

The Story Inside Leather Furniture

Using the best possible polyurethane foam can help you produce leather upholstery that flies off the retail floor

BY CAROL MILANO

Shoppers who have an ever-widening range of tastes and budgets love leather's looks, comfort, durability, and feel. Yet an invisible component is crucial to customer enjoyment of any leather furniture — its cushioning. The right flexible polyurethane foam can raise consumer satisfaction, build brand loyalty, and increase cost-effectiveness.

Industry estimates indicate that leather upholstery accounted for about 20 percent of U.S. upholstery sales in 1998; this year that figure will probably top out at roughly 25 percent. To maximize your company's advantage in this red-hot category, you need to understand how to select the foam that's best suited for each leather product in your line.

Flexible foam can help

Leather is difficult to upholster and make comfortable; today's versatile flexible polyurethane foam can help. The abbreviation "FPF" distinguishes flexible polyurethane foam from other foams, latex, or fiber.

"It allows us to do some unique things in styling," says Eddie Hyder, merchandise coordinator/Sealy Motion at Klaussner Furniture, referring to his company's use of FPF. "We can do more curves in the arms, or in shaping our sides, which is very difficult with wood. On a new, Italian-design leather sofa we introduced at High Point [in October], the shape and



curvature of the outside arm is basically done entirely with foam."

La-Z-Boy uses a contour cutting saw to get the exact dimension — within 1/16 of an inch — and shape it wants in FPF. "We tend to use much more foam than other manufacturers, feeling the solid polyurethane core will keep its shape much longer than blown fiber," says Greg White, vice president/merchandising.

At Leathercraft, 80 percent of orders are custom-made and FPF varies with each customer's expectations. "If they want a sit-on feel with lots of resilience and a tailored look, we use smaller coils wrapped in polyurethane foam. We establish a standard based on how a piece is tailored," says Phil Brown, national sales manager. "For a deep sit-in accent chair, we had the back contoured for a great casual look and feel. We used 6-pound compression Reflex very effectively for the chair back to support shoulders."

To get the desired comfort level, Franklin Corp. seeks the ideal mix of springs, FPF, and fiber, then makes sure the combination breathes well, which depends on the leather. "We buy foam in bun bulk, cut it to size, and pre-flex or roll it," says Chuck Tidwell, product manager. "Our six-month break-in period makes foam softer and maintains its consistency, controlling the compression ratio."

Better recovery

In leather or heavy upholstered furniture, fiber tends to mat down and lose shape. New fast-recovering FPF can replace fiber to preserve furniture's durability and looks. Independent studies at Mississippi State University found that Reflex FPF from Foamex exhibited three times greater recovery than fiber. "It gives the loft of fiber with the durability of foam," says Jeff Briney, national accounts manager/furniture at Foamex.

Traditional foam has cells of similar size and shape. For leather, North Car-

olina Foam Industries produces Ultracel FPF with irregular-shaped cells. "Some depress quickly and easily when weight is on them; others, of different structure, are very firm and depress slowly," explains Steve Riddle, vice president/sales. "Then there's Softcel, which is almost like fiber because it's so soft, but has better retention properties and holds its shape."

Manufacturers and retailers of leather upholstery want to avoid problems or customer complaints. "Manufacturers call these shots," says Larry Frugé, Leggett & Platt vice president/marketing. "They want to be sure they have a good quality product to put under leather because it lasts

Lane's urban contemporary sofa, in a rich plum color, embodies style and comfort. The CL-Dream rocker/recliner (below) from Coja Leatherline incorporates minimum 1.8 density FPF cushions.



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longer.”

With leather upholstery, “You want foam to hold up and bounce back to its original thickness,” says Eric Vlessing, vice president, Coja Leatherline. “If you buy cheap foam, resilience isn’t there; a six-inch cushion will become a two-inch cushion. We keep density at 1.8, minimum.”

Seeking styling and aesthetic appeal, Leathercraft “spends more money on filling material than other companies I’ve worked for,” says Brown. “[Some] cut corners on that — it’s just chemicals and air — but we want to make sure the consumer will be pleased with overall comfort, and that it will last.”

The right foam for the job

Inside Mulholland Brothers’ heirloom-quality leather chairs is soft, open-cell FPF wrapped in down. “We utilize existing foam technology and depend on our suppliers to give us the best material for a chair to envelop, but support, you,” says co-owner Jay Holland. “Everyone who

sits in it agrees we have the right combination of foam and down: a cushion that works well and maintains uniformity.”

Remember, all foam softens with use. “Often, consumers aren’t informed to expect this, but they need to be,” says Jim Mulvey, general manager, Future Foam. “To eliminate problems, buy the right foam for the job. All high-resiliency FPFs, starting at 1.8, and cushions with coils, hold up better and are seldom returned.”

Franklin’s Tidwell agrees. Problems are less likely “if you use premium fibers and foam,” he says. “That’s why we go through a selection process on what to use.”

Foam suppliers take manufacturers’ concerns seriously. The latest production process at Foamex creates increased softness with more durability. “Customer satisfaction is higher, and you’ll see savings over the long term,” Briney says. “Developed for the furniture industry, Reflex is ideal for leather:

it holds up better than fiber and can provide either loose fit or a tight, upholstered look.”

Lyondell Chemical, a major supplier of chemicals to FPF producers, spent years developing a balance between cushion support and softness. “Today’s furniture contains more time, technology, and special materials,” says Alvaro Vaselli, market development manager. “We met our challenge to create a substance as soft as polyester but also durable: Softcel is a super-soft, high resilient foam.”

In fact, industry-wide, both chemical suppliers and foam producers seem eager to respond to furniture industry needs. Proof positive: the loss of market share to fiber, which was seen in the early to mid ’90s, has virtually been reversed. A commitment to research and development has created a new generation of softer foams that retain important properties such as comfort, support, and durability.

New uses for FPF

Adaptable products provide upholstery manufacturers with the right FPF exactly where it’s needed. Specifying by comfort level for each item, La-Z-Boy may use two or three different foams in one chair back. “If your lower back needs more support, we put heavier weight foam there and lighter weight in the upper back to get your shoulders comfortable,” says White.

La-Z-Boy’s new sports-fan recliner — the Oasis, with 10-motor heat/massage system, telephone, and six-pack-sized electric cooler — uses high-resiliency foam. The seat combines 27-pound IFD, 1.8 density FPF with 30-pound IFD, 2.0 density; the back has 12-pound IFD with 2-ounce fiber batting.

“Most arms and back panels have zippers; we can easily add or take out foam to make it firmer or softer,” notes Klausner’s Hyder. “We’ll give a lumbar-type support if someone wants it. Most

of our dealers have that foam on hand and simply open the zipper. It’s adjustable, and can move around in the pouch to fit a buyer’s contours.”

Lyondell’s market research found consumers willing to spend more if convinced they’re buying better furniture. Not knowing what constitutes furniture “quality,” shoppers admit they look at color and design. “Our focus groups show people will spend more if we demonstrate furniture is better because of key factors they’re not aware of,” says Vaselli. “If we promote components like branded foam and show it’s better, would people pay more? The unanimous reply is ‘yes.’”

“We’re missing opportunities for point-of-sale education about different component benefits,” Vaselli says. “We can solve many more manufacturers’ problems than they bring us. Innovations have a cost, but if it’s a cost consumers will pay, it’s worth it.” □

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For maximum comfort La-Z-Boy’s Oasis recliner combines high-resiliency foam of various densities.

Six Ways to Improve Leather Cushions

Your choice of foam should vary with specific styling and cushion construction. Consumers buy leather furniture first for feel, then for durability, expecting it to outlast fabric. When designing and engineering leather upholstery, keep the following points in mind:

1. Use FPF with durability consistent with the leather furniture’s performance requirements.

2. Don’t specify the same FPF in all leather furniture. Try different FPFs to see which works best in each item. The chemistry varies — both Future Foam and North Carolina Foam make FPFs with unusual compositions. Leggett & Platt’s bestseller for leather is high-resiliency RestEasy, which

retains its original feel and shape far longer than average. Hickory Springs recommends high resilience Enduro-Plush, a first-class FPF, with improved modulus and compression ratio that make it well-suited for use in leather furniture.

3. Get expert assistance from a reliable supplier, preferably a member of the Polyurethane Foam Assn. PFA members represent most of the industry and virtually every member offers a premium product suitable for use with leather. The PFA website is www.pfa.org.

4. Consider who’ll sit in your chair. “Women buy furniture, and weigh a lot less. Upholstery manufacturers don’t take into account that difference in weight of

a person sitting on a sofa,” says Bob Bush Sr., Hickory Springs vice president/sales.

5. Make sure your suspension is the best available. Specify proper springs or webbing in leather recliners — even though space is limited — in combination with a high resiliency foam.

6. Keep up with new developments in FPF. Encourage your staff to learn about its new uses, varieties, and ways it can help you make better upholstery. The Alliance for Flexible Polyurethane Foam offers two helpful free booklets, “Millennium Report on Engineered Comfort” and “The Furniture Industry’s Guide to Today’s Flexible Polyurethane Foam.” Request them