

# YOUNG GUNS

INNOVATION DRIVES THE NEXT GENERATION OF OUTDOOR LEADERS

In this recurring series, *Casual Living* interviews the industry's rising stars, notable executives under age 40 who already are making an impact on the outdoor business. This month, Frank Verna, director of sales and business development at Tropitone, and Satya Tiwari, president of Surya, share their insights on the state of the industry now and where it's headed in the future.



Frank Verna

## FRANK VERNA

Director of sales and business development, Tropitone

### WHAT SPARKED YOUR INTEREST IN THE OUTDOOR FURNITURE INDUSTRY?

**VERNA:** I was introduced to the industry by my father-in-law, Ed Brookes. This industry has allowed me to develop relationships with great mentors that have had a profound impact on my life and career. I am very grateful to Ed for introducing me to this business.

### WHAT STEPS DID YOU TAKE TO GET TO WHERE YOU ARE IN YOUR CAREER?

**VERNA:** I went to college at a small school in Lancaster, Pa., called Millersville University and received a degree in economics. My first job out of college was with Enterprise Rent-a-Car in San Diego. Enterprise helped me to develop valuable customer service, sales and time management skills.

I started in the furniture industry as a Brown Jordan in-house rep in 2002. After

a brief stint as an independent rep for BJI in the Pacific Northwest, I started with Tropitone in 2005 as a sub rep in South Florida working with Ed Brookes. Prior to moving into my current position, I represented Tropitone in Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi and Kentucky for five years.

### HOW HAVE YOU SEEN THE OUTDOOR FURNITURE INDUSTRY EVOLVE OVER THE YEARS?

**VERNA:** The most glaring difference in our business has been the evolution of the deep seating category. When I first started, every new product conversation would start with, "What is the price of the dining chair?" Now most conversations start with, "What is the price of the sofa?"

I have also seen an enhancement in the in-store experience our specialty retailers provide. As the product mix changes, so does the merchandising. Retailers no longer line up dining sets and have sofas and gliders in the back of the store. We now see more vignettes and merchandising elements that tell a story and help the consumer visualize what the set would look like at their home.

Lastly, we are seeing digital elements come into the sales

process. Many retailers have in-store portals where they use websites as interactive, electronic catalogs. This is also happening on iPads.

### WHAT ARE SOME OF THE GREATEST CHALLENGES THE INDUSTRY IS FACING?

**VERNA:** The greatest challenge I see is how our brick-and-mortar specialty retailers can enter the e-commerce space to capture more sales opportunities both online and in-store. How do we work together to create touch points with the "new shopper" and grow as an industry? We need to be able to keep the national resellers from preempting our channel and capturing our customers before we can. Casual furniture is an ideal "brick and click" product category.

Because of the multiple variables ranging from finish and fabric combinations to comfort level, consumers are likely to research their purchase at home and then go to their local retailer to "test drive." Tropitone has developed an omnichannel strategy for our residential channel and we are building a structure to execute this with the finest retailers in the industry.

The Ravello deep seating swivel action lounge by Tropitone exhibits traditional beauty.



## HOW CAN BUSINESSES ADAPT TO THOSE CHALLENGES?

**VERNA:** Adaptation requires knowledge and cooperation. Retailers and manufacturers need to work together to understand product trends and consumer behaviors. We need to develop partnerships to bring the in-store and online shopping experience consumers demand.

Tropitone is adapting to the marketplace by expanding our product portfolio. After the launch of our third brand, Tropitone Valora, at the July premarket, we will have three unique brands - Tropitone, Tropitone Moda and Tropitone Valora.

All three brands deliver our marketing message of "The Most Enjoyable Outdoor Experience" in unique ways. Tropitone Moda delivers meticulous workmanship and high design for extraordinary spaces. Tropitone Valora delivers with products designed to meet basic standards for a multitude of applications. Our core brand,



According to Director of Sales and Business Development Frank Verna, Tropitone's Moda brand "delivers meticulous workmanship and high design for extraordinary spaces." Shown here is the Toulon collection.

Tropitone, delivers industry-leading performance through a robust product offering combined with a superior purchase and ownership experience.

Our three brands allow us to create more touch points with our end users and create more sales opportunities for our company as well as our retail partners.

## HOW HAS TECHNOLOGY IMPACTED THE INDUSTRY?

**VERNA:** Technology has made it possible for businesses to

create relationships and touch points with their end-users via social media. Websites have allowed businesses the opportunity to tell their story and afford consumers the ability to research their purchases more thoroughly than ever before.

Only the strongest value propositions will survive. If a company does not deliver on their message, they will be called out on product reviews for all consumers to see. Conversely, if they do what they say they do, they will be rewarded

with a positive review.

"Word of mouth" advertising has never been more powerful or far-reaching.

## HOW DO YOU THINK THE NEXT GENERATION OF OUTDOOR INDUSTRY LEADERS CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE INDUSTRY'S FUTURE?

**VERNA:** We can embrace the core values and the heritage of the companies we work for while constantly seeking ways to improve what we do and who we are.

# SATYA TIWARI

President, Surya

## WHAT SPARKED YOUR INTEREST IN THE RUG AND ACCESSORY INDUSTRY?

**TIWARI:** I grew up in a family business, but I went out and got an education at Northwestern for undergrad. Then I did four years of investment banking in New York. I had no idea growing up that I would want to come back to the family business. But I realized it's a good brand, and if they're reinventing the wheel, why don't I apply my knowledge to the family business?

## WHAT OTHER STEPS DID YOU TAKE TO GET TO WHERE YOU ARE NOW IN YOUR CAREER?

**TIWARI:** Once I joined Surya, I started in sales and moved into product development, and now I'm head of the company. It's about learning how our customers work. A lot of vendors make the mistake of developing product they think their clients should sell. Our goal is to facilitate the buying process. By being in a different part of the business and interacting with customers at all levels, I got a good understanding of how to develop a product that our customers want to buy, and how to simplify the whole buying process.

## WHEN DID SURYA FIRST ENTER THE OUTDOOR MARKET?

**TIWARI:** We entered the outdoor market in 2006 or 2007. About two years ago, we really got into the outdoor market in a big way. Today in the outdoor world we have good, better, best, so we have a very entry level product to a very high-end product. And we have not just outdoor rugs but outdoor pillows and poufs.

We see outdoor as a lifestyle rather than just another product that we can sell and make money. We probably have the largest selection of outdoor in the market today in rugs. We have over 200 designs we sell.

If chevron is hot, we bring it outdoors. If medallion is hot,

we have it in outdoor. Every outdoor customer doesn't want a solid stripe or plain rug. They need fashion. We have really taken outdoor the way we've taken indoor. And we believe in collaboration and partnership. We look at what is the outdoor world doing today in upholstery and furniture and we're making sure we have those color palettes instilled in our line.

## HOW HAS THE GROWING ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IMPACTED THE INDUSTRY?

**TIWARI:** Technology definitely helps us be more efficient, from manufacturing to communication with our factories to communication with our customers through [surya.com](http://surya.com).