



**BY KIM WOODS**

*Sickler Inc is a manufacturer representative firm committed to marketing and selling commercial furnishings through dealers and wholesalers to businesses, hospitals, schools, and hospitality industries in Illinois, Wisconsin and Northwest Indiana. Sickler Inc strives to meet or exceed sales and marketing goals by providing world class professional service to sales and service professionals, direct marketers, architects, designers, specifiers and wholesale distributors. We hope you enjoy the discussion!*

**Q: Tell us a little bit about how Sickler Organization got started?**

**A:** *(Steve Sickler)* I was a biology and finance major at Seton Hall University when Uncle Jack (Jack C. Smith) offered me a job. He represented both office supplies and office furniture lines in Chicago and taught me how to run a successful rep firm. During the 1983 recession Jack had too many on the payroll for the revenue stream, so I struck out on my own. I started Sickler Organization with Hayes Manufacturing, Jasper Table Company, Flex-Y-Plan, and La-Z-Boy Contract signed us on in October 1984. La-Z-Boy has been a major part of our success story. Barbara Krech and I have represented them for over 36 years now. I'm not sure who keeps the industry records, but an independent rep's 30-day term contract for 36 years must be some sort of industry record, no?

**Q: How has the company changed over the years?**

**A:** *(Steve Sickler)* We have reinvented ourselves as the industry has changed. Business furniture used to have two categories: budget & contract. In the early 90's midgrade became the hot

furniture category, and La-Z-Boy Contract was its leader. This was our first major strategy change. I took the company from a dealer-focused sole salesperson to a multi-person firm with a focus on architects and designers. Barbara Krech



joined Sickler Organization in 1986. Her textile design background added depth in both dealer relationships and A&D relationships – one of our strengths that continues today.

Import furniture came next, upsetting the budget and midmarket categories and its distribution. The Big Box stores and import furniture gobbled up a percentage of budget and midmarket furniture sold. Sickler Organization needed a new strategy and purposely focused on healthcare in the early 2000's. We're very happy we did!

**Q: What do you think is the secret to the Sickler Organization's longevity and success?**

**A:** (Steve Sickler) Hah! Like any successful firm, its people. We've been fortunate to have several very talented associates as part of the Sickler team over the years. Some moved on to form their own top-tier rep groups. One even started his own iconic manufacturing company. Barbara and I strive for an open work environment with minimal oversight. We believe that if you have to micromanage staff, you've hired the wrong people. We've also formed an alliance with another rep group in a part of our territory, who represents all our lines in addition to their own. They find the opportunities, but our inside staff does most of the quoting and sales support. Our combined strengths are used to advantage. It is a great relationship.

I credit our longevity in part to a conversation I had long ago with sailing buddy who was the COO of a multinational insurance company. I asked how he managed tens of thousands of employees and billions of dollars of revenue. He said, "If you report to me, I have to know that each morning when you wake up, that you know the direction the company is going, and that you have my back. If I doubt it, I don't care how good a job you've done, you have to go." This notion changed the way I related with manufacturers. Reps must act as if the line we represent is our own company. We need to be concerned with more than sales volume. We need to consider reputation and profitability. We need to align with quality distribution. We need to provide customer service that competes with the major manufacturers. Perhaps we should drop the word "independent" from our rep description. Maybe "field partner" would better describe how the Sickler Organization operates. It's not easy to manage a successful manufacturing company, and reps need to embrace accountability as part of the package.

**A:** (Barbara Krech) Do what you say you are going to do. Practice random acts of kindness. Be helpful. Respect you are part of the project recipe, even if you are the ½ tsp water.

**Q: What makes you most excited about working in the contract design industry?**

**A:** (Steve Sickler) I love the constant changes; it keeps it interesting. The blends of fashion and functionality are unique. I like that - compared to other industries - contract furniture is smaller, friendlier and less ruthless. We even have family-owned manufacturers!

**A:** (Barbara Krech) The people! We have made so many lifelong friends and have had so much fun. Working on projects with design and dealer partners requires trust and respect. No surprise, the same ingredients of friendship!

**Q: How do you think your group will evolve over the next 5-10 years?**

**A:** (Steve Sickler) Our largest evolution will no doubt be in the immediate future as we exit the COVID economy. How we go to market has changed. Our most recent hire is a social media specialist. Over the past year, cloud-disseminated media was THE way we communicated. Period. We now consider our social media specialist as our key marketing person, replacing the in-person presentations with PowerPoints and printed brochures around a conference table. Binder updates have been replaced with My Resource Library. Looking forward, cloud marketing will give us more time to focus on training and on closing sales opportunities in person. We need to figure out how to better market to dealers and A&D via the cloud, to grow our success. Though in spite of a shift to digital, there will be a strong desire for human interaction after a year of isolation!

**A:** (Barbara Krech) Clients still need to see some of the furniture solutions they've researched and we've presented. One wants to drive the car before buying it. We have warehoused in 2000 square feet of racked space, hundreds of furniture samples. We have 5 manufacturers with showrooms in the Merchandise Mart. This will go a long way in turning our cloud efforts into projects.

**Q: If you could use just one word to describe Sickler what would it be?**

**A:** (Steve Sickler) Established. Sickler Organization had a strong sales year in 2020 with sales that matched 2019 despite the challenges of shutdowns and fewer in-person sales calls. One reason is our healthcare focus and the long processing times of healthcare projects. A significant advantage is our deep relationships with other established dealer salespeople and A&D designers. It's just easier for those successful professionals to reach out to people they trust the most. Pros reach out to established firms. I can't imagine being new to the industry and easily establishing new relationships and introducing new products in 2020.