



Misleading claims a continuing concern: ACCC

by Bob Panitzki, CEO Furntech-AFRDI

In a small business focus report, the ACCC has identified misleading conduct and false representations as the biggest issue facing small business in Australia.

The ACCC's deputy chair, Dr Michael Schaper, says the ACCC will continue to pursue a range of compliance and enforcement tools to encourage compliance with the Competition and Consumer ACT 2010.

Dr Schaper said more than 1500 complaints were received during the 2013-14 financial year, followed by more than 900 complaints about consumer guarantees.

AFRDI CEO, Bob Panitzki, said the company was concerned about the deliberate flouting of rules associated with the use of AFRDI logos and intellectual property.

"Proper guidelines are laid out on our Webpage," Panitzki said, "but on a daily basis we are confronted with online advertisers who claim AFRDI certification on products.

"It could be a case of certified products having been given new identities for marketing purposes, but this is unacceptable, as consumers have no way of checking whether a product is what it claims to be. We see look-alike logos, bogus claims, and options offered on chairs which have not been part of the testing process."

Panitzki said AFRDI had accumulated a considerable body of evidence against a number of traders regarding abuses of AFRDI's IP, and the time would probably come when a prosecution would be reluctantly pursued.

"But we don't want to go down that road," he said. "It's costly to us, and potentially costly to the furniture industry as a whole. It would be better for everyone if a handful of traders behaved in an ethical manner.

"In the past two years, we have written to a very considerable number of people about false claims of AFRDI certification, and the growing practice of trying to gain a marketing advantage through giving bloated 'weight ratings' to otherwise standard chairs. "

More from the ACCC on page 5

ACCC takes action against online suppliers of unsafe household cots

Two online traders have separately paid infringement notices and provided court enforceable undertakings to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission after admitting that they supplied household cots that did not comply with the mandatory safety standard.

The cots were recalled after testing obtained by the ACCC identified a risk that infants might fall out of the cots, suffocate or become entrapped.

New Aim Pty Ltd, which trades as OzPlaza.Living, sold the 'Wooden Sleigh 3-in-1' through its eBay store between June and September 2013. Le Tian, trading as 'Saving ForAussie', sold the Canterbury Cot through its eBay store between May and September 2013.

ACCC deputy chair Delia Rickard said the ACCC was committed to improving product safety and would not hesitate to take action when retailers put the safety of infants and children at risk.

Other cots recalled this year include:

Frank Masons Pty Ltd - Wooden Baby Sleigh Cot Bed
Belly 2 Baby - Virginia Sleigh Cot
A Plus Buy - Stanton Convertible Crib, classic white
Vicky Sun Pty Ltd – 3 in 1 Wooden Sleigh Baby Cot
Cots4tots Pty Ltd – 5 in 1 Sleigh Cot.

As a result of the ACCC's proactive cot safety surveillance program, nearly 5,500 household cots have been recalled since 2013.

United States shows slight uplift for office furniture

A new Office Trends survey in the United States, carried out in July, has shown a slight positive trend for the commercial furniture industry, indicating an increase in gross shipments and tooling expenditures and a slight decrease in capital expenditures.

The survey showed there are more hirings in the furniture industry, which however resulted in an overall drop in the number of hours worked by individuals. Costs for raw materials improved, and there was a slight increase in gross shipments and new product development.

The survey draws on responses from 750 individuals involved with office furniture manufacturing, and included input from suppliers based in Asia, Africa, Australia, Europe, along with North and South America.

At the same time, the Business and Institutional Furniture Manufacturers Association (BIFMA) is now predicting a strong 2015 in the US, with production expected to rise by 8.8 per cent.

Aligning education with workforce needs

By the Editor, AFRDI Bulletin

It would be a foolish man who says that Australia should always take heed of what industry does in the United States. But every once in a while, you read something about American practice which strikes a resonance.

The article I was reading comes from the Center of Workforce Innovations (CWI), and pushes the value of both higher levels of education, and more appropriate education, in industry. To which many among us might well reply, you don't need a higher degree to assemble furniture.

Yet, as we see from recent news highlighting the rise and rise of robots in traditional low-end manufacturing and assembly jobs, it gives pause for thinking about what will happen to those workers who are displaced, or indeed to those who are entering the workforce and who fail to see the role of education in gaining for them a higher-level job.

As the CWI sees it, there is a need to align the work of high schools with regional economies, so that young people do not learn only the basics, but develop skills in writing communications, teamwork, critical thinking and problem solving. Such skills will become more important as robotics and 3-D printing become mainstream in manufacturing. In a line, CWI says that on its home turf, nearly 80 per cent of U.S. job openings will require post-secondary training or education within the next decade.

And, as they point out, that line of thinking does not only apply to the United States – we are all competing in a global economy.

So what comes from higher education levels, apart from self-satisfaction? As the CWI paints the picture, better education leads to elevated wages, a more equitable distribution of income, and substantial gains in productivity.

No one answer can make an adequate response to a complex question – but it is possible the CWI is talking a modicum of sense.



Space travel influences car seat design

NASA standards for optimum neutral body posture in spacecraft have led to the development of ergonomic car seats.

At the dawn of space travel, safety outweighed comfort in spacecraft designs for human space travel. Capsules like Gemini and Apollo were small, and most flight activities were performed while the crew remained strapped to their seats.

Later, as technologies matured, NASA devoted more attention to understanding how a spacecraft could provide comfort as well as safety. To facilitate this, NASA studied neutral body posture (NBP) the posture the human body naturally assumes in microgravity.

Examining photos from Skylab, it was found that the body automatically enters into a particular posture with certain angles made by the joints, and certain positions assumed by the limbs. NASA documented characteristics of NBP in the Man-Systems Integration Standards, in which ways to design spacecraft systems that support human health, safety and productivity were specified.

Later, the Nissan Motor Company which, through its alliance with France's Renault and other smaller manufacturers accounts for one in ten of the world's vehicles, turned to NASA's NBP research as a starting point to develop a new driver's seat. Like an astronaut, a car driver needs to be safe and comfortable in order to operate the vehicle efficiently for extended periods of time.

On selected vehicles, Nissan has now introduced a new seat design, in which the seat is articulated, with two sections connected by a flexible joint, and provides proper continuous support from the pelvis to the thorax. It also keeps the spine shape naturally in the sitting posture.

Nissan now says the technology developed will be applied not only to the driver's and front passenger's seats, but to the rear seats as well.

Editor's note: A range of neutral posture office chairs is on sale in Australia, although the chairs appear to somewhat differently shaped than those in the NBP focus of this article.

from NASA Tech Briefs

Britain's last dedicated deckchair manufacturer is making seats an inch wider to accommodate the broader bottom. As well as making their single seaters 23 inches wide (58 cm), Southsea Deckchairs report more people buying their Wideboy range, originally devised for two persons, for single use.

The Big John range of toilet seats is tested to withstand 380kg (60st). Their ultra-wide 48cm sitting surface gives 75% greater seating area than regular 36cm toilet seats.

Indiana-based Goliath Caskets supplies 20-gauge steel coffins with extra width, length, and depth. Its largest casket is 4ft wide, 8ft long and can hold a body weighing up to 457kg (72st).

Airplane manufacturer Airbus offers airlines the option of installing extra wide seats measuring 51cm across, instead of the standard 46cm on its A320 jets because of what it calls "trends in demographics". Those wider, usually aisle seats, unsurprisingly, cost more.

from The Guardian

How far should AFRDI go to expand its Rated Load Standards?

AFRDI's suite of Rated Load standards is a response to the need to appropriately test commercial furniture to meet the demands of a country where the waistline is expanding. When the first of these standards was introduced, just three years ago, 160 kilos was set as the upper bench mark for variable height office chairs, while the testing limit for fixed height chairs was set at 300 kilos.

At the time, the upper testing limits seemed to be a more than adequate response to the demands of any likely commercial furniture user. Anecdotal evidence would have it that few people who weigh more than 160 kilos would be very active, and flowing from that, would not likely to be in the workforce.

But then AFRDI was visited by a group of physiotherapists, outlining their concerns about how to responsibly recommend heavy duty office seating for shift supervisors in a smelter. The men in question weighed in at more than 200 kilos a piece, and were described as being 'quite active'.

According to an article in the Monday Morning Quarterback, the practice of placing a car or a massive sandbag on a chair is prevalent, but relatively meaningless, taking no account of the dynamics of loading, or repetitive loading.

So, to cut to the chase, what do people in the Australian office chair industry want? We would like to know whether it is worth our while to research additional testing points under the Rated Load testing program, bearing in mind that while 'everyone' seems to know of a very big worker, statistically the numbers of such people must be very small indeed, calling into question the commercial viability of extending the standards.

Please let us know your BRIEF opinion, and we will publish them (with your permission) in the Christmas edition of the AFRDI Bulletin. Email the editor Julian Ridgers julian@furntech.org.au

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Importance of making accurate claims in advertising

Continuing its recent focus on false and misleading claims in advertising, the ACCC's deputy chair, Delia Rickard, has said: "Where businesses claim their products have certain performance characteristics and benefits, they have a responsibility to ensure that those claims are accurate and supported by credible evidence. This is particularly important...where it is difficult for consumers to independently verify the claims."

And in another statement, Ms Rickard said: "Companies should not claim products are of a particular quality or standard when they are not."

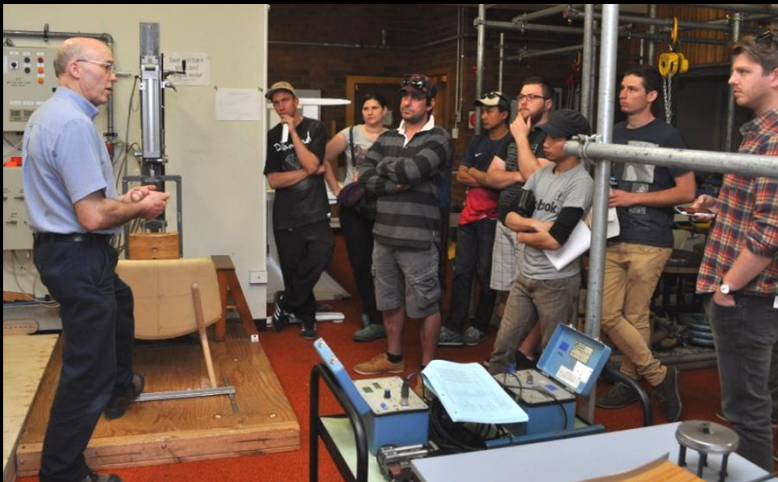
Editor's note: The statements confirm the ACCC's hardening attitude towards false advertising, a matter of considerable concern to AFRDI.

Testing

on unfamiliar ground

Far be it from our lips to say that testing at AFRDI is routine. But notwithstanding that observation, there is a degree of sameness in the daily challenge to test office chairs and the usual bevy of fixed height chairs.

Imagine our delight in having the opportunity to spend an afternoon with second year design students from the School of Architecture and Design at the University of Tasmania. To sweeten the deal, lecturer Matthew Prince, a graduate of the School of Fine Furniture at Utas, brought along a chair of his own design for testing 'to the death' if needs be!



Team leader Eric Paul had his doubts. "I think there needs to be lateral bracing so that the legs don't spread under load," he said.

And Eric admitted to a degree of uncertainty about testing a wood-based product.

"With steel and plastics, you are dealing with engineered materials, and their performance is well known."



Testing starts with gentle load applications at Level 3. To everyone's surprise, including a rather nervous Matthew Prince (right) there's no appreciable movement in the chair.



The fundamental design – pan and seat back made of four layers of ply glued together and moulded to shape – proves its structural worth.

Ten cycles at Level 6 (limited to static, not dynamic) revealed no problems, either.

A quick glance under the chair to see if all's well at Level 6...no issues, except for the emergence of a hairline crack on a radius above a tenoned joint. "Purely cosmetic," said a delighted Eric.

AFRDI hopes to encourage further limited testing by students if they plan to produce items in quantity.

