

INFORMATION
AND NEWS FROM
FIRA INTERNATIONAL

SPRING ISSUE 2010

FIRA

Expertise • Independence • Integrity

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Image courtesy of Harlequin Fabrics & Wallcoverings



FIRA announces joint venture with Chinese Manufacturers Association

For the latest FIRA news, please visit www.fira.co.uk/news

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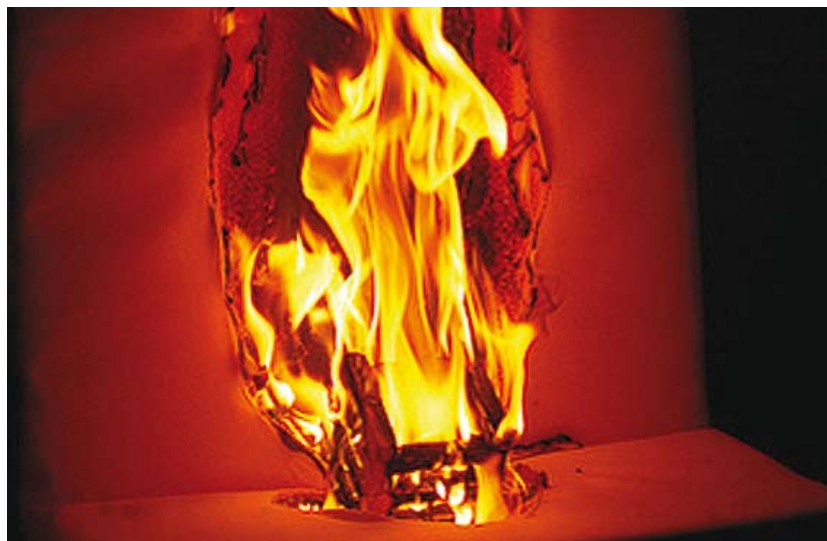
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FIRA announces major new flammability guide for industry

FIRA is currently finalising a furniture flammability guide for the British Furniture Confederation (BFC).

The document, which is a guide to the flammability requirements for contract and non-domestic furniture, is a sister publication to the BFC guide to the UK domestic flammability regulations, produced by FIRA, last year.

The new document is an essential guide for manufacturers, component suppliers and specifiers as it describes how furniture sits within the requirements of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order. It specifically details the obligations of both end users and suppliers and suggests appropriate fire safety levels for furniture in a range of end use environments.

As well as input from FIRA's flammability experts, the document incorporates invaluable contributions from the industry via members of the British Contract Furnishing Association (BCFA).

A launch event in London will be held by the BFC on April 14th 2010.

For more information on the guide, or to book a place at the launch event, contact FIRA's Dr Pete Beele pbeele@fira.co.uk.

If you would like to download a copy of the BFC/FIRA document 'Fire safety of furniture and furnishings in the home – A guide to the UK Regulations' visit www.fira.co.uk/publications.



FIRA continues to help shape Government policy for the UK furniture industry

FIRA represents the industry on the Advisory Group for the review of the Furniture and Furnishings (FIRE) (Safety) Regulations 1988 (FFR's)

FIRA's involvement further demonstrates its commitment to help shape government policy in relation to the UK furniture industry and to raise standards within the industry both in the UK and abroad.

The Advisory Group brings together technical experts, manufacturers, the fire services, test houses and consumer safety groups to work with officials from the Department of Business Innovation and Skills (BIS). The advisory group will recommend the best options for the future of the FFR's.

The review is needed because, while the FFRs are widely acknowledged to be very effective in saving lives and preventing injuries in domestic fires, they have not been

reviewed since their implementation. Since then, there have been various innovations in products and manufacturing processes that do not clearly fall inside or outside the scope of the FFRs. Minister for Consumer Affairs, Kevin Brennan, has approved this review.

The two main objectives of the review are:

- To identify the current effectiveness of the Furniture and Furnishings (Fire) (Safety) Regulations 1988 (FFRs)
- To assess which benefits can be ascribed to each of the tests, in particular the Crib 5 test

This will enable BIS to establish if the additional stringency of the flammability requirements in the UK, above that of European provisions, continue to be effective and necessary.

If you have any issues with the current regulations that you would like considered for the possible revision of the FFRs, please contact FIRA and we will ensure that these are raised during the consultation process.

FIRA will endeavour to offer regular updates throughout the consultation process to ensure that the industry is fully informed of progress.

NEWS

New Members

We are delighted to welcome the following new members:

FIRA

Amaryllis Group Holdings
Broadstock Office Furniture Ltd
Cort Business Services UK Limited
De Montfort University
Elm Workspace
Frank Hudson Limited
Hawk Care Limited
Homini Education
Interserve Retail & Interiors
JC Kitchens Limited
Roger Lewis Furniture Company Limited
Sainsbury's Supermarkets Ltd
Tesco Stores Limited
The Central Buying Consortium
Tough Furniture Limited
Wintech Production Group SP.Zoo
Worlds Apart
Zeoftig Limited

FISP

Bene plc
Egan Reid Stationery Company Limited
ISU Ltd
Knightsbridge Furniture Productions
Paula Rosa Kitchens
Southern Office Interiors Ltd
Symphony Group plc

TFO - Full Members

Bentalls of Kingston
Bernhardt Furniture UK Ltd
Frank Hudson Limited
Marriotts House Furnishers Ltd

TFO - Associate Members

Beds Direct
Custom Carpentry
Homewood Interiors
Hypnia Ltd
Keechdesign UK Ltd
New-life Interiors
Sofa & Home



New impetus for FIRA at Interiors 2010

We went to Interiors 2010 with a refreshed image and exciting news about a new test laboratory in Hong Kong which will service furniture testing needs in China and the surrounding region. The initiative will be a joint venture with local organisation, CMA Testing and Certification Laboratories Limited and one that will delight many of our existing customers who require FIRA testing to be undertaken in the far east.

Opening in March 2010, we specifically chose to partner with CMA Testing and Certification Laboratories because of its long standing reputation within Hong Kong, and the extensive range of tests it currently offers, which further complements our specialism in furniture.

Also at the show, The Furniture Ombudsman (TFO) re-launched its Associate Membership package. Especially designed for retailers, manufacturers and other associated organisations, this new package demonstrates members ongoing commitment to excellent customer service. "It provides a more cost-effective way to reap the rewards of being a part of TFO" says Kevin Grix, Head of The Furniture Ombudsman. "Associate Members will receive news and case studies, and will be able to demonstrate their membership with a sticker and a certificate which they can display to their customers." The new membership scheme also offers access to discounted training on consumer law and customer complaint handling – and until end of April new joiners to the scheme can benefit from a special offer on training, whereby one extra place is offered free on any TFO consumer law or customer service training course that is booked.

Finally, at the Interiors Show, TFO held a seminar in conjunction with Magnet Kitchens, presenting an actual case study of complaint-handling, with adjudication by TFO. The seminar detailed how TFO provides a cost-effective and positive alternative to litigation and how its service gives tangible added value to a retailer's customer service operation.

Joanne White, Service Excellence Manager of Magnet said: "We firmly believe that having TFO membership assists in our customers' decision-making process, and we would very much encourage anyone who has the desire and determination to improve their service to join TFO."

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FIRA announces joint venture with Chinese Manufacturers Association New test centre for Far East countries

FIRA International is establishing a test laboratory in Hong Kong, to service furniture testing needs in China and the surrounding region. FIRA-CMA Testing Services Ltd will be a joint venture with local organisation, CMA Testing and Certification Laboratories Limited.

FIRA has chosen to partner with CMA Testing and Certification Laboratories because of its long standing reputation within Hong Kong, and the extensive range of tests it currently offers, which will further complement FIRA's specialism in furniture.

The joint venture, FIRA-CMA Testing Services, will be established and equipped by FIRA, and will offer a comprehensive range of furniture tests including:

- physical safety, strength and durability tests for tables, chairs and beds,
- performance and flammability testing of fabrics and foams
- chemical analysis
- packaging tests

In addition FIRA-CMA will be able to offer factory and container inspections. Staff will be trained to FIRA's exacting standards, and have access to FIRA's unparalleled furniture knowledge.

"UK and European furniture retailers and manufacturers have been clamouring for this," says Phil Reynolds, head of Technical Services at FIRA International. "It will now be possible to get furniture FIRA tested locally in the Far East, with the added benefit of reduced shipping costs."

CEO of CMA Testing and Certification Laboratories, Mr. Chapman Chan, said: "We're delighted to have secured this venture with FIRA and to be able to offer furniture testing services in Hong Kong. We believe this will help our local companies in providing the right quality of furniture to European markets."

The laboratory will be opening its doors for business in March 2010. The implementation will be a phased approach with the laboratory offering flammability, textile performance and chemical analysis (e.g. determining the presence of restricted substances such as azo dyes, DMF, heavy metals etc), with full structural testing following shortly after.

This initiative will be working closely with FIRA's sister company, BMTRADA Certification, which already has an established presence in Hong Kong providing accredited management systems and product certification.

The Chinese furniture market:

China is the dominant player in the furniture market and manufactures almost a quarter of world production (valued at £50 billion). 23% of global exports emanate from China, as do 27% of the UK's imports.

However, China only exports 29% of its production. The remainder feeds a growing internal market in which, as living standards continue to improve, consumption per capita has increased almost six fold since 2000.

Competitiveness analysis helps shape industry strategies

UK furniture manufacturing has room for optimism, despite the impact of rising imports and the effects of the recession.

This was just one of the messages from FIRA's launch of its in depth analysis of the UK furniture industry, which took place on February 11th 2010 at The RSA in London. The event, which was billed as an opportunity for senior executives to network and discuss issues that impact on their businesses, was attended by 50 representatives of contract, office and domestic manufacturers plus leading retailers and specifiers.

Jonny Westbrooke, FIRA's COO, introduced the meeting by summarising the concept of a competitiveness analysis. He explained that it comprises the three main stages of Performance measurement, SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) and Foresight (predictions for the future including finance and markets); and that by understanding the impacts of these issues it is possible to identify competitiveness gaps that need to be plugged for the industry to continue to thrive.

The current status of the industry, and how it has evolved since 2000 when the last competitiveness analysis was carried out, was presented by Dr Peter Beele. He used evidence gathered from statistical analyses, industry questionnaires and working groups to draw on his conclusions.

The UK's home market for furniture, the fifth largest in the

world, has risen by 20% in eight years, although so has inflation which is indicative of a relatively static market conditions. However, imports have increased at a much greater rate, leaving UK manufacturers with less market share than they enjoyed at the start of the decade.

Dr Beele went on to say that this overseas competition has had some positive effects on the industry. Manufacturers have improved performance in a number of ways. They have adopted some lean manufacturing principles and turn over stock at twice the rate of that in 2000, bettering many other manufacturing sectors. In addition they are creating greater value added and turnover per employee and are sweating their assets, creating higher returns on capital employed.

There are, however, increasing pressures. Profit margins are being squeezed and labour costs have risen at a greater rate than inflation, a critical issue for a labour intensive industry competing with low wage economies.

The presentation finished with a summary of the relationship between manufacturers, retailers and specifiers. It is apparent that UK manufacturers are perceived as being better performers by their customers than in 2000. They create fewer problems than anywhere else in the world and are close to market, thus in a position to provide excellent service. Retailers and specifiers voted overwhelmingly on their preference to source from the UK. They also agreed that they would be willing to pay UK manufacturers a significant price premium for better quality products and exceptional levels of service.

In concluding on this positive note, Dr Beele handed over to Hayden Davies, International Development Director for the BMTRADA Group, who delivered a thought provoking presentation entitled "Seizing the initiative, a vision for the future".





Mr Davies highlighted the strengths of UK manufacturers including their proximity to, and understanding of, the market; their recent improvements in quality and service and their ability to be creative and flexible. However, weaknesses such as a high dependency on labour, with its inherent costs, were also identified.

He predicted that the short term future for manufacturers would present challenges. Despite early signs of the end of the recession, there will be impacts such as continued rising unemployment creating low consumer confidence combined with inevitable public spending cuts.

Irrespective of these pressures there are opportunities for manufacturers who are able to deliver high quality furniture backed by exceptional service. Mr Davies suggested that competing with imports from the far east becomes increasingly feasible when delivering niche products, offering wide customer choice and with short lead times.

The presentation continued with a series of actions that would improve the competitiveness of UK manufacturers. Whilst the market will continue to present opportunities, changes will need to be implemented to take maximum advantage.

Manufacturers must incorporate lean manufacturing as the core of their business philosophy if they are to deliver a world class offer and be competitive across markets. This philosophy will underpin improved supply chain communication and generate rapid, on time deliveries. Hayden went on to say that the UK has the most competitive retail market in Europe, with the largest proportion of large retail organisations sourcing a range of products. Domestic furniture manufacturers who understand these organisations will have the greatest chance of success.

Mr Davies focussed on the environment and sustainability. Despite the fact that consumers and end users remain relatively ambivalent about such issues, he made it clear that they would become increasingly important, most probably as a consequence of legislation. However, UK manufacturers lead the way compared to their far eastern counterparts and, through continued investment in issues such as reducing carbon footprints, they will be able to differentiate their products in terms of reduced environmental impact.

... there are opportunities for manufacturers who are able to deliver high quality furniture backed by exceptional service

Government also has a role to play in the success of UK furniture manufacturing. They need to recognise value over price, encourage investment, reduce the legislative burden and have clear environmental policies, thus ensuring a level playing field for all suppliers.

In concluding, Mr Davies highlighted the fact that world trade in furniture has doubled since 2000 and will continue to expand. Whilst this is a threat due to imports, it also presents an export opportunity. Unfortunately, the industry has been singularly ineffective at exporting. Yet Germany, another high wage economy, has managed to reduce its furniture trade deficit to almost nothing. By understanding how Germany has implemented such a successful strategy, UK furniture manufacturers should be able to exploit a global market place in which they have, historically, had proportionately little participation.

An electronic copy of the full report is available for download from our website at www.fira.co.uk/publications. Printed copies are also available on request.

STANDARDS UPDATE

European Standards for non-domestic storage furniture come a step closer

At a recent meeting of CEN TC207 WG5, the European committee responsible for developing standards for contract furniture, two new draft standards for storage furniture were finalised.

These draft standards will cover test methods and requirements for all types of non-domestic storage furniture - including hotels, educational institutions and army barracks. These standards will shortly be circulated for public enquiry. If accepted publication is likely to be at least 18 months away. More information on the contents of the documents is available from FIRA.

Standards Update - domestic and contract furniture

BSI committee FW0/2 - the committee responsible for domestic and contract furniture standards recently met. The main business of the meeting was:

- **Approval of the European Standard - EN 12520 - requirements for domestic seating.** The UK approved this standard, and it has now been confirmed as a European Standard, and will shortly be published by BSI
- **Comments on draft European Standard - prEN 13759 - test methods for mechanisms for convertible sofa bed mechanisms and reclining chairs.** Whilst the UK agreed with the document in general, there are concerns that the loads used are not high enough to represent real life, and these concerns have been passed back to Europe.
- **Discussions relating to the use of BS 8509 - Junior and toddler beds.** There have been some issues using this standard, and these problems were raised with the committee. A number of products are on the market that do not comply to this standard and this is causing problems for retailers. A balance of potential risk and accident history needs to be applied to the products and the standard. The issues will be discussed more fully at a meeting in March and it is likely that there will be agreement for a slight amendment to the standard.

A new standard for domestic seating

A new European Standard for domestic seating products has been approved for publication:
BS EN 12520 Furniture - Strength, durability and safety - Requirements for domestic seating

The new standard will be published by BSI within the next 6 months and will replace BS 4875-1 in the UK. Across Europe it will replace the previous draft, standard DD ENV 12520. This will mean that there is a single accepted standard for domestic seating across Europe - making life simpler for exporting. The standard is very broadly equivalent to BS 4875-1 test level 3 in scope, however the main differences are:

- the standard has a single test level (rather than 5 in BS 4875-1), based on the principle that there is only one level of performance necessary for safety

- the standard features safety requirements for sharp edges and entrapment issues (similar to those used in the European standard for garden furniture)
- the standard features a new backwards falling test for 4 leg chairs

Although BSI are in the process of publishing the standard it is not currently available publicly. However, FIRA - as a key member of the committee developing the standard - have access to the document and are able to offer its customers advance access to testing of products to the new standard, ensuring FIRA customers maintain a competitive advantage in the market. FIRA recommends that all new domestic seating products submitted for test are tested to the new standard. In addition we can offer competitive 'upgrade' packages to allow customers who have previously tested products to BS 4875-1 to have their certificates upgraded to reflect the latest changes.

New standard for office task chairs

A new standard has been published for office task chairs: CEN TR 1335-4: 2009 Office furniture. Office work chair. Clarifications to EN 1335-1:2000

This technical report is designed to clear up ambiguity on how to measure office task chairs in accordance to the dimensional requirements contained in EN 1335-1. Previous to this, different laboratories across Europe were interpreting the Standard differently (particularly in relation to the seat depth measurement). This meant that chairs were passing the requirements in some countries and failing them in others. The publication of the standard should remove this ambiguity and allow for more consistent results when assessing office task chairs (those designed to be used with VDU equipment). At present there is no work in hand to revise EN 1335-1, however work is in hand at an international level to develop a new chair measurement device and once this is published it is likely there will be moves to revise the standard.

New Standard for domestic tables

A new standard for assessing the safety of tables for domestic use has been published:
BS EN 12521: 2009 Furniture. Strength, durability and safety. Requirements for domestic tables.

As your technical partner FIRA can offer testing to this new standard immediately. In addition, a conversion service allowing tables recently tested to the withdrawn standards to be re-certified to BS EN 12521 is available from FIRA at minimal additional cost for a limited period only.

See our website for further details about this new standard.

FIRA represents its members on the BSI committees that formulate the UK's response to and stance on these standards. If you would like to contribute to the development process, or want more information on these issues, please contact us on 01438 777700 or email info@fira.co.uk. To purchase a copy of a standard, or to arrange product testing at FIRA please contact our Customer Services Department.

New Associate Member level for The Furniture Ombudsman

At the Interiors 2010 show in January The Furniture Ombudsman launched a new package for Associate Members, designed for retailers, manufacturers and other associated organisations.

The new package aims to bring more of the industry closer to TFO and help companies who wish to improve the standard of their customer service. "We want to help all of our members to raise their profile - and the industry as a whole," said Kevin Grix, Head of The Furniture Ombudsman. "By pledging to support the aims and objectives of The Furniture Ombudsman, businesses sign up to support our 10 point Customer Charter which benefits both them and the consumer. This helps them to inspire confidence in the consumer and distinguish themselves from non members."

For a yearly subscription of just £99 + VAT Associate Members will receive news and case studies, and will be able to demonstrate their membership through the use of our Associate Member logo, a window sticker and membership certificate. The new membership package also offers access to discounted training on customer service, consumer law and customer complaint handling. **We are delighted to be able to offer buy one get one free on all our courses to those who sign up to Associate Membership before 30 April 2010. To view our full range of courses please visit www.fira.co.uk/training**

Both Full and Associate Membership levels will profit from having their information, including a web-link, on a new consumer website that was launched earlier this year. The Furniture Ombudsman currently has thousands of hits to its website, but it intends to push even more consumers to a new dedicated site which will be heavily publicised throughout the rest of 2010.

"There are around 20,000 furniture and home improvement retailers in the UK," says Kevin Grix, Head of The Furniture Ombudsman, "and we want to work with and support them all. TFO's logo is becoming synonymous with quality customer service in the eyes of the consumer, and we want to spread the word even further."

For further information about Associate Membership of TFO call **01438 777 605**



TFO launches new consumer website

The Furniture Ombudsman (TFO) has recently launched a new consumer-focused website, **www.thefurnitureombudsman.org**, which includes improved services for both consumers and retailers.

Increased web traffic from consumers to TFO's page on the FIRA website prompted the decision to launch the new site, which features the details of all companies who are members of TFO and have agreed to abide by its Code of Practice. The new website also provides information regarding TFO's range of consumer specific services – including how consumers can commission an independent inspection report – such as the TFO Smart Report.

The Smart Report is designed to assist consumers and retailers who are in dispute over faulty furniture. For £99, The Furniture Ombudsman will appoint a qualified technician to visit the consumer, inspect the furniture and file an independent report as to its condition.

"We are working closely with a number of organisations who have an interest in consumer affairs, and whilst we are committed to supporting the furniture industry we also wish to align ourselves with the consumer," says Kevin Grix, Head of The Furniture Ombudsman. "We believe our new website provides consumers with better access to our range of services and important consumer information. We'll continue to have a membership area for all our TFO members on the main FIRA web site."

TFO is an independent organisation and has many checks and balances to ensure that it acts fairly to both consumers and retailers.



Why use The Furniture Ombudsman?

Integrity and independence have always been the cornerstones upon which The Furniture Ombudsman has been built and I am delighted to be able to say that we took significant steps to strengthen those foundations in 2009, each with the purpose of increasing the value of the scheme to our members. There are a number of new projects on the horizon in 2010 which are geared towards developing our range of services, raising the profile of both The Ombudsman and our members and enhancing our efficiency.

Our admission into the Trading Standards Institute (TSI) last year followed a mixture of hard work and a continuing commitment to support their aims and values. I have no doubt that our relationship with organisations such as TSI can only be of benefit to all of those associated with The Ombudsman. In May our Adjudicators were professionally qualified by The Chartered Institute of Arbitrators which affirms the quality of our decision making processes and reflects our collective commitment to first class dispute resolution. This helps us to preserve the integrity of the service by ensuring we act fairly at all times. I am conscious that our members and consumers must have absolute trust in The Furniture Ombudsman for it to have true value.

In 2010, alongside the introduction of 2 new websites (business and consumer facing), we shall promote our members, reaching more consumers and consumer publications than ever before. We are sure that a dedicated consumer facing website will help us to fulfill our aim of 'inspiring consumer confidence' which also represents

our new strap line. If consumers make The Furniture Ombudsman their first port of call when deciding where to shop they can be assured that good customer service policies are in place. Alternatively, if they visit the TFO website first when they have a dispute, it means that their issues can be dealt with appropriately and quickly and less traffic is likely to pass through the hands of other regulators. Our new business facing website will equip members with useful news, business and consumer law updates which I am sure will be of great benefit to those who access them.

Our Marketing Manager is currently channeling a PR campaign through the media, the fruits of which I hope to see over the coming months and I am also confident that the recent talks I have held with both Consumer Direct and The Office of Fair Trading will provide some new opportunities for us to explore as we move forward with them.

Despite the positive signs for recovery, this year is likely to be a difficult one for many businesses in the industry. I am therefore keen to emphasise my belief, based on feedback from our members, that membership to The Furniture Ombudsman not only provides access to a fantastic array of services, but remains a unique way to attract and inspire consumer confidence and helps businesses to distinguish themselves from their competitors.

Kind regards
Kevin Grix
Head of The Furniture Ombudsman

March
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The Furniture
Ombudsman
FIRA, Stevenage

The Principles of Consumer Law & Customer Service

This course equips delegates with all of the information necessary to ensure that they are confident in delivering excellent customer service, whilst also giving customer facing staff an insight into the essential legal issues surrounding typical furniture transactions from upholstery to fitted kitchens.

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APPFG
Committee
Rooms, Houses
of Parliament

APPFG (All Party Parliamentary Furniture Group) Meeting

Open to all members of the furniture sector. Chaired by Madeline Moon, MP, and feeding off information collated by the British Furniture Confederation (BFC), it provides a vehicle to ensure that important industry issues are given a political ear. **Guest speaker - Kevin Brennan MP (MP with responsibility for the UK Fire and Flammability Regulations)**

April
07

The Furniture
Ombudsman
FIRA, Stevenage

Consumer Law - Unfair Commercial Practices and Distance Selling

This course provides a step-by-step guide as to how the Regulations will affect your business and what actions you need to take to implement them into your normal working practices.

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FIRA
FIRA, Stevenage

Sustainable Timber Sourcing and Chain of Custody

FIRA is offering training to assist companies in understanding what is required to implement a 'Chain of Custody' system. The training details the variety of systems and schemes currently available such as FSC and PEFC, the certification process, and some of the problems which may be encountered along the way.

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The Furniture
Ombudsman
FIRA, Stevenage

Customer Service & Understanding Home Improvement Complaints

This course gives delegates all the information necessary to ensure that they are confident in delivering excellent customer service, and to aid them in their understanding of the issues surrounding home improvement complaints.

May
12

The Furniture
Ombudsman
FIRA, Stevenage

Customer Service and Understanding Upholstery Complaints

This course equips delegates with all the necessary information to ensure they deliver excellent customer service, and aids them in their understanding of the issues surrounding upholstery complaints.

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The Furniture
Ombudsman
FIRA, Stevenage

Consumer Law in Practice

This workshop gives customer-facing staff an insight into the essential legal issues surrounding typical furniture transactions from upholstery to fitted kitchens, along with a study of the assessment of compensation with specific references to the principles and theories used.

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FIRA
FIRA, Stevenage

FIRA Open Day

For 60 years, FIRA International has been providing a wide range of expert services dedicated to the global furniture supply chain, including information, testing, consultancy and training, after sales solutions and consumer advice. Find out how we can help meet your business needs by attending one of our Open Days.

Further details and booking information for all our training and events can be found on our website www.fira.co.uk/training



Image courtesy of Harlequin Fabrics & Wallcoverings

PROMOTE YOUR BUSINESS HERE....

If you want to get 18000 readers finding out about your new initiatives or products for free – send us your news!

The FIRA Newsletter is sent out to worldwide audience by post and via email. It goes to around 18000 named people, many of whom have requested a copy. We want to promote the news of our members to a wider audience and have created this feature area within the FIRA Newsletter – 'Members News'.

In this section we are offering you the opportunity to share a key news story or article which will be of interest to the furniture supply chain overall. If it can show how your involvement with FIRA either through your membership or through a particular service has assisted your business, this would be useful, but is not a prerequisite.

We cannot guarantee that every article will be used, but we would welcome hearing from you if you feel you have a story that will benefit the furniture industry overall. To allow for variety, we are looking for around 250 words maximum plus a good quality (300 dpi) image.

Please email articles and images to
cwinsor@fira.co.uk



For the latest FIRA news, please visit www.fira.co.uk/news

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