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BREAKING THE ICE

As the recession bites, business for Dutch rug company ICE is flourishing. **Natasha Randall** talks to owner Marc Janssen to find out how his new commission work is beating the downturn

Marc Janssen will tell you that retail business in the company's ten 'FM Janssen' shops in Holland has been tough this year. "Like everyone with a set of shops, business has been on the slow side." But ICE, the contemporary carpet production arm, had a clever new initiative – something that has turned out to be a recession-busting tactic. As a result, it's been a great couple of years for the business as a whole. "When your usual business is shrinking, if you have a new initiative, a new source of work, then everything looks like growth."

ICE was founded forty years ago by Marc's father, FM Janssen, and Marc grew up in the business. "I've been walking on our carpets in the shop since I started walking." Indeed, experience and tradition are a major part of what ICE's success. Janssen senior created relationships with carpet-makers in India and Nepal that continue today. Indeed these long-standing and exclusive ties explain the pride that ICE places in its highly efficient system. "We deliver on time and that's a rare thing in the carpet world. We have set up such a refined system that we can deliver within three months of commissioning."

For a long time, ICE has been selling carpets through its shops and custom designs to interior designers. But the new upswing in business is a whole new aspect, brought to the company by the younger Janssen, Marc. Three years ago, he was at a trade fair in Dubai, looking for residential sales opportunities, when someone in the design business invited him to a meeting of top designers. "And that's when I got hold of the Plaza Hotel project in New York. I always dreamt of doing business in the US and this was my chance." From that moment, ICE was launched into the hospitality business and now supplies hotels around the world with carpets and area rugs.

"People who design hotels are far too busy to do research into where they'll have their carpets produced. And they don't want to come and find you either. We were lucky

- 1 Carpets by ICE for Noonon food and wine bar in Amsterdam, designed by SEVV, Amsterdam
- 2 Netting carpet by ICE for Cocoa-Mat project in Greece, designed by SEVV
- 3 Coral Lodge in Mozambique, a project designed by SEVV with rugs by ICE

to be introduced to some major designers and gained commissions across the globe from them because they trusted the work we did from the start." ICE has now produced carpets for luxury hotels in New York, Paris, Venice, Miami, Beijing and many more places.

When the Savoy Hotel in London reopens in 2010, ICE carpets will furnish its suites, lobby and reception. For the suites it produced the rugs for its designer Pierre-Yves Rochon who wanted an Aubusson-style flatwoven rug. "He wanted the feel of tapestry in a rug on the floor. Something to complement the room and its period touches. It wasn't practical but these are the sorts of challenges we like." The rug was tested in the mock-up room that serves as the model for all the rooms of its type in the hotel, before the furniture and textiles are ordered in great quantities.

The process of working with designers varies constantly. Some designers, like Philippe Starck, have very specific ideas for their floor-coverings. They give ICE an image that they want reproduced in carpet. "It's often a great challenge, actually," says ICE head designer Femke Goossens. "We have to search for different qualities through gradations of colour and texture to get a fine-tuned image. Sometimes, we'll just get a mood-board with ideas for textures and images. Then we're rather free with colours and shapes." ICE has produced the carpet for Starck's restaurant, Paradis du Fruit in Paris, where the carpet has been designed to look like wooden flooring, according to very specific instructions from the Starck team.

ICE's clients include Hirsch Bedner, Wilson Associates, Yabu Pushelberg and Philippe Starck. "We keep a small list of top clients and work with them intensely. I don't want to crowd our plate with too many clients since what's important is the quality of our relationships – we work with them intimately. Our designers work directly with the designers. It's a very efficient process," explains Janssen.



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4 *Sushi light* carpet by ICE, for Moroso's Sushi Collection, designed by SEVV

5 Carpets that look like wood flooring by ICE for the Philippe Starck designed Paradis du Fruit restaurant in Paris

There are other creative aspects to the business: Goossens and her team are continuously designing new carpets for their own portfolio. "Our designs are based on just looking outside the window, a stroll in the park or the woods. We also get good inspiration from the internet and fairs that we attend; books, magazines, paintings, ceramics; we are always absorbing imagery to convert into a woven piece."

Overall, ICE designers prefer to produce their carpets in silk. "The effect is the point. It's the whole point," says Goossens. The client Inge Moore, MD of Hirsch Bedner London, says she enjoys working with ICE, and particularly with Goossens whom she calls one of the best carpet designers in the world. "ICE are able to be much more flexible with imagery on the floor. They're not just bound by a simple Axminster weave but will really explore textures and length of pile." Moore also notes that so many carpets for hotels are just small traditional repeats where ICE designs often have broader strokes, creating what Moore calls "a painting on the floor rather than something just to walk on." Moore is a designer herself and she relies on the interaction with Goossens in striving towards very subtle and intricate images for the textiles they commission. "There's a lot of back and forth in our discussions, we play with colours a lot, and we use a lot of close tones in order that they blend nicely and get the depth we want."

From a business perspective, ICE has been transformed over the last few years. A large part of this is due to Marc Janssen and the business experience he acquired after his MBA plus his subsequent work in sales and marketing at Proctor and Gamble. After four years in the pharmaceutical business he couldn't help returning to the carpet trade: "I was drawn back to rugs – they're like a drug, such a beautiful product."

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