

March 2004

# SUPPLY HOUSE TIMES

Plumbing

PVF

Hydronics

HVAC

SHOWROOM MERCHANDISING

## *Reinventing A Showroom*

Bennett Friedman, director, AF New York

*The Cutting Edge:*  
**WAREHOUSE MANAGEMENT**

*College of Product Knowledge:*  
**SHOWER VALVES**

**INSIDE:** Information Showcase

[www.supplyht.com](http://www.supplyht.com)



# Reinventing a Showroom

AF Supply's upscale bath-and-kitchen showroom in Manhattan now has a new name — AF New York — and a completely renovated interior.



by Pat Lenius

*Embedded in the walls of the conference room are several glass cubes, each containing a live beta fish, and shadow box displays of individual products.*



## Showroom Profile

AF New York is a division of AF Supply Corp., Brooklyn, N.Y.

**Location:** New York, N.Y.

**Branch Management:** Bennett Friedman, director; Michael Jones, general sales manager; Virginia Kaiser, sales manager/distribution division; Mark Fletcher, sales manager/architect & design division.

**Employees:** 30.

**Hours Of Operation:** Monday - Friday, 8:30 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.

**Inventory:** More than 400,000 items in a 150,000-sq.-ft. distribution center in

Harrison, N.J.

**Product:** Luxury plumbing fixtures, faucets, accessories and hardware.

**Vignettes:** Five, modeled on the typical New York 5-ft.-by-7-ft. bathroom dimensions.

**Service:** Consultations on product aesthetics and functionality with regard to budget and project scale; marketing consultations to wholesale clients; and initiatives such as The Designer Signature Program, which provides product customization.

**Web sites:** [www.afnewyork.com](http://www.afnewyork.com) and [www.afsupply.com](http://www.afsupply.com).



"We wanted to create an atmosphere of balance and harmony,"

— Bennett Friedman, director



Floor displays have a certain hierarchy and can be changed daily.

At AF New York, we are selling design and style, says Bennett Friedman.

Someone told me that Brooklyn, N.Y.-based wholesaler AF Supply was renovating its Manhattan showroom. When I visited the 10,000-sq.-ft. facility on the fifth floor of a building in the Flatiron District, an area known for being at the vanguard of art and design, I discovered that "reinvention" would be a more apropos description.

Over the course of two years, the structure of the space has been entirely recreated. Architect H.T. Chang virtually took up residence in the showroom and set about redesigning every facet of the space. If he couldn't find a chair, a table, a file cabinet, desk or a light fixture he liked, he designed one. "The showroom is a fusion of many things: architectural principles, structure, discipline, a sense of Asian culture, and the New York City merchant way of life," says Bennett Friedman, director and co-founder of the renamed AF New York. He is also a principal in the parent company AF Supply Corp., and one of four grandsons of its founder, all of whom are involved in the company. "We set out to accomplish something completely different," he says.

The space now draws inspiration from urban planning, including an area Chang calls "the capitol," a commercial district, a library/archive space, a fountain, an art gallery and a "Yellow Brick Road" of aluminum panels that directs clients through the showroom.

There are two basic sections to the facility. One section features product in showroom displays and a line of sales stations designed with oval desks and curved benches for the salespeople who will assist visiting clients. The other section is where the company's master distribution business with other wholesalers is conducted. It consists of two tiers of open cubicles facing windows and a long worktable bearing master catalogs perched atop additional file cabinets.

"We wanted to make everyone happy and

create a sense of community," Chang says. "Everyone has a view. Good design should always incorporate function."

Shelving with translucent backing creates a bridge between the upper and lower workstations. Lights suspended from above are equipped with cable and pulleys as if they could be raised or lowered.

"We wanted to create an atmosphere of balance and harmony," Friedman says. This extends beyond the environment to include the way his staffers do business, he adds.

"There has been retraining," he notes. "We all try to reinvent ourselves." A consultant has provided image training to employees. They are being trained in organization, record-keeping, dress and personal grooming, and how to keep their desks. "Each of my people represents the company," Friedman says.

Part of the transformation of the showroom has involved decluttering the space. To that end, small parts are kept in bins and drawers inside a closet, like a hardware store. Accessories, shower bases and hardware are displayed in tall, two-sided modules that can be

continued on page 49

## Why A Renovation?

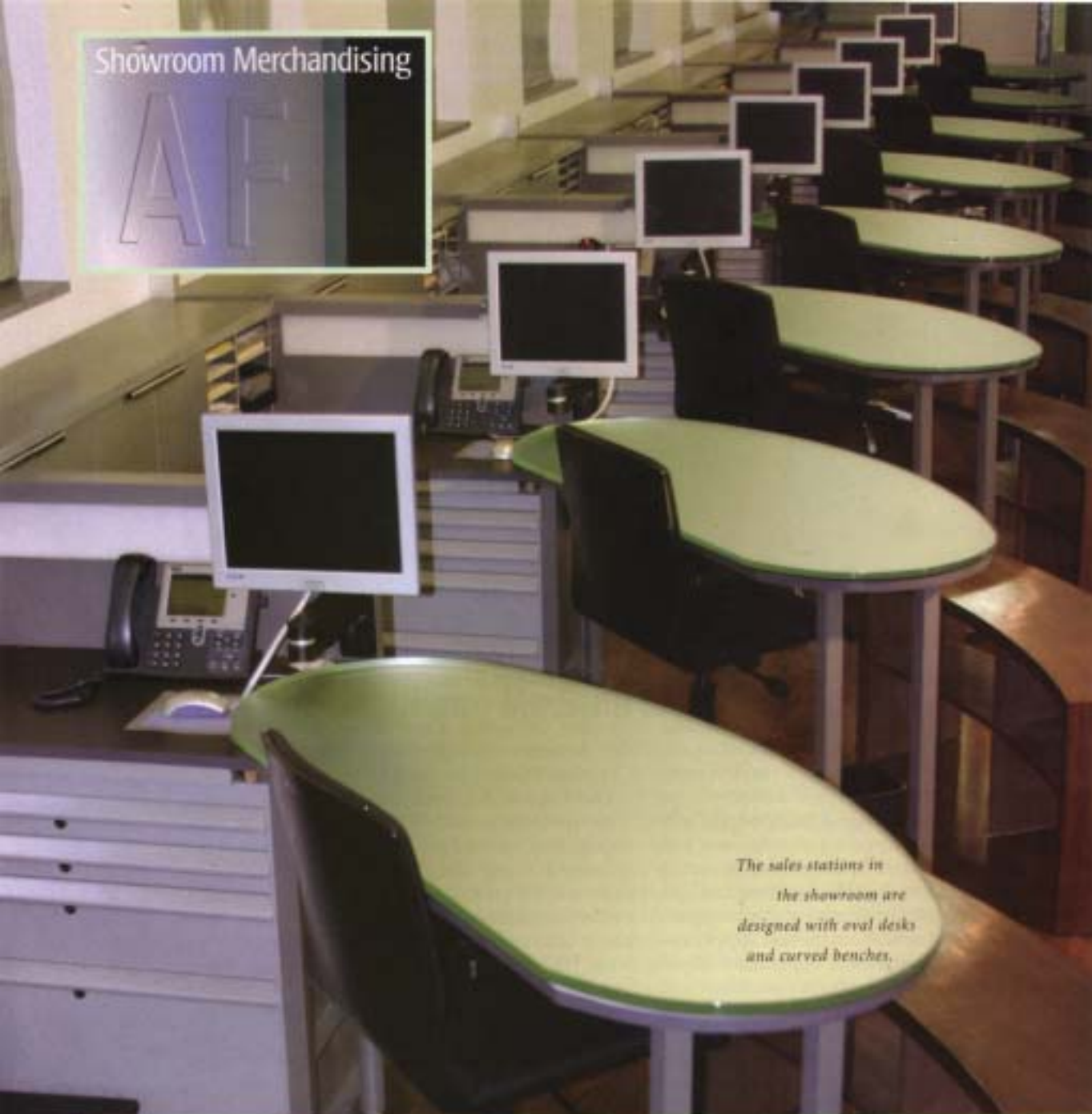
It started in October 2001, several weeks after 9/11, says Bennett Friedman. "People were contemplating their lives and their businesses and how to deal with the present and the future," he says. "I realized that the business would undergo a significant change — the general economic conditions, activities and criteria for doing business would be different from now on."

The renovation of the AF New York showroom reflects the growing sophistication of the business and "a sense of

interconnection between all levels of our business," Friedman says. Integrating sales and marketing was part of the re-orientation.

Moreover, AF New York aspired to be more dynamic in its relations with its clients, creating a perceived value by providing a better and a wider range of services, he says.

"We hoped to make ourselves singularly more important in a market that was changing by the moment," Friedman says.



*The sales stations in the showroom are designed with oval desks and curved benches.*

## ***The Man Behind The Showroom***

Bennett Friedman, director and co-founder of AF New York, has more than 30 years of industry experience. He is the product of both undergraduate and graduate educational experiences. He now lives in New York City and continues to pursue with passion the inspirations behind his successes: modern art, the decorative arts and architecture.



"Our clients should never experience the showroom twice the same way."

— Bennett Friedman, director



A whole series of accessories can be contained inside each pull-out display module in the showroom's "archives."



A faucet is a faucet, but a \$100 faucet is not the same as a \$2,000 faucet, Friedman says.

continued from page 45

pulled out from a large L-shaped circular space Friedman calls the "archives." A whole series of accessories can be contained inside each unit, which can be pushed back into the wall. Each module bears an illustrated sign with information about its contents.

"Everything is ready to be moved and changed, with locators and bar codes so salespeople can keep track of what we have in front and back," Friedman says. Workstations are positioned near the modules, where customers can consult with the salespeople or small training sessions can be conducted.

Another area of the showroom was inspired by Chang's visit to Rome, where he saw the fountains outside of St. Peter's.

"We're transforming some merchandise to installation art," Chang says. At the center of the display is a bubbling whirlpool tub, surrounded by a semi-circular wall that holds 90 working showerheads. An additional 15 showerheads are mounted to the ceiling. A handheld transmitter controls the rows of showerheads. Visitors can touch and feel the water. The display was designed so that all of the products are changeable.

"Nothing should ever be static," Friedman says. "Everything should be fresh, new and current."

An on-staff merchandiser is assigned to continuous remerchandising of the showroom.

"Our clients should never experience

the showroom twice the same way," Friedman says. "We want to inspire them. We are on the leading edge of the market."

Chang uses water as a recurring theme throughout the showroom. "AF New York is decorative plumbing. Water is essential to its business and essential to life. We play with water elements here," he says.

## History

AF Supply is now operated by the third generation of the Friedman family. The company was founded by Alex Friedman in 1922. His sons, Sol and Joe Friedman, joined the business. Today, at age 85, Sol Friedman is still in daily contact with his sons, Warren, Howard and Bennett Friedman. Joe Friedman's son, Jack Friedman, is the fourth member of the third generation of Friedmans managing the AF Supply Corp.

The company consists of seven branches that sell commercial plumbing fixtures, heating equipment and pipe, valves and fittings; or act as sales and showroom facilities. Founded in 1987, the AF New York branch functions as a sales, marketing and showroom facility that specializes in upscale bath products.

"It is a rare privilege and opportunity to be in a family business," Bennett Friedman says. "I was very fortunate; it worked out well for me. Our father instilled a work ethic in us, but also taught us that our purpose is to solve customers' problems. It goes beyond working late or making special deliveries to a job site. It involves having a sense of ethics, integrity, loyalty, and commitment to the customers, the staff and the business."

AF New York is a highly distinct location of the AF Supply organization, which focuses on market-driven products, services, techniques and clientele.

"A faucet is a faucet, but a \$100 faucet is not the same as a \$2,000 faucet," Friedman says. The difference is in sales and marketing. One is a commodity item, while the other has value as an interior architectural piece of art. Its value goes beyond the functional, he explains.

"At AF New York, we are selling design and style," Friedman says.

The showroom was the first in the country to show only white fixtures, Friedman notes. "We wanted to convey the value of design and style that lies within the shape and form of the product," he says.

This facility also acts as a master distributor, selling upscale plumbing products to other wholesalers. "We feel we have to help our wholesaler customers find good solutions for their business problems," Friedman says. "We don't want to be a source and competitor, but a business partner, providing assistance to our customers to help their businesses grow. We are sellers and marketers of business solutions."

## Showroom Merchandising

# AF

*Workstations near the display modules in the "archives" area can be used for consultations with clients or small training sessions.*

## Showroom As Art Gallery, Event Site

AF New York's renovated Manhattan showroom has an area in which artists will be invited to display their work in a multimedia environment. This row of flat-screen monitors fed by DVD players and computers is designated as the gallery area.

In addition, the showroom has been used by partners/vendors as a site to host market launches and product introductions. Last October, AF New York hosted the U.S. premier of Duravit's new series of bath fixtures and furniture by world-renowned designer Philippe Starck. In November, Hansgrohe participated in a launch of its Axor Citterio product line and lifestyle offering.

These are not run-of-the-mill events. For example, the Starck premier included a screening of the documentary "Designers on Design" by

filmmaker and artist Yvette Chaparro. Graphic invitations were designed in-house bearing photographs of a Starck toilet from the collection in various New York settings, such as the crosswalk of an intersection in front of the Flatiron Building, a subway station, and next to a park bench. The Creative Department developed a comprehensive marketing identity: LOV123LAV with only the number 2 colored, so it would read LOV2LAV.

An installation artist, Russell Murray, was commissioned to paint the campaign logo onto the body of a nearly nude model in an illuminated bathtub of lights and rice for the event. "Everything was done with a tasteful and artistic sensibility," says Bennett Friedman. "We are stretching the limits of what we know as an industry."



"When we decided to transform ourselves, we wanted to go someplace where our competitors would find it hard to follow."

— Bennett Friedman, director



A three-layered abstract translucent divider with images of bubbles serves as a backdrop for the reception area.



Bennett Friedman welcomes visitors to the area known as "the fountain," which features a whirlpool tub surrounded by a semi-circular wall that holds 90 working showerheads.

The water theme is introduced upon entry to the showroom, where a three-layered abstract translucent divider with images of bubbles serves as a backdrop for the reception area.

In the conference room, one wall features a projected image of ripples of water accompanied by a subtle dripping sound, intended to produce a calming effect. Embedded in the conference room wall are several glass cubes, each containing a live beta fish. The wall also contains shadow box displays of individual products. Other areas of the showroom have stainless steel screens with translucent glass, sometimes illuminated by artificial light from behind. The light fixtures also serve as art objects.

The floor displays have a certain hierarchy, Chang notes. They are mobile displays designed for easy re-merchandising.

"We may have three to four times as much product in the wings," Friedman says. "If someone wants to see something, we can have it brought into the showroom the next day. We can re-merchandise for an event or a presentation for a client."

At the end of each aisle is a vignette. The vignettes are on raised glass floors to set them apart from the other product displays. Dried leaves, rose petals, rice, stones or ping pong balls can be inserted under the glass floors to add interest or change the look.

"We are using architecture to promote AF New York," Chang says. "It's like a billboard."

Everything in the showroom had the same amount of thought and energy put into its design whether it was signage, product, concept, technology or display. The renovations even extended to the heating and

cooling system and computer technology. Chang also developed a program for housekeeping and maintenance.

"This is a meticulously crafted creation," Friedman says. "When we decided to transform ourselves, we wanted to go someplace where our competitors would find it hard to follow. It has been a two-year project. We will continue reinventing and readjusting. We want to be a dynamic force and a leader in the marketplace. The experience of coming to AF New York should enhance our clients." <<

## Changes In Recruiting Strategy

While there is still an element of people selling product to other people at AF New York, the showroom is trying to add value through consultations, says Bennett Friedman. "People come here to solve their problems."

The difference between AF New York and other showrooms is that it can create demand for a specific product, he says. To accomplish this requires a well-trained sales staff. Friedman says it takes two to three years of training before a showroom salesperson is fully productive.

"They need a whole range of skills: they have to be perceptive about people; have a good knowledge of our system; possess a knowledge of design, construction, function and product aesthetics; be able to close the deal; know how to evaluate the client; and be able to deal with problems before, during and after the sale. They have to be

able to do all of this quickly, efficiently and on a timely basis."

Further complicating this challenge is the cosmopolitan clientele served by the showroom: Manhattan-based architecture and design firms with discerning clients, many of whom are well-known individuals. Often AF New York works with firms specifying projects that are later constructed in other parts of the country, and at times, in other parts of the world.

"We've also found that it is advantageous to recruit people from outside the traditional industry," Friedman says. "Sometimes recycling does not give you the best product. The fashion industry is a very good source for recruits, as are upscale home furnishing retailers. Design schools are also a good resource of budding creative talent. We have a very unique demand for business."