

BUSINESS**A WOMAN'S TOUCH BRINGS SUCCESS: Home furnishings chain refocusing on design**

By ALYSA LANDRY
The Patriot Ledger

NORWOOD - Domain Home opened its third retail store in Massachusetts on Friday, bringing the total to 28 stores in seven states.

The 8,500-square foot store at Wayside Commons in Burlington is the first to open since the home furnishings company updated its look.

"Our customers have changed and evolved," said Judy George, chief executive officer for Domain Home. "People are no longer insecure about what they want in their homes, and they are no longer uneducated about home furnishings."

Prior to opening her first Domain Home store in 1986, George toured the country and interviewed 250 customers as they left furniture stores. She found that 75 percent of customers were women, and most were disappointed with the disparity between what they saw in home fashion magazines and what was available at stores.

"The industry was run by men for men," said George, a Milton resident and Quincy native. "Women were a sidebar for how furnishings were sold and talked about."

Women wanted the vintage European looks and romantic vignettes for kitchens, dining rooms and living rooms. She opened her first store in Chestnut Hill with furniture inspired by French, English and American classics.

Since then, George opened stores in Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Maryland and Virginia, and increased the number of employees to 290. About 40 people work at the company's Norwood headquarters. Its other Massachusetts stores are in Natick and Boston.

George sold the chain to British kitchen appliance company Aga Foodservice Group in 2002.

Tastes in furniture have changed since she first launched Domain Home, George said. The company interviewed 500 customers last year and updated its collection and decorating strategy.

Domain Home customers - still mostly women - are looking for less formal pieces, George said. Homes are becoming more casual, and design is more relaxed.

Instead of selling the decorator looks from magazines, Domain Home is refocusing to capture the designer's touch. The new collection offers a broader assortment of designer furniture and accessories. Customers can still find the luxurious European styles, for which Domain Home is known, including the Aga kitchen gallery.

"Our new collections are cleaner, less formal," George said. "But even as people are taking a more relaxed approach to home design, they still want something charming."

Domain Home's new look includes an Aga stage for presentation of the professional cookers, ranges, refrigerators and cookware. The store will host cooking demonstrations and classes on the stage.

The company's new strategy also calls for updating the other East Coast stores and researching new locations in Georgia and Florida. George said she is looking for strategic partners to help Domain Home go national.

"I have to prove that Domain Home is the newest concept in the Northeast," she said. "I have to show them that I don't furnish homes; I furnish ideas."

Alysa Landry may be reached at alandry@ledger.com.