



THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

INDULGE

food & drink

A new website designed to make dining out easier. Plus, where to look for exotic mangoes | **P 8-9**

Growing at 300-400 per cent a year, the online furniture industry is rapidly converting customers and welcoming new players like Gulmohar Lane | **PAGE 12-13**

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the it list

Matching separates: the season's hottest trend brings in skirts, trousers, tops and jackets, all in pairs | **P 6**



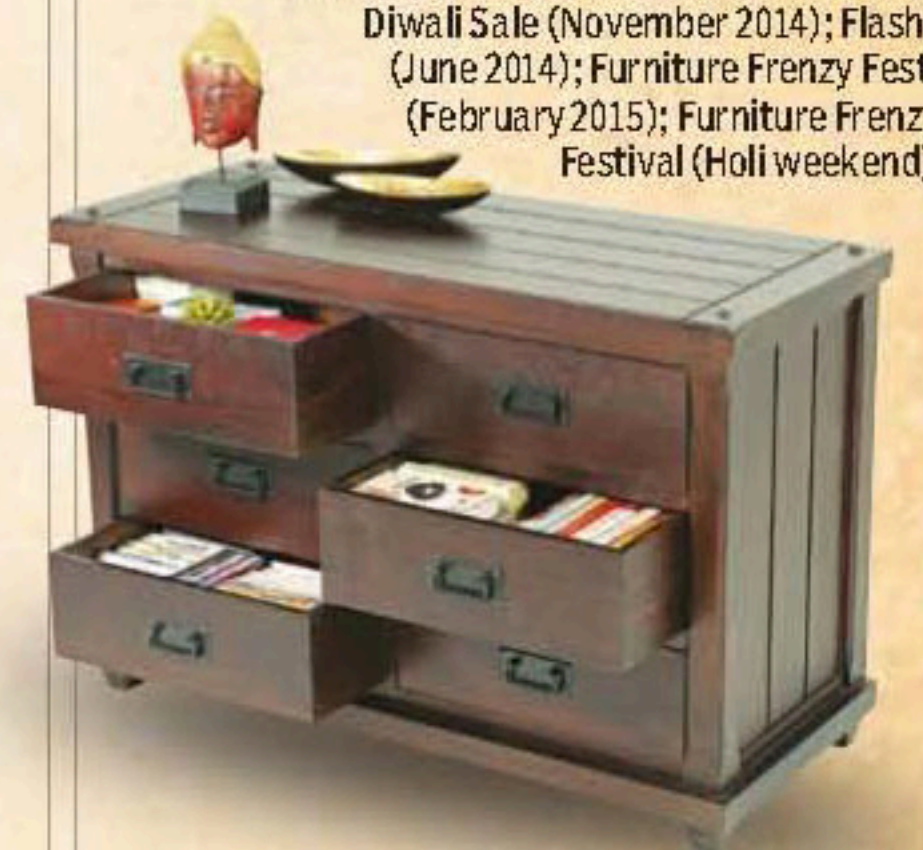
Know the players

PEPPERFRY

45 lakh plus visits a month
Has 11 distribution and fulfillment centres in the country and employs over 500
Buyer Hotspots: Bengaluru, Mumbai, Pune, New Delhi, Ahmedabad, Chennai

FABFURNISH

Registers over two lakh visitors and 2,500 orders per day. **Buyer profile:** Homemakers in the age group of 26-45 years. **Hotspots:** Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Hyderabad. **Top sales:** Diwali Sale (November 2014); Flash Sale (June 2014); Furniture Frenzy Festival (February 2015); Furniture Frenzy Festival (Holi weekend)



URBAN LADDER

Registers close to one million visitors a month
Buyer profile: 25-45 age group
Hotspots: Bangalore, Mumbai and Delhi
Top sales: Only on special occasions

TIMBOR

An average of 150,000 hits a month
Buyer profile: Owing to their in-house manufacturing, they attract several designers and architects, besides individuals and homeowners. **Hotspots:** Bengaluru, Chennai, Pune, Delhi NCR, and Ahmedabad. **Top sales:** Entire room packages have worked best, like their Bedroom Sets promotion.

GULMOHAR LANE

An average of 500-600 visits a day
Scaled up to 30 employees from two, in two months
USP: They send home fabric swatches for customers who wish to see what the actual product will look like
Best sellers: The Chesterfield and Colton collections



Vikram Chopra, FabFurnish

these craftsmen started adapting to the contemporary needs of international users. And the industrial look is trending right now," says Saurabh Ailawadi, co-founder of Gulmohar Lane, who shies away from these trends, and instead, puts the focus on the natural and weather-proof fabrics that his classic couches offer. UrbanLadder on the other hand, sticks to modern contemporary pieces, with clean lines that are versatile. As for Pepperfry, who offer products from third parties (Nilkamal, HomeTown) in addition to their own brands (Mintwud, Woodsworth, CasaCraft and Mudramark, made in Jodhpur), their product line includes the contemporary, functional, modern and eclectic.

Fixing glitches

My next stop at Jodhpur is the warehouse and corrugated box manufacturing unit of Pepperfry, where 20 per cent of the products go through a random quality check before being despatched for delivery. But despite all this effort (Pepperfry even ensures that their manufacturers source wood — sheesham, acacia and mango — from the same seasoning and chemical treatment plant, to ensure uniform quality), complaints of damage during transit still crop up and that's where the 24-hour response time and return policies of these websites come into play. In fact, Vikram Chopra, the co-founder of FabFurnish who claims a customer satisfaction rate of 90 per cent, feels that if anything, people are only gaining confidence in buying furniture online. "There was a marginal increase in the average selling price due to greater furniture sales. More and more people are now open to making high-value purchases online," he points out. On the other hand, Timbor.in, that follows a zero-inventory policy (they manufacture only after an order is placed) and does not accept returns, only retails the furniture of its parent company, DIY Furnitures. "We have had a few issues with delays and at times even damage due to logistics. But we ask customers to send pictures of the same and if needed, have the product replaced," says Aisha Daga, director of Timbor.in.



Rajiv Srivatsa, Urban Ladder

thrice, still says that she would prefer the option of inspecting the furniture before making a purchase. Is this why even online furniture retailers have been setting up physical showrooms and stores of late? "As a brand, we want to provide a holistic experience to our consumers and offline stores help us do that. Creating physical stores was a part of our brand strategy from the start. Our first store was running within six months of launching our online business," admits Vikram Chopra of FabFurnish. Pepperfry's Shah, who opened the first Studio Pepperfry in Mumbai last December, insists that his studios (and he plans to open around 19 others in cities like Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Chennai over the course of the year) are solely for value addition. Daga of Timbor.in agrees that they are an added bonus, but she argues that online stores remain a boon to tier two and three cities where these products would otherwise be unavailable.

As for Urban Ladder's Rajiv Srivatsa, he is confident that technology will play a big role in bridging the touch-and-feel gap. "We launched 'UL Labs' last year, where we work with several tech startups to come up with solutions in this space. Under UL Labs, we launched a wardrobe configurator and an augmented reality app that lets you visualise a sofa in your home," offers the co-founder of Urban Ladder, that (for a fee) allows a Home Trial of a one-seater sofa of your choice. We can't help but wonder if this move marks the online sector trying to tap the offline market too. But Pepperfry's Shah tries to clear that up before I bid him farewell. "Both online and physical stores will co-exist. We are able to operate 175 trucks of our own in 200 cities because we also retail the products of other brands and thereby, give them better reach too. Besides, 91 per cent of the industry is unorganised, so there's plenty of market for both segments to tap," he concludes.

The writer was in Jodhpur on invitation from Pepperfry



e-stores



the indulge cover story
trend



With eclectic designs, a 24-hour response time and attractive benefits, online stores are making headway in an industry dominated by the unorganised market. By **Ryan Peppin**

The furnitur hunt



Vintage value

Even antique furniture is finding buyers online. City-based Deepak Srinath's Phantomhands, in offers antique furniture that comes with a story. Some of the website's loyal customers even make purchases once in two months. With orders pouring in from the US and Australia, Srinath, who delivers through FedEx, insists that his R&D in packaging has helped them ship overseas, with zero damage.



Harnessing skills

Mumbai-based The Retirement Plan, which retails furniture through a Facebook page, a few design stores and Jaypore.com, hires skilled craftsmen who come to the financial capital from across the country. Anu Tandon Vieira, the designer who started the brand, uses only sustainable or recyclable products like old tyres, cane bamboo and textile waste rope or plastic packaging print waste to make her eclectic basket-like furniture.



ARMED with a complex bunch of tools and nose masks, a group of carpenters are scraping, hammering and chiselling away at strips of wood. In another room, three handymen are shrouding a chair in corrugated cardboard, using duct tape in its most generous use I have witnessed till date. These are the employees of Jugal Kishore, one of the many Jodhpur-based manufacturing partners who create solid wood furniture for Pepperfry.com. But furniture is not the only product that the Mumbai-based online store deals in. Like FabFurnish, they offer several other products as well, but have set up a warehouse, packaging and processing centre in Jodhpur because, as COO and founder Ashish Shah says, furniture is a "hook" category. The folks at FabFurnish, Urban Ladder and Timbor.in would agree with him, especially given that 91 per cent of the furniture industry in the country is still unorganised, with organised players like them barely scratching the surface. Add to this the 300-400 per cent year-on-year growth rate of the online furniture industry and you'll see why new players like Gulmohar Lane are emerging every year.

Setting trends

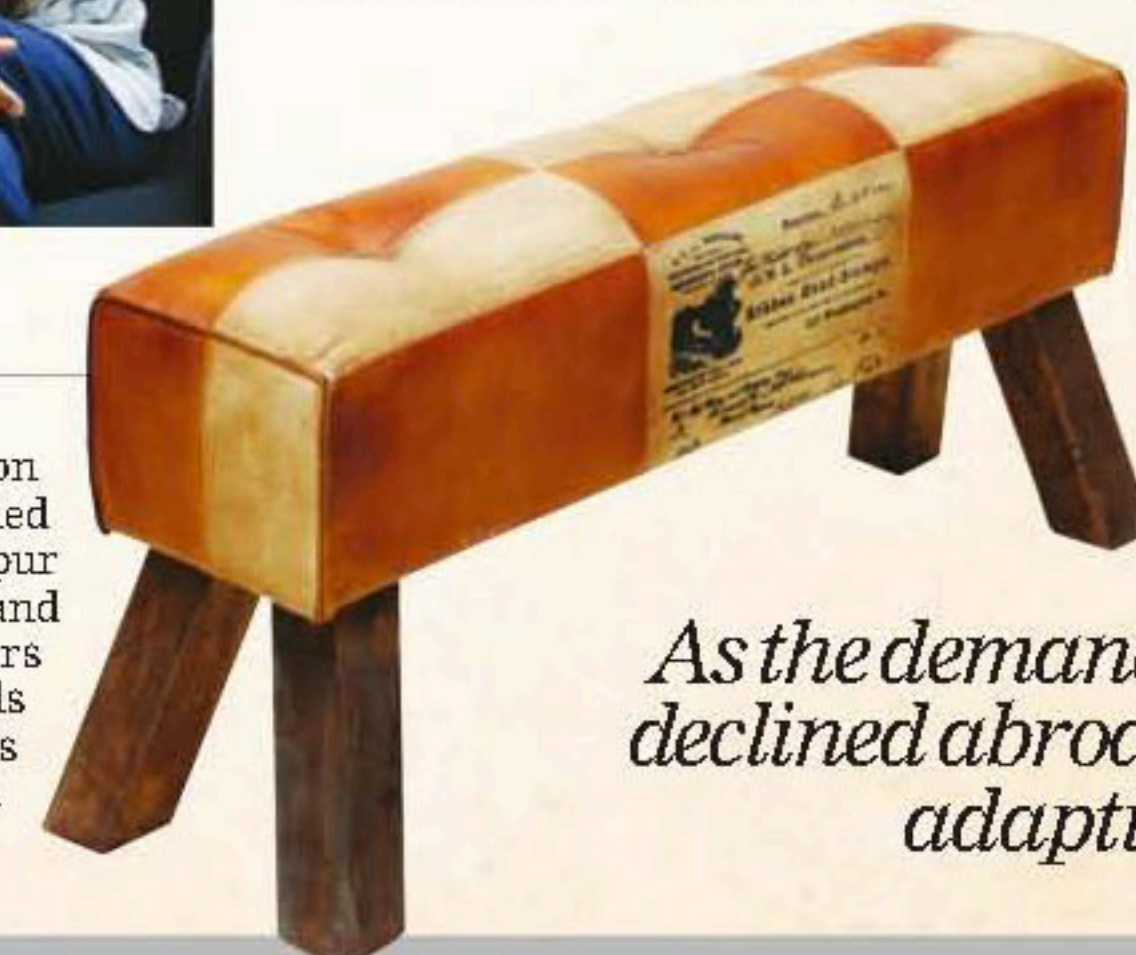
Based in the Pink City, two-month-old Gulmohar Lane relies on Jodhpur for its woodwork and Jaipur for the upholstery of its classical furniture. UrbanLadder on the other hand, sources from Jodhpur, Mumbai, Chennai and Bengaluru, while Pepperfry depends on the skills of the nearly 150 small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) they have nurtured in Jodhpur. Mostly family-owned and operated outfits like that of

(L-R on top) Pepperfry's Sanjay Netrabile, Kashyap Vadapalli, Ambareesh Murty, (sitting) Ashish Shah



Saurabh Ailawadi & Shweta Mewara, Gulmohar Lane

Kishore, these SMEs formerly focussed on export, until websites like Pepperfry opened them to a new market. As my day in the Jodhpur sun continues at the units of Ajay Sharma and Bharat Lohia, also manufacturing partners of Pepperfry, I see where the industrial stools and sand-blasted rustic-looking table tops on their website come from. "When demand for traditional furniture declined abroad,



As the demand for traditional furniture declined abroad, these craftsmen started adapting to contemporary needs

