

FurnitureToday

UPHOLSTERY

Motion upholstery: Telling the health, wellness story

Selling reclining furniture's potential benefits needs to steer clear of gimmicks



[Powell Slaughter](#) // Senior Editor • March 1, 2021



Who doesn't want to massage after a long day at work or while watching a movie? Well now you can. Master Motion Studio 54 Patented Airbag Massage hides right in the seat back cushions and draped in only the best leathers available... (click photos to enlarge)

HIGH POINT — With home and comfort front-of-mind for consumers these days, demand for motion seating, already a hot category pre-pandemic, continues unabated.

Vendors in the category are moving beyond comfort into incorporating functions such as massage, heat and enhanced positioning to bring a health and wellness story to their products about improving consumers' overall well-being. The trick is to keep that story honest, not gimmicky, and not to overstate claims on retail sales floors. In fact, some vendors prefer to stay away from those topics, keeping the conversation focused on comfort alone.

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However, the product is presented at retail, though, potential health and wellness benefits play into product development for motion seating and recliners.

Start at the drawing board

Prevention of back pain is a focal point at Ekornes when it comes to product development of its Stressless brand of recliners and seating. Marketing Director Beverly Kastel noted that back pain is a leading cause of missed work and one of the most common reasons for visits to a doctor's office, according to the American Chiropractic Assn.

"The human anatomy is carefully studied and intentionally considered all the way through the product development process," said Kastel. "Stressless seating is equipped with patented comfort technologies for lumbar, back and neck support."

Examples at Stressless include its patented Plus system, which articulates with the body's contour for the ideal lower back and head support in the upright or reclined position. Another technology, the BalanceAdapt system, gives select Stressless recliners a slight back-and-forth motion designed to simulate rocking.

Michael Nanni, President and CEO of Master Motion Studio 54, said health and wellness is "our No. 1 priority" when adding new features.

"We want to make sure that what we are adding will truly work to help the health and wellness targets we are trying to achieve," he said. "There are a lot of gimmicks out there that do not offer the benefits they originally set out to achieve, or what they are trying to achieve can simply be done by a person without having to buy the specific products to achieve it."

Health and wellness should play a significant role in product development, especially now, according to Ultracomfort Director of Marketing Sarah Lydon.

"Consumers are considering their health now more than ever," she said. "Pair that with the extended time spent at home, they are looking for non-traditional ways to improve the wellness and preserve their health."

Health and wellness has factored into product development across all categories at La-Z-Boy, from adjustable lumbar and head support to advancements in foam technology.

"We recognize that motion seating provides additional benefits to consumers by being able to ergonomically adjust to their body," said Paula Hoyas, vice president of merchandising. "As we develop motion seating, we take into account full body support through the full range of the reclining motion and leverage tools such as pressure mapping and anthropometric data to ensure our products are designed for a broad range of body types."

Mega Motion designs and produces power recliners with lift function to assist those needing assistance in sitting, reclining or standing up, including comfort features such as adjustable lumbar area, adjustable headrests and heat/massage systems. The company serves both medical and non-medical retailers.

“Most of our models are FDA Class II medical devices and are held to higher quality, component, testing and durability standards than a normal rocking recliner with a lift frame slapped under it,” noted Managing Director Dwight Hardison.

Telling the story

While La-Z-Boy’s point-of-purchase materials do not specifically call out health and wellness benefits, RSAs are trained to convey what motion furniture and recliners can do to enhance consumers’ seating experience.

“They point out the benefits of being able to ergonomically adjust one’s body, having infinite positions on our leg rests that allow one to find their perfect elevated leg position, lumbar support with adjustability to sooth the back, adjustable headrest to fully support the head and ensure comfort whether taking a nap or watching TV,” Hoyas said, adding that La-Z-Boy’s patented wireless hand wand puts these functions in the palm of the hand vs. having to reach over the side of the arm.

Other vendors get more specific about motion seating’s potential health and wellness benefits through sales training and POP that helps RSAs, who might not be experts, share those with shoppers on the floor. The key is to substantiate any such claims.

Ekornes provide retailers with a working ‘inside’ model of the Stressless so that the sales associate can describe how the chair works and the consumer can see the support system. That also is communicated in printed materials and training materials including the annual Stressless catalog.

Do RSAs specifically talk health and wellness in their Stressless pitch?

“Yes, they describe the ergonomic benefits that the head, neck and lumbar support Stressless provides as well as the fact that we are endorsed by the American Chiropractic Assn.,” Kastel said. “Stressless was the first recliner that the ACA endorsed many years ago, and we use it in marketing materials and provide it as a proof point for the RSA.”

It’s the same at Ultracomfort when it comes to citing health.

“Most definitely,” said Lydon. “That is what makes our product different. Not only do our chairs focus on health and wellness with the lift function, but we also hold two positioning patents that allow for ergonomic body placement and comfortable leg elevation.”

Ultracomfort POP is designed to act as a retail sales aid. Its recently launched “Comfort Zone by UltraComfort” concept supported by video and printed materials, which provides up to five adjustable, patented and supportive positioning zones designed to increase body wellness and optimize comfort.

“We realized that the word ‘motor’ can be intimidating to consumers and does not accurately portray the wellness benefits our positioning can provide,” Lydon said. “Therefore, we replaced the word ‘motor’ with ‘zone’ in creating this new concept.”

Nanni at Master Motion said he wasn't sure before that its retail customers sell health and wellness on the floor, "but with our products today, they sure do now."

"We have actually worked with doctors and acupuncturists to make sure our (patented) airbag massage, which has six independent double-walled airbags, hits all the required pressure points in the back to give the maximum health and wellness benefits from our massage," Nanni said, noting those consultations pin-pointed the optimal location for bags.

Just placing an air bag wherever, he added, "is like getting a real massage where the masseuse just massages anywhere and not on the pressure points or in the correct spots."

In addition to POP for all products, Master Motion provides YouTube video links that can be shared with customers. Sales associates — and consumers — can access the company's website, which outlines all health and wellness benefits.

Looking ahead

Furniture Today also asked about new features and functions on the way that could enhance motion furniture's potential health and wellness benefits.

Mega Motion soon will launch a new line of power recliners with lift function and a new three-zone heat system designed to add more soothing heat to the legs, lower and upper back.

Ekornes will offer a new set of recliners later on this year with a massage and heat feature for more comfort and ergonomic benefits.

Others spoke in more general terms.

"'Work from home' looks like it will be here to stay for some companies, and any mechanism or feature that can support that will be beneficial," said Ultracomfort's Lydon. "Also, after witnessing the effects COVID-19 has had on nursing homes, 'aging in place' has become more important to older individuals. Any function, mechanism or feature that supports them in their home will also be beneficial."

Above all, said Nanni at Master Motion, the new and best health-and-wellness-related functions will be those that can prove their claims of true medical benefits backed with the science to back up those claims.

"You can say that 'scratching your foot prevents itching,' and 'smiling helps prevent sadness,' but you can do these yourself, you don't need to buy something to achieve this," he said. "You cannot do that with massage, targeting pressure points, relieving stress, healing sore muscles, and the list goes on.

"I think today's consumers are smarter than we have ever seen," Nanni continued. "Everyone reads reviews before they buy, so I don't believe the gimmicks out there will survive as they did in the past, and the products that can prove real medical health and wellness benefits that are not easy for a customer to do themselves will be those that will survive."



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I'm Powell Slaughter, senior editor at Furniture/Today. I returned to the publication in January 2015 after nine years of writing about furniture retail strategies and best practices at a monthly magazine focusing on home furnishings retail operations. Prior to that, I spent 10 years with F/T covering wood furniture, the last five of those as case goods editor. Upon my return to F/T, I developed coverage of the logistical and service aspects of the furniture industry as well as following the occasional, home office and home entertainment categories. In April 2018 I took over the upholstery category, with responsibility for coverage of the fabric and leather stationary and motion upholstery, recliners and massage chair categories.