Furniture in the family for generations

By ELLYN COUVILLION
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H arold Bahlinger Sr., president of the Kornmeyer Furniture Co., thinks there will always be a place for the storefront retailer, even in these days of the Internet.

"You can't sit on an Internet sofa; you can't feel the fabric," Bahlinger said.

Internet competition is just one of the changes affecting today's furniture industry, and the Kornmeyer's family-owned company has seen a lot of them in its 145 years of business.

The advent of the Internet and an "electronic" shopping world has put a new emphasis on quality customer service at the store level, Bahlinger said.

While the world is getting "smaller" via electronic communications, the world is also making a bigger presence these days in the product area.

"We used to think of furniture products mainly coming from High Point, N.C., or from up in Michigan," Bahlinger said. "Increasingly, supplies are from worldwide," he said.

Coming on strong are China, Canada, Pacific Rim countries like Malaysia, and, more recently, South America.

"They can get the carving done so much cheaper and better," Bahlinger said.

It's a far different world from 1854, when Jacob Kornmeyer of Germany opened his general mercantile store in Baton Rouge, on Main Street. He steered his product line to furniture, and, in 1880, relocated the J. Kornmeyer Furniture House to St. Ferdinand Street.

In 1893, Matilda Kornmeyer, who inherited the business after her father's death a year earlier, married Julius Bahlinger, a salesman and handyman for the store.

The couple operated the business until retiring in 1925, when their sons, Andrew and Fred Bahlinger, took over.

In the late 1980s, Andrew's sons, Marion and Harold "Hal" Bahlinger Jr., who is operations manager and corporate secretary; Harold Bahlinger Sr.'s son-in-law, Jacques Pouraceau, service manager; and Peter Bahlinger's son-in-law, David Currier, sales manager.

With growth in the suburbs, the Bahlingers opened a second store location at 7643 Florida Blvd. in 1966 and closed the downtown location in 1992.

The next year, the Florida Boulevard store added a 37,000-square-foot distribution center and warehouse.

Three years ago, the company elected its first nonfamily board members: Rose Mary Williams, general merchandise manager; and Claudia LeJeune, controller.

Bahlinger said. It also gave managers the opportunity to buy stock in the corporation, he said.

Stockholders, who number 48, had always been made up of family members, Bahlinger said.

Inclusion of nonfamily on the board and in store ownership opens the company a little bit, he said, and "helps you think outside the box."