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Inspired design using custom-developed technology – along with a personal touch – make for a winning combination for rug-maker.com. Director, Richard Mathias, outlines the company's offering where no two sales are the same.

Virtual selling and good old fashioned customer service

By SUZI GRALA

RUG-MAKER.COM markets and sells hand knotted custom rugs. Virtual rugs are designed, customised and pre-processed in exploRUG and Galaincha, a software suite especially developed for the purpose. The quality and precision of the output from the software offers to inspire consumer confidence in the finished product.

With its virtual rug solution and services, customers can see any design in any colour combination in any room setting, including their own; and by clicking on the designs and rooms and dragging and dropping colours, they can quickly find the best rug for their room before it is actually woven.

It was 1989 when Richard Mathias and Julian Blair went into business together. After opening their first retail premises in St Albans – showrooms in Eton, Guildford, Oxford, Cambridge and Belfast soon followed.

Richard Mathias, director of rug-maker.com

"Classical good quality and more traditional style rugs along with good service were fine ten years ago. The world has changed. Along came the internet and technology – and the M25 got busier.

Overheads are also getting higher," says Richard, as he explains why he and Julian then decided to close down all the showrooms and concentrate their business solely in its original accessible St Albans location.

Identifying a need to give rug-maker.com's products a better presence in the marketplace Richard started to consider the manufacturing processes involved.

By chance he came across a company in Nepal on the web with a similar vision and pooled his retail experience with Dr Jyoti Tandukar, at the Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu who was developing software for local manufacturers.

"Nepal is known to be one of the best sources for hand knotted custom carpet because of the uncompromised quality of the woven rug," according to Dr Jyoti Tandukar of rugalaxy.com and explorug.net, who has developed the software along with associate Shreeniwas Sharma, working closely

Dr Jyoti Tandukar and Shreeniwas Sharma.

with Richard and Julian.

"Now many of the manufacturers here are also capable of giving their customers a computer visualisation of the end product before the custom rug is actually woven.

"They are using a specifically developed computer software – www.galaincha.com.np – to design the carpet of desired size and quality, quickly modify the design, see numerous colour combinations, immediately print the graph, and estimate how much wool of each colour will be required for weaving the design into a rug," he continues.

"Technology has not only helped in visualising the end product, but also quick modifications in the design and colour, and calculating the cost of rug according to silk percentage are now possible without having to wait for the strike off and production data.

"As the graph for weaving the rug can be directly printed from the computer design itself, the shapes and proportions of the elements of the rug remain intact no matter how complex the design is.

"Thus technology in carpet making is bringing in enhanced customer satisfaction, because the end product closely resembles the illustration that is provided before actual weaving begins.

"While the appropriate use of technology is transforming the

Tuft box – samples can be replaced in 24 hours.

Clear-labelling promotes the rug-maker.com name.

production end, it is equally benefiting the importing and distribution channel as well," he continues.

"Communicating a rug design as a small computer file embedding all required information from patterns and colours to size, quality, and knotting details is much more efficient and reliable than writing a long description in text.

"Therefore, many importers of Nepalese hand knotted rugs are also using the same software as their manufacturers so that they can
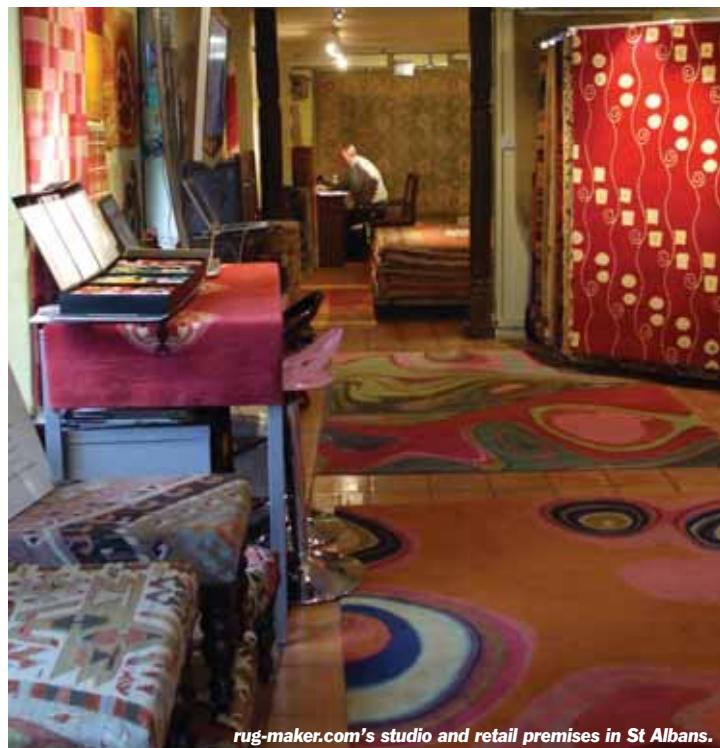
rug-maker.com's studio and retail premises in St Albans.

design, customise, and communicate flawlessly with the end customer as well as with the manufacturer.

"Having a web page for a rug company is quite common. When this web page is supported by a specific rug program at the back end, the simple web page can reincarnate as a fully-fledged online showroom.

"In his article *Rug Interface (Modern Carpets and Textiles, Winter 2006,* page 79-83), Mark Sinclair has done a detailed report on how various rug companies are utilising internet-based technology to transform their custom rug business," says Dr Jyoti Tandukar.

"Out of the many company websites that are offering customisation of colour in the rug design through their web sites, some really advanced ones are offering customisation of textures such as cut, loop and silk, as well as viewing the customised rug in different room settings, for example www.explorug.net This kind of technology is pushing custom rug business into new heights.

"As the end customers can see any design, in any colour combination and in any room setting, including

their own, just by clicking on the designs and rooms and dragging and dropping colours, they can quickly find the best rug for their room in their own choice of colours.

"Since the system can be accessed online and the simulations are blazingly fast and indistinguishably real, the days are not far off when people will start ordering custom rugs from their home through such online systems," concludes Dr Jyoti Tandukar.

Retailers, architects and interior designers can take advantage of the newly-developed software and use the online facility to speed up the ordering process – doing away with catalogues, orders can be made direct to the factory.

Consumers give a photograph of the interior of a room to Richard at rug-maker.com, which can then be uploaded via explorug.com for a template of the chosen rug design to be added.

This is then sent to the customer as a jpeg for approval before the rug is completed to the size and quality required within 12 weeks – in a choice of qualities in cut, loop or silk finish. Alternatively the

exploRUG.net
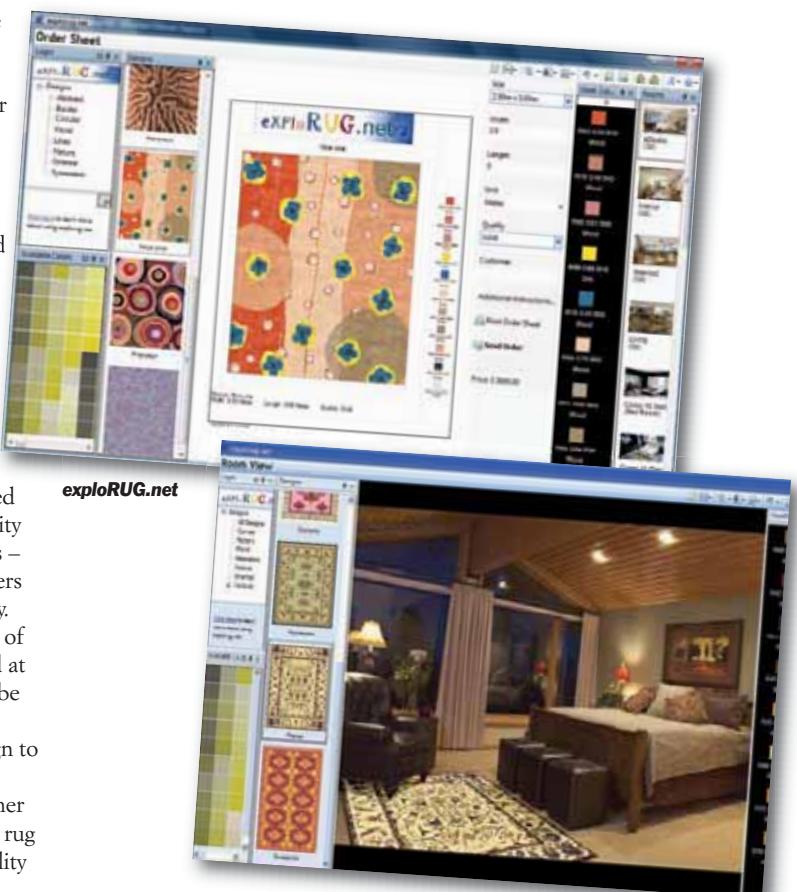
Virtual roomset – to help customers visualise final design.

Left – computer simulation before production, and right – actual rug photographed after production.

Finished rugs in customer's hallway.

customer can view the room on the in-store plasma screen.

"The whole process is a personal service from start to finish – from talking directly to both the manufacturer and to the customer," says Richard, who is offering the intelligent software to other retailers.

"The software may be of interest to a carpet or furniture retailer, who may not want to stock rugs but may want the opportunity to make an extra sale, by offering customers a complementary accessory to the other products purchased. All they require is the software and accompanying tuft box, which contains a cross-section of 210 colours reflecting what the UK consumer generally requests," explains Richard.

"We haven't really been affected by the economy, though we have noticed there are fewer customers. We are developing more on the interior design side. We are a bit like the US interior designer who does everything, and consumers love the possibility that it is an affordable service.

"The final price depends on materials used, but the retailer is able to quote accurately. Customers find it easy to connect with the idea

and are not scared of the product. Other software programs out there are in 2D. This advanced program is user-friendly, showing texture and detail, and allows customers to colour match to paintings, swatches or any object.

"We are proud to be able to offer a unique shopping experience to customers around the globe," Richard says. "One client was able to drop in and order some custom-made rugs just before going off to Australia, which arrived the day after he did!"

The chromatone tuft box costs £300 plus VAT, and Richard tells *CFR* that he makes absolutely no profit on this. The Galaincha design software is offered at a trade rate of £2000 plus VAT, and can be trialled for three months before purchase for £75 plus VAT.

exploRUG is available free of charge if linked to rug-maker.com. This is a simple package where retailers can have access to a collection of around 40 unbranded designs.

For a branded exploRUG website, the cost is £1000 to set up and £1000 license fee per year, plus VAT.

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