

Letter to the Editor: Wow, I didn’t see that coming!

**Market review from the “front lines”… no predictions, just the statistics**

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[**Guest Contributor**](https://www.furnituretoday.com/profile/guestft/)**•*May 6, 2021***

The virtual revolution has and is changing our industry, and I am seeing it first-hand as I host the First Tuesday Events every month, Premarket and High Point Market. It started off where the first Tuesday Events were 80%-90% virtual, as buyers could stay home to view the line and not fly to High Point for just one or two days, and that made sense.

Now we just faced our first Premarket, where in the past personal attendance has always been king. So how were virtual visits going to blend with in-person visits for this market? Would there be any virtual visits, or would everything be in-person?

What would be the break-down of in-person visits vs. virtual visits at an actual market? Maybe 80% in person and 20% virtual would have been my guess, and I couldn’t have been more wrong. We did 70% virtual and only 30% in-person.

The problem is, if I would have built my showroom availability regarding my predictions, I would have spent 80% of my time preparing for in-person visits and only 20% of my time preparing the platform for virtual visits. What a costly mistake that would have been.

A company’s structure today, more than ever, is a critical point to survival. At Master Motion Studio 54, we have set the stage for both in-person and virtual visits. Preparing for virtual visits doesn’t mean doing a Zoom call and walking around the showroom showing your line. It means preparing your complete product line for an online buyer to easily view the line and be able to make a purchase comfortably and confidently without having to travel to the showing in High Point, Las Vegas or China.

We have focused our line not on a good, better, best category, but we focused our line only on the best category. Once a retailer has a collection of ours on their floor, the only thing that changes are the color of the covers. The leather quality, fabric quality, 100% foam seats, massage backs, mechanisms, are all the same from frame to frame.

We know in upholstery people like to sit and feel, but when sitting and feeling the same products you already have is costing you four days of travel aand the cost of food, rental car, hotel, etc., then it becomes very inefficient. I believe most will choose not to take four days away from running their business to achieve what others are doing in one hour without ever leave their office, home or state.

So, the push to virtual and online is more than just getting a subscription to Zoom, but rather aligning your product line to fit today’s virtual buyer.

**New dilemma**

Check out these results: 70% of my Premarket visits were virtual, and half of those were the two days before Premarket opened. Before anyone walked in the door to view the line at Premarket, retailers had already committed to and placed orders over Zoom.

I did one virtual visit with four people in four different cities, and they all viewed the line together on Zoom, placing orders before the meeting was over.

What does this mean for the in-person buyer who traveled all the way to Premarket to view the products in person? “I’m sorry but that frame is already taken…”

Now the big dilemma. Retailers that did their in-person walk-through had one person take photos, one person take notes, and almost everyone was in a rush because they were behind or catching a flight. Wow, a lot of expensive travel to have to rush and not fully see what they needed.

All the virtual visits went the full one-and-a-half hours, no one was rushed, and all decisions were made as a group before the call was over. The in-person buyers asked for price lists to be sent so they would go back and review with their team and before their final decision (almost a commitment but no orders).

Now we have two scenarios, the first is that we had buyers that did virtual visits and wanted to write orders over the Zoom call for products that the in-person visitor liked and was going back to make their final decision on.

The second scenario is that 50% of my virtual visits from two days before the Premarket started signed up for my last two days in town, Thursday and Friday after the show had ended, to finalize their order. So, the two days after the Premarket ended were my busiest days and when I wrote the most business.

Buyers who viewed the line before the market began, immediately were sent a video link to a copy of the entire virtual presentation. All text questions asked during the Zoom call were sent in a written transcript, and the entire presentation recorded and supplied in a video link. Price lists were sent immediately on Zoom. Many reviewed that video and made their final decisions on Thursday and Friday after Premarket was over, when we did a final Zoom call where they reviewed their final choices and asked any final questions before placing orders and committing to that product.

But what about the in-person buyer who liked that collection and was going back home to make their final decisions? They were also waiting for price lists and were going to email any questions they had after they met back at their home office.

I see this as being a real issue moving forward. Do you take the orders you have in-hand or do you wait weeks to see if the in-person buyers choose your product or not? I believe once you have truly “set the stage” for the virtual buyer, this will become a big dilemma moving forward.

I never would have thought that the only buyers who “beat” the virtual Premarket buyers to products were the virtual buyers who had already written orders for products at the First Tuesday event in April, making products unavailable for even the largest major retailers that shop the week before Premarket opens. By the time those major retailers got to Premarket a week early, products had already been taken in their territories.

The statistics from this Premarket more than amazed me. At Master Motion Studio 54, we have made it our priority to truly “set the stage” for both the virtual-buyer and the in-person buyer, and it is truly amazing to see where the results lie.

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