

INDUSTRY OBITS

Ralph J. “Timer” Swan

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Rob Kirkbride

Ralph J. “Timer” Swan, an independent rep known throughout the office furniture industry who appreciated art and design, yet had a keen sense of how to run a business and at the same time have fun, died last week. He was 64.

Swan was one of the best known reps in the office furniture industry, working in the Midwest from his base in the Chicago area. And he is being remembered as a larger-than-life figure in Illinois and Wisconsin in the industry.

“He represented the hallmarks of office furniture in terms of this being a relationship-driven industry,” said Nora Fenlon, vice president of sales and market at Via Seating, one of the brands Swan represented. “He lived his commitment to integrity, honesty, fairness and he was a huge advocate of creating the relationships he cherished in the market. His word was his bond.”



Ralph J. “Timer” Swan

He helped build a powerful rep group — a conglomeration of reps that would join to form SVK Contract. The group, which includes Swan, Steve Van Bergen, Tom Karas and Bob Warnke, represents manufacturers like Via, Allseating, Egan, Gianni, Integra, Nello, Simo Corp., Versteel and SiS in Illinois and Wisconsin. The group that came together to form SVK has a cumulative experience of more than 150 years in the contract furniture market.

SVK distributes product exclusively through contract furniture dealers. Its customer base consists of architects, designers, dealers, commercial real estate brokers and end users.

The group specializes in providing corporate, education, healthcare and hospitality furniture to the A&D community throughout Illinois and Wisconsin — a one-stop-shop when furnishing a commercial interior.

“Our thoughts and prayers go out to Timer’s family and all those that have had the absolute pleasure of knowing Timer,” said Gary Scitthelm, chief executive officer of Simo Corp. “Myself and the Simo team lost a great friend and coach. There is no better than Timer. We will miss you so very very much Timer.”

Fenlon said Swan had a unique personality. He was someone who loved humor and that humor resonated with those who worked with him. “In this industry, we can get very wrapped up with the seriousness of it all,” she said, “but Timer created fun and laughter every opportunity he could.”

Though his territory was Illinois and Wisconsin, Swan was known to independent reps across the country. In many ways, Swan represented the “old school” values of relationship building that are being lost to the industry. He championed independent reps at a time when they rarely received the recognition they deserve, despite being the lifeblood of the industry for so many manufacturers.

“Timer embodied the characteristics that make independent reps so successful,” Fenlon said. “He showed how independent reps act as a conduit from manufacturers to dealers to end users; that they are the fabric that makes up this relationship-based business. It is very, very fitting that we salute one of the great independent

reps that reflected that so well.”

Swan was one of the few visionaries of the industry, Fenlon said, who easily mixed his love of art and design with his ability to be a “marvelous strategist on the business side,” according to Fenlon, who added that he always had the long-term best interest of his clients in mind. “Now you see a lot of reps out there just dropping off furniture binders. That’s not what Timer did,” she said.

So how did he get his unique name? When his father was born, there was a number of “Ralphs” in the family and the young boy acted old beyond his age. So family members dubbed him “old timer.” His son, who was known so well in the industry, was born and called “little old timer.”

As he grew up, it became clear that the name wouldn’t stick. From the “little old timer,” Timer Swan grew up to be a very large man who stood 6 feet, 6 inches tall. He was anything but little. So the “little old” part of the moniker was dropped and he simply became known as Timer.

Swan was born on Oct. 15, 1949 in Aurora, Ill. He was married to his wife Denise for many years and was devoted to his children, John (Valerie), Jenny (Steve) Smith, Teddy and Katie. Swan graduated from West Aurora High School, attended Luther College and served in the Army Reserves. Swan loved the outdoors and enjoyed many canoe, fishing and wilderness trips with family and friends.

His visitation and funeral were held this past week, but contributions in Timer’s name can be made to The Passage To Manhood Ministries at Ginger Creek Community Church, 2850 Ginger Woods Pkwy, Aurora, IL 60502.