

Whiteboard Communications
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Simple products that have been around a long time rarely see a meaningful update. People have been trying to build a better mousetrap for years, with very little to show for it. This is especially true for the office furniture industry. A chair is just a chair, a desk just a desk and a whiteboard just a whiteboard.

Or is it? Ghent Manufacturing's Ghent Visual Communications Products Group believes it has built a better whiteboard with its new Nexus product line. According to Janet Collins, president of Ghent Visual Communication Products Group, Nexus grew out of research on how corporate, government and academic teams work. "The tools used to support collaborative groups were not keeping up with the needs of today's meetings and working group initiatives," she said. "Nexus is an ideal fit for the way people work in business, professional, educational and other settings where the working meeting is the norm."



Ghent, based in Ohio, has been in the whiteboard business for many years. But its research behind how whiteboards are being used now and how they can be changed to improve meetings drove the design on the Nexus whiteboards. "We came at it from a different perspective," Collins said. "Instead of designing a whiteboard to replace another whiteboard, we approached Nexus with the user in mind and how we could impact collective meetings. It is a completely different kind of product offering."

On the surface, Nexus appears to be another series of mobile whiteboards -- that is until you study the limitations

of current whiteboards. Unlike traditional whiteboards that are mounted permanently to a wall or dependent on rails to hold them, Nexus is mobile and in addition to the main, large writing surface, consists of smaller 28-inch by 28-inch tablet boards that can be hooked onto the larger piece. The small tablets act like mobile flip boards that can be used in small group work and brought back to share with a larger group by attaching them to the main board. "The biggest problem we are seeing is that everyone does this collaboration and what you get is chaos," Collins said. "The fact is people aren't stuck in one room where the whiteboard happens to be stuck on the wall."

Nexus is much more than a whiteboard. It is a family of interconnectable dry erase tablets, caddies, easels and portable whiteboards that allows individuals or small teams of up to 30 to easily wheel or transport ultra lightweight components for breakout sessions, training and shared communication purposes. Nexus enables individuals to interact with each other more effectively to unite ideas and actions together with the whole team.

The adaptability of Nexus makes it useful in training rooms, classrooms and conference rooms as well as at offsite locations like hotels, conference centers and training facilities. The Nexus design benefits users in new ways. "Nexus has two major advantages," said Scott Bowers, Ghent's Director of Marketing. "First, Nexus is extremely lightweight and portable. The components are ideally suited for today's multi-configured working and learning environments. Different than track systems, Nexus products easily connect and are free from the limitations of a structural wall fixture. Second, Nexus brings forth an environmentally friendly alternative to flip chart papers. Whiteboards are reusable and far more durable than traditional, one-time usage paper pads."

Whiteboards are common and they are usually designed for training larger groups, Bowers said. If a small group of three to five workers get together, they still need communication tools. "It isn't about technology, because in those kinds of situations, we found that technology actually slows them down. When we created this product, we looked at who was working in these small groups of people and who was putting the tools in the hands of those people. When we found that no one was doing that, we saw that as an opening to us."

There are certainly products out there from companies like PolyVision, Peter Pepper Products and Bretford that address mobile whiteboard issues. But most of those products are large 4-foot by 6-foot boards that have only limited mobility. Nexus starts with the 4-foot by 6-foot mobile board and adds the option of using four smaller tablets that can hook onto it. "That's the thing that makes this so different -- the way these things connect with each other," Bowers said. "You can take a big board and a whole collaboration tool kit in that room. Other competitors that use track systems permanently install the track in the space. But then you are limited to that room. With us, any room can become a meeting room."

Nexus is also unique because it is made at the company's plant in Lebanon, Ohio, not contracted out to a manufacturer overseas.

Ghent Visual Communications Products Group and its parent, Ghent Manufacturing, provide a good blueprint for how a company that creates fairly simple, utilitarian products can still push the market forward and innovate. Ghent is made up of four divisions. The Visual Communications Products Group is the largest and makes whiteboards, presentation products and bulletin boards. Waddell Furniture is another division that makes trophy and display cases for schools and corporate lobbies. WoodWare is a recently acquired company that makes training furniture. And Vivid Board creates graphically enhanced dry erase boards, primarily for the healthcare market.

While the sluggish economy has hurt everyone, Ghent has "held its own," according to Collins. "This year, we're actually up a bit," she said, adding that the company's willingness to innovate has been a big help. "Our future is not necessarily our past. We are trying hard to understand how people work. We create value added products that may not be high tech or bleeding edge, but we want our customers to say, 'That's exactly what I wanted.' We think Nexus is our first product in that future market."