

From Western Australia to Queensland, WFA has mined retail trade trends for an update on what's hot, what's not, and why.



Designers Guild

SALES

patterns *analysed*

GIVENTHE AND VARIETY of Australia's geography and demography, it's reasonable to assume that local factors and trends continue to influence the window furnishings market, with retailers reporting wide ranging sales patterns, driven in some cases by unforeseen factors.

In Western Australia, Ben Boyce of WA Blinds in Perth says rollers and double rollers are currently selling well. "We're also selling lot of 50 mm white timber or PVC venetians, which are simple and cost effective for large windows and offer glare reduction. With the size of new homes reducing, they enable the home to look bigger and less cluttered - offering a clean white look - and they're cost effective per square metre. Home sizes are currently reducing in Perth as a lot of urban infill is going on as older houses are being demolished, with owners building three or four properties on the same site. They tend to be three or four bedroom houses with smaller rooms but lots of windows, often quite generously sized. Perth's property market is good for business; infill-led sales are keeping us very busy at the moment."



SALES patterns *analysed*

Jatin Kotecha of Curtains and Blinds Direct in Broadview, Adelaide, confirms the company's main business is in curtains and blinds. An online business with low overheads, the company can offer attractively low prices, while diversification into new niche areas is helping drive sales.

"We've identified a gap in the market for roman blinds using curtain fabrics. A lot of the time blinds can be a bit boring, so we're using curtain fabrics on blinds and we're finding that a lot of customers are going for them. They offer the practicality of a blind with the design elements offered by curtains."

"Roman blinds are also easy to maintain and clean. They are big at the moment and have been selling strongly over the past two or three years. Roller blinds are a big seller and to an extent venetians are too, but also they're also hard to clean."

"In terms of fabrics, we're noticing a strong interest in floral prints and lighter shades, often with white as a key colour. In Europe these are selling strongly and generally speaking we tend to follow European trends."

Overall Jatin says business this year has been slow. "I was hopeful about curtain sales but they've been going more slowly than expected. I think there's still a bit of soft consumer confidence in the market. Over the next few months we're entering peak season so it will be

interesting to see how it develops. However we're aware that even as an online company we need to continually make ourselves more efficient. It's an unpredictable market."

Danny Holmes of Danny Holmes Curtains & Blinds in Somerset, Tasmania, indicates that local trading patterns have been hard to call in recent times.

"This month it's been quiet but last month we were 30 per cent up on the same period last year, so it's quite a fluctuating market at the moment; there's still a bit of pessimism and low consumer confidence out there."

"Our key sellers are roller blinds because they're easy to maintain and cost-effective. Families with children prefer them for their practical benefits," he says, adding that he also does solid sales in timber blinds and plantation shutters.

The cooler climate in Tasmania also influences sales, with many shoppers buying products designed to keep heat in as well as keeping cold out. "We've sold quite a few Honeycomb blinds in the last few months; there's been quite a bit of coverage in magazines, home shows and lifestyle shows on TV recently."

"In terms of colour, in Tasmania we're getting demand for black blinds and latte coffee colours - a lot of black blinds at the moment in particular... It's a trend that seems to be snowballing. In new houses particularly, people are contrasting white with black blinds and black workbenches for a clean, modern look. It's also easier to see through black and people can't see in."

"It's also well worth mentioning that around 70 per cent of my customers prefer to buy Australian made even if it costs them more because they recognise the value of quality and service."

Also in Tasmania, Philip Overton of Zab Window Furnishings in Launceston indicates trade is emerging from protracted period of gloom. "The last two months have been quite positive but it's been tough for the past 24 months. I've been in retail for 34 years and this is the toughest period I can remember."

He adds that the store's positioning in the top 10 Luxaflex Gallery stores nationally is a strong point of difference.

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Jatin Kotecha Curtains and Blinds Direc

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Wendy McInnes of Enviro Drapes & Shades in Wodonga

“We’ve been around for a while, so the customers get to know you and we’ve got a pretty good reputation. We’ve done quite a bit of work interstate including in South Australia. Customers in Tasmania do tend to be climate conscious and sales of the Duette Honeycomb Blind are solid as a result.”

Mel Michael of Sunshader Blinds & Shutters in Caulfield South, Melbourne, says business has quietened down for the past few months.

“A lot of people have been putting off making new purchases in recent years, but they will have to upgrade eventually and I’d say business will start to pick up for summer. In summer people start looking a bit more closely at their windows and suddenly they want a change. Roller blinds are our largest volume of sales, particularly in this economic climate. Plantation shutters have had a good run in recent years but obviously they’re a bigger investment. A lot of people who have middle management positions are losing their jobs or concerned about redundancies at the moment, so instead of paying \$3000 to \$4000 for shutters they’re spending \$1000 on roller blinds.”

The business is also doing solid sales in Honeycombs blinds. “They certainly have that energy saving benefit that suits a need and they’re also fairly attractive and cost effective, particularly in modern buildings with skylights.”

By contrast the business gets very few enquiries about drapes, “although there are some very lovely fabrics on the market,” he says. “They keep predicting there’ll be a renaissance but I’m not so sure about it. I think drapes are still a niche product. A lot of people still associate drapes with being old fashioned and they’re also quite a major investment.”

Wendy McInnes of Enviro Drapes & Shades in Wodonga, Victoria, confirms an anomalous local factor is currently affecting sales. “A lot of people are apprehensive in this area of Victoria as the Smart Meter (electric meter) is being rolled out here. There have been a lot of concerns about it due to some extremely high charges associated with the meter. This is affecting confidence and I’m pretty sure it will continue to do so until things settle down.”

Aside from the Smart Meter issue, sales in the area have typically been strong particularly in blinds for investment homes, including roller blinds and venetians in Eco Wood and Vision Wood. “Sales are driven by a strong local investment property market, with many people building a first home and keeping it as long as they can before moving on to something bigger – then at that point they want to invest in better window furnishings such as drapes and romans.”

Drapes are increasingly being sold for their energy saving properties against extremes of heat and cold, with temperatures dropping to minus levels in winter and soaring to 45 degrees in summer. Fade resistance is a strong motivator, with many shoppers opting for separate linings to protect their drapery.

McInnes, who has owned the shop for four years, describes the area as the largest growing area outside the metropolitan sector for new homes. “There are a lot of investment homes as well as ‘turnkey’ homes, where the builder does everything including the fittings and the home is ready to be lived in once they’ve completed. This is the border of NSW and Victoria and both states have first home buyer schemes.”

While the area has competitors such as Spotlight and Curtain World, the benefits offered by Enviro Drapes & Shades are quality, made-to-measure, high levels of consultation and service. “We also have the advantage of being located in a main street and offering a broad product and fabric range. We also advertise in Yellow Pages and the local newspaper as well as attending environmentally focused trade shows.”

Heidi Lapidge of Homelife Furnishings in Clovelly, Sydney, confirms the company sells “everything except verticals” with sales currently focused on folding arm awnings, external rollers and external venetians and shutters. In interior treatments, drapes and soft furnishings as well as romans and rollers continue to sell well, with interest in drapery increasing. “People want more personality in their homes through the use of interesting fabrics. A lot of customers are doing curtains for the first time and it’s a serious decision; the approach is different now. They’re looking for something stylish and modern – definitely not ‘nana’s curtains’, and they’re taking time to get the best quality. In terms of fabrics they’re often going for poly linen blends which offer a linen look with practical benefits. They’re going for a range of treatments; ripple fold, wave heading, box pleats or goblet pleats – the whole gamut. In terms of fabric, texture is very popular; there are a lot of burnouts coming through – sheer fabrics with a pattern in a thicker texture.”

She describes the market as fairly buoyant with a lot of people in the Clovelly locality renovating and updating their homes. “They’re doing re-paint, new carpet and new window treatments. In the eastern suburbs there are a lot of new builds, a lot of renovations with some clients completely gutting and re-doing their houses.”

Nicole Kajewski of Regency Blinds in Gladstone, Queensland, says screens and awnings are key sellers to counter the local climate. Flat aluminium privacy screens that sit in a frame separate to the building itself are fairly popular in Queensland, she adds. “They provide privacy and sun protection and people like the look,” she says, adding that newer styles featuring a lattice pattern and powder coated to match homes’ colours are growing in popularity. “They provide a more modern look than louvres which are very traditional in Queensland.”

Consumers are also increasingly enclosing patios and outdoor areas with awnings, with the Sunmaster 40T a particularly strong seller as outdoor spaces expand in size. “This product can span an entire back yard, which is increasingly the trend.”

Gladstone’s dramatic growth spurt, driven by its growing port and tourist industries, is creating new markets in property development and therefore window treatments, she says. “A lot of people have money to spend and they’re getting a house full of plantation shutters.”

“These are interesting times as there’s a lot that’s positive about the current trading climate in Gladstone, but a lot that’s negative. A lot of businesses suffered with GFC, which was hard for two years, but now because of the boom, we’re struggling to get staff as it’s a challenge to match the wages and benefits of other growth industries.”