



MANUFACTURERS/PRODUCTS

Adjustability

Baker Manufacturing has been at the forefront of height-adjustable tables for years, wants to bring that adjustability to the masses

By Rob Kirkbride

Research shows that height-adjustable tables can increase productivity, worker comfort, decrease stress and boost employee satisfaction with their jobs. Yet height-adjustable tables remain the exception rather than the rule.

So why aren't height-adjustable desks universal? Height adjustable tables are more expensive and more difficult to work into office designs. Some designers complain that the adjustability takes away from the clean look of an office. So height-adjustable tables have been a niche product — favored for highly intensive work like call centers and placed piecemeal in other offices.

Baker Manufacturing, a Pineville, La. company that has been at the forefront of height-adjustable tables for years, wants to bring height-adjustability to the masses with its new Animate and Animate+ products. The company also is going to market under a new banner — JRB Studio.

The new product and new name are huge steps for the company. For 12 years, Baker has had an agreement to manufacture Herman Miller's height-adjustable tables. The company is letting that exclusive expire on June 1.

Animate+ is a product created to allow designers to use height-adjustable tables throughout an office instead of just slotting it in where it might fit. It is not a cubicle or system collection, but it does allow for similar wide-scale planning. Animate and Animate+ are both based on the company's new height-adjustable desk. Animate+ adds items such as privacy screens and specialized storage products.

Animate grew from the Presto line of height-adjustable tables for benching designed by Thomas Newhouse and previewed last year at NeoCon. The company took that prototype on a designer roadshow. The company set up focus groups at nine different office furniture dealerships, each with 20-25 people. It used the feedback from the groups to refine Presto into the Animate desk and Animate+ collection, said Charles Martin, who has lead the company for just over two years.

Animate+ is best described as a height-adjustable universal system. Animate can be specified for everything from a height-adjustable single touchdown space to a height-adjustable benching application to a height-adjustable private office. The core of Animate is the height-adjustable table, which can be linked with various accessories, Newhouse said.

Since Animate's reach is so much broader than anything the company has done in the past, JRB Studio is changing its sales strategy as well. The company has to move its sales pitch "up the line" — focusing on the architecture and design community instead of just the salespeople and final specifiers.

Newhouse, who was on Bob Probst's team that created Action Office, designed Animate with a minimum number of parts. Its design is simple and elegant. Still, Animate and its Presto predecessor were designed in a surprisingly short amount of time.

Animate was also designed to evolve. For example, if customers buy Animate height-adjustable tables and want to add accessories to it later, they can. "One of the areas we focused on is how (the products) come together and how they come apart," Martin said. "You can reconfigure at any point."

Most importantly, JRB Studio is selling Animate+ at competitive prices compared to fixed workstations and accessories. Height adjustability will be available for little or no additional cost compared to filling an office with a traditional systems product. "The ergonomics really get revved up with a height-adjustable product," Newhouse said. "The trick was to allow for height adjustability in a more affordable way. We found we could deliver the whole



THINK
BIG
NeoCon®



floor at the same cost (as a traditional system).”

The company has been a pioneer in height adjustability for some time. Baker has made height adjustable tables for more than 25 years. And it has built a little of just about everything else since it was founded by Jim Baker in 1954 after he could not find another job in his hometown.

The company has a history of adapting to the times. Company founder Jim Baker was one of nine children and moved to Texas to find work. When he moved back home to Pineville, La. he found he needed a job. He decided to start making something. It was 1954 and the Cold War was underway. Baker began his company by selling furniture — wardrobes, bunks, lockers and desks — to NATO.

Since the company had experience bending metal, it began making safes for hotels. It went on to become the sole supplier of tables and filing for the United State Postal Service. Chances are, when you set your packages down on a table in your post office, it was made by Baker Manufacturing. When Baker first began producing height-adjustable tables, its customers were primarily concerned with preventing employee injury due to repetitive motion or constrained movement while working with computers. The company’s early ergonomic designs culminated in the 1998 launch of Zydeco, which pushed height-adjustable furniture forward with refined motion-control mechanisms that let people raise and lower their own worksurfaces.

As computers became everyday tools

for professionals and executives as well as data entry clerks and telemarketers, aesthetics and compatibility with a variety of office environments became important. Working with Herman Miller and Newhouse, Baker developed the M Collection: streamlined height-adjustable tables in a variety of organic shapes. Introduced in 2003 in the full range of Herman Miller colors and finishes, it was designed to look equally at home in executive suites and systems environments.

The company has changed its focus along with changes to the market.

Animate and Animate+ advance the company’s evolution. With new products and a new name, JRB Studio hopes to bring height adjustability to the masses. †