



# Three Ways to Make Furniture Products More Competitive in Today's Marketplace

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### 1. Implement a Performance Testing Program

BIFMA are the most commonly called upon furniture test methods in the United States. BIFMA (the Business and Institutional Furniture Manufacturers Association) is a non-profit organization comprised of industry members that acts "the voice" of the non-residential furniture industry. BIFMA standards are ANSI-approved and cover products ranging from seating and desks to storage units and panel/cubicle systems. Standards for performance testing are prefaced by an 'x', e.g. "*ANSI/BIFMA x5.1-2002 for General Purpose Office Chairs.*"

To use the *ANSI/BIFMA x5.1-2002* standard as an example, a chair submitted for this would see a variety of testing, based on the features of the chair, e.g. arms, casters, tilting mechanism. A standard swivel/tilt office chair with arms and a caster base would see static and dynamic loading of the seat, back, arms, and base, in addition to cycling of the swivel mechanism, casters, and tilt mechanism. Frontward and rearward stability testing would also be performed.

ANSI/BIFMA standards are considered voluntary- there are no federal laws which require compliance to these or any other furniture testing standard in the United States. However, many manufacturers are realizing that customers prefer to buy from, or in some instances will only buy from, a company that can demonstrate conformity to the baseline safety and durability requirements as seen in ANSI/BIFMA standards. In addition, to be placed on the United States Federal Government's GSA contract list, you must meet ANSI/BIFMA or other GSA specified requirements.

What does this mean for you as a manufacturer? If you are not currently using the ANSI/BIFMA standards, this is an excellent time to start. Obviously, your customer demanding it is one thing, but what if your customer is indifferent? ANSI/BIFMA testing can be what differentiates your product from your competitor's untested products. Many companies have discovered what a great marketing tool a test report is in today's marketplace.

Is your competition already meeting BIFMA standards, or do your products already meet BIFMA standards? If so, you may wish to consider turning it up a notch to differentiate your products- testing to two or three times the BIFMA requirements can help establish or enhance your company's reputation of quality and durability. This extended testing is especially helpful to manufacturers offering long-term or lifetime warranties.

## 2. Implement a Fire Testing Program

The most commonly used “finished good” fire standard in the United States is the California Technical Bulletin (Cal TB) 133, which was written specifically for upholstered seating used in public occupancy buildings such as hospitals and courthouses. In several states, including California, Massachusetts, Ohio, and Illinois, Cal TB 133 is the law- any upholstered seating product, including sofas and loveseats, which are being sold for use in a public occupancy building, must comply with the Cal TB 133 requirements.

The requirements are stringent and there are several criteria where a chair can encounter a non-conformance. The test, in short, is performed by placing a burner apparatus within close proximity to the seat and back surfaces, or arm crevice, lighting the burner and allowing it to flame for eighty seconds. At the conclusion of the eighty seconds, the burner is extinguished and the chair is allowed to burn on its own, for up to one hour. During the maximum one-hour test period, the laboratory personnel are monitoring, among other factors, the smoke opacity in the test room, the rate of total Heat Release (measured in KJ), the temperature at four and eight feet, and the weight loss the chair experiences.

The California Technical Bulletin (Cal TB) 117 is a very different standard than the Cal TB 133. First and foremost, the Cal TB 117 is a component level test performed on the foam/fill material(s) and upholstery which make up a seating article. Cal TB 117 testing is usually performed by the component manufacturer, who provides evidence of compliance to their customer (usually the seating OEM). In states where Cal TB 133 is not required, manufacturers will still construct seating with only Cal TB 117 certified components. Law labels are applied in both instances to show compliance with Cal TB 117, 133, or both.

It is important to note that a chair constructed entirely of Cal TB 117 certified components is by no means guaranteed to meet the requirements of the Cal TB 133 testing. The tests are totally unrelated to each other. Usually, a manufacturer must also add a fire blocker/barrier layer in-between their foam/filler and upholstery to aid in extinguishing the flames. Chairs without this additional layer have passed the Cal TB 133 testing in the past, but that is the exception and not the rule.

The Cal TB 133 and Cal TB 117 standards are maintained by the California Bureau of Home Furnishings and Thermal Insulation. Both standards are freely available online via this link: <http://www.bhfti.ca.gov/bulletin.htm>.

### **3. Consider a Custom Test Program**

What can you do if there is no test method published for your product, or if you're having trouble locating a suitable test method? A custom test program may be just what your product needs.

For unusual, unique, or cutting-edge products, testing will certainly give a leg-up over the competition and show your customer you care about quality and the product performing as advertised.

Custom test programs come about by a brainstorm between the company submitting the product for testing and the laboratory personnel. Questions are asked about intended use, expected use and worst case abuse situations. Using this information, lab personnel formulate a plan which helps the company meet their testing goals whilst staying within their testing budget. When working up this plan, the rule of thumb is to rely on applicable portions of published standards whenever possible. With custom testing, these published tests may be modified to fit the client's product more appropriately. If nothing suitable is found in a published standard, or if the tests located only give half the story, experienced lab personnel can design tests which meet criteria set out in the brainstorming session(s).

**For more information on Intertek's furniture testing capabilities,  
products covered under our scope of accreditations,  
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