information, and enhance workforce capabilities.

IFMM already has started to conduct multi-disciplinary

applied research to address the current and future manufacturing needs of the furniture industry. It will assist manufacturers with business marketing and management research. It also will deliver information, training and assistance to the furniture industry, including help with problem solving on tactical issues, strategic issues or both.

IFMM got its start at Mississippi State University in 2001 as a collaborative effort of five areas: The Furniture Research Unit of the Dept. of Forest Products, The Food and Fiber Center of the MSU Extension Service, The College of Business and Industry, The College of Engineering and The School of Architecture.

The Institute focuses resources and capabilities at the university to effectively partner with industry, as well as with state and federal agencies, so it can address the needs of the furniture industry. It plans a special emphasis on issues relating to international competitiveness.

IFMM will recruit and train students for professional roles in the furniture and related industries; provide workforce education and training to furniture manufacturers and their suppliers; and establish a forum through which manufacturers of, suppliers to, and distributors of furniture can interact with students, educators, researchers and institute partners.

### How to compete

Successful strategies to gain competitive advantage do not involve competing on the basis of low wages or low-cost raw materials. Sustainable competitive advantage must involve “higher order” strategies — these are strategies that are difficult for global competitors to replicate quickly. Product differentiation is an important example.

A class of strategies that may involve producing upholstered furniture that’s customized for specific customers, or delivering products to market faster, or with higher quality and better service.

Another potential source of “higher order” competitive advantage lies in workforce management and organization. So-called “lean” manufacturing practices and principles haven’t

**U.S. furniture producers must be willing to change and innovate if they intend to stay in business long term.**





When construction is completed this November, The Franklin Center for Furniture Manufacturing and Management at Mississippi State University will be ready to offer upholstery manufacturers assistance with business marketing and management research.

been adopted widely in furniture production facilities. Yet, they have the potential to greatly increase productivity and quality, and shorten the time to delivery for customized upholstery products.

A joint project currently is underway within the IFMM to implement lean manufacturing in furniture production facilities, including upholstery, and to document the improvements in productivity as case studies. The project so far has involved work with four upholstered furniture producers and suppliers, and recorded dramatic performance improvements.

### Ready to help

These case studies will soon be documented and disseminated widely as examples for other manufacturers to consider. Findings will be distributed in publication form, both print and electronically, as well as through an IFMM-sponsored national conference on lean manufacturing in the furniture industry.

The main office of the IFMM will be located in the Franklin Center for Furniture Manufacturing and Management on the MSU campus in Starkville, Miss. This 35,000-square-foot facility is

now under construction and will be completed by this November.

The facility will have a laboratory wing with state-of-the-art equipment for quality testing, machining, engineering and automation. The administrative wing will include a 2,500-square-foot showroom, classrooms, conference rooms and distance learning facilities, as well as offices for faculty, staff and graduate students associated with the furniture research and technical assistance program.

More details on the institute, including updates on construction of the Franklin Center, are available at the IFMM Web site, [www.ifmm.msstate.edu](http://www.ifmm.msstate.edu).

Several publications are currently available from FMM, including "Innovate or Evaporate: Business Concept Innovation in the Furniture Industry in the Age of Information" and "Furniture Manufacturing and Marketing: Eight Strategic Issues for the 21st Century." These reports can be downloaded from the Web site or they may be obtained by contacting Steve Bullard, director of the Institute of Furniture Manufacturing and Management, by telephone: 662/325-2781 or e-mail: [sbullard@cfr.msstate.edu](mailto:sbullard@cfr.msstate.edu). ■

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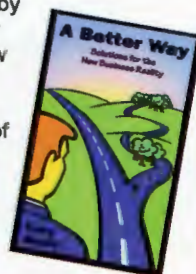
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