

Bath Suppliers Balance Features, Cost

BY CECILE B. CORRAL

NEW YORK — The next chapter in the book about bath accessories and shower curtains reads much like the previous one, with persistent raw material price hikes impacting design direction, product development, price points and margins.

Suppliers are becoming reluctant experts at swallowing higher costs for oil-based products — including resin, plastic, polyester, vinyl and rayon — while still churning out innovative products that can at best maintain price points at existing levels and not push them further down the rank.

“We have to do a very, very good job of negotiating with our product suppliers, and it’s becoming brutal,” said Bob Weiss, director of sales and marketing for Central Islip, N.Y.-based Creative Bath Products, which in 2005 was the third largest bath accessory supplier with \$51 million in sales. “Before it was unpleasant and now it is brutal to get the right price out of them and try to maintain your business. In the end, the vendor community is taking the hit on the chin. We are taking the margin hit.”

The challenges of working with expensive constructions have inspired suppliers to use more mixed media looks in their designs, enhance the value of their products, and expand their free-standing assortments to more flexibly work across a broader range of core bath towel and rug offerings at retail.

The bath accessory segment of the bath industry has reached its plateau, possibly even falling as much as 5% in the past year, “and raw material prices going up don’t help. We’ve been fighting it but we haven’t raised our prices. There is resistance to any price increases. Retailers don’t want to pay them,” said Carl Legreca, of the office of the president of New York-based Croscill Home Fashions.



Creative Bath Products will introduce in August several new mixed-media and stand-alone bath accessory collections, including this one titled Sand Dune — made in a resin and wood combination.

“[The category] has leveled, I will say,” Legreca continued. “It isn’t growing the way it did five to 10 years ago.”

“We have to do a very, very good job of negotiating with our product suppliers, and it’s becoming brutal.”

—Bob Weiss, Creative Bath Products

The prices suppliers are being forced to pay for raw materials have jumped 25% to 30% in the last six months alone, estimated Charlie Barrese, senior vp merchandising, New York-based Ex-Cell Home Fashions.

Ex-Cell has stepped up its offerings of mixed-media accessories, meaning products that employ more than one construction — such as resin with ceramic and wood, metal and resin combinations — to

help offset raw material prices while delivering added value.

New York-based Baltic Linen Co. tries to create “as much as we can in ceramic and glass and try to steadfastly avoid resin if possible because of the prices,” said Rick Lipton, director of bath coordinates. “We are pushing our factories to be more creative with ceramic. You can’t turn to plastic or resin or metals now as much, because they’ve become so expensive.”

On that same note, Baltic’s shower curtain offerings are increasingly becoming cotton duck and less vinyl and polyester.

Similarly, Newport/Layton Home, Portland, Ore. — which entered the bath coordinate category more than one year ago — keeps its growing free-standing shower curtain assortment to blends and cottons.

“We’re trying to keep the amount of 100% polyester shower curtains to a minimum,” said Richard Tamblyn, design and marketing director for bath, tabletop and window. “But it’s very hard because it makes up a lot of what the fabric people are offering. We’re trying to use more blends, like cotton-poly and cotton-rayon to help us through this cost increase.”

While such efforts all help, most bath accessories suppliers agree that these are not final solutions, Barrese pointed out. Consider replenishment for existing programs that have long been on retail shelves and because of good sell-throughs will stay there for the time being, he said: “To a certain extent you can use mixed media. But the problem is when you have existing product in the marketplace. You are paying a higher cost for making the product but you can’t pass it on to the retailer. They won’t change their price point.”

Long the top bath accessories and shower curtain supplier, Boonton, N.J.-based Allure Home Fashions got into mixed-media looks “several seasons back,” although less to offset raw material prices and more “as a way to offer unique designs,” explained Gabrielle Colquitt, vp, design and marketing.

What has helped diversify Allure’s line is a greater emphasis on free-standing offerings that can stretch into a broader range of looks in other bath goods, namely towels and rugs.

“They can go with more solid towels and rugs; they can go with anything, even novelty,” she said.

Blonder Home Accents, which began

Ex-Cell Home Fashions’ new Desert Clay collection, set to debut in August, is an example of the company’s growing mixed-media assortment intended to help offset some of the high raw material prices. Desert Clay employs a combination of wood and resin on all coordinating pieces — wastebasket, tissue box, tumbler, toothbrush holder, soap dish and lotion pump.



Blonder Home Accents, known for its vast thematic assortment of bath coordinates, is showing eight to 12 new collections of technique-based, more generic designs in August to appeal to a broader customer base. Based on color and texture, the Verona collection speaks to this shift for the company.

with and remains heavily focused on thematic and novelty looks, is now giving more attention to free-standing generic looks to attract the attention of larger chain customers, said Brian Murphy, vp of sales, marketing and product development.

For the New York Home Textiles market in August, Blonder will introduce eight to 12 “more technique, less thematic” collections, he said. That almost mirrors its roster of themed new collections, which will encompass 10 to 12.

“We think that as much as we have to offer in the thematic area, we can call on retailers and regions where people who are looking for product that is less about thematic design and more about technique,” he said. “More texture-, color- and material-based.”

These collections also consist of fewer components than the themed looks — centering on four or five standard bath accessory pieces. But Blonder will create “a unique looking, coordinating shower curtain” to tie the collection together and give the retailer another incentive.

Companies like Creative Bath and Baltic Linen have gone the way of expanding their offerings to include bath storage and organizational pieces to break even.

“It eases the pain to subsidize some businesses with others,” Weiss said.

Creative Bath is also exploring other avenues to pitch its wares.

“We’re looking for customers, such as hospitality and institutional channels, who want a good price — and they’ll pay their bills on time and not look for any returns,” Weiss noted. **HTT**

