

# CONNECTION



HEADQUARTERS  
THE ONYX COLLECTION, INC.

## Visiting our Kansas City members

The Onyx Collection  
The Polynt-Reichhold R&D campus

ALSO:

- Getting employees involved
- Developing safe plants

POLYCON 2019'S  
SUCCESSSES

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**16** POLYCON 2019 Kansas City



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A visit to two of ICPA's members in the Kansas City area revealed that much expansion is going on with both companies. Pictured on the cover is what the new 27,000-square-foot headquarters building in Belvue will look like for The Onyx Collection (the building under construction is in the background). Holding the banner for Onyx are siblings (from left) Bobby, Louise and Francis Awerkamp. Story on page 4. The inset is the original 820 historic building on the campus of the site where Polynt-Reichhold conducts research on gel coats and resins. Polynt will be expanding and renovating parts of the campus during the next two years. Story on page 8.

PRODUCED BY  
GSP Publishing

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## PRESIDENT'S LETTER

# The Energy of POLYCON



IT'S BEEN REWARDING AND FULFILLING to see how each year the energy and enthusiasm at our annual national meeting has grown, and POLYCON 2019 Kansas City was a huge step up. This meeting has become a tremendous resource for those of us in the cast polymer industry—from the demos of specific plant techniques to the workshops on vital topics such as how to keep our employees engaged and our plants running smoothly. This year, we also added the value of a

CCT-CP training course and sessions explaining the ICPA SAFE PLANT program.

There were several outstanding new developments this year as well. As Sean Jacobs pointed out in our introductory session, the last four years of POLYCONs have included a lot of companies that come as a way to “kick the tires” (consider membership). This year is the first year that all the manufacturers in attendance were already members—an outstanding fact considering that we've gone from just a little over a dozen members in that first year to 81 manufacturers and 25 suppliers this year. This development, as well as the fact that so many more members brought their own employees for the CCT training as well as the general sessions, shows we see the value of our meeting. It also shows we are recognizing that we need to engage our employees so that they understand the vitality of the industry and the opportunities it presents.

POLYCON and its predecessor meetings have always been a great source of interaction, and networking is one of the main reasons people say they come. That interaction occurred between those of us that have been involved for many years (our old friends) and those new to the scene (our new friends). I

believe that interaction was a huge part of why this year's meeting went so well.

But our amazing growth is also now our biggest challenge. Hopefully, we can turn this interaction into action. In other words, we need to identify people willing to get involved in making things happen in the industry and with our association. We need to use the energy we now have to show our new members and our own company leaders that this is a pay-it-forward organization. We need volunteers and we need fresh ideas on what we should be doing and how we can do it.

I challenged each of the people at POLYCON 2019 to go back to their shops and return next year with new ways of thinking and operating.

Your board is now working on updating the strategic plan to provide a template and guide for leadership in the future so that we can use it to strengthen our organization while maintaining a simple framework that works for our association. We need your help in putting it all in place. I hope you'll lend your support and provide your ideas to me and to your next president, Mark Buss, general manager at Virginia Marble Manufacturers Inc. ■

**Luke Haas**  
ICPA President

**WE NEED TO USE THE ENERGY WE NOW HAVE TO SHOW OUR NEW MEMBERS AND OUR OWN COMPANY LEADERS THAT THIS IS A PAY-IT-FORWARD ORGANIZATION.**

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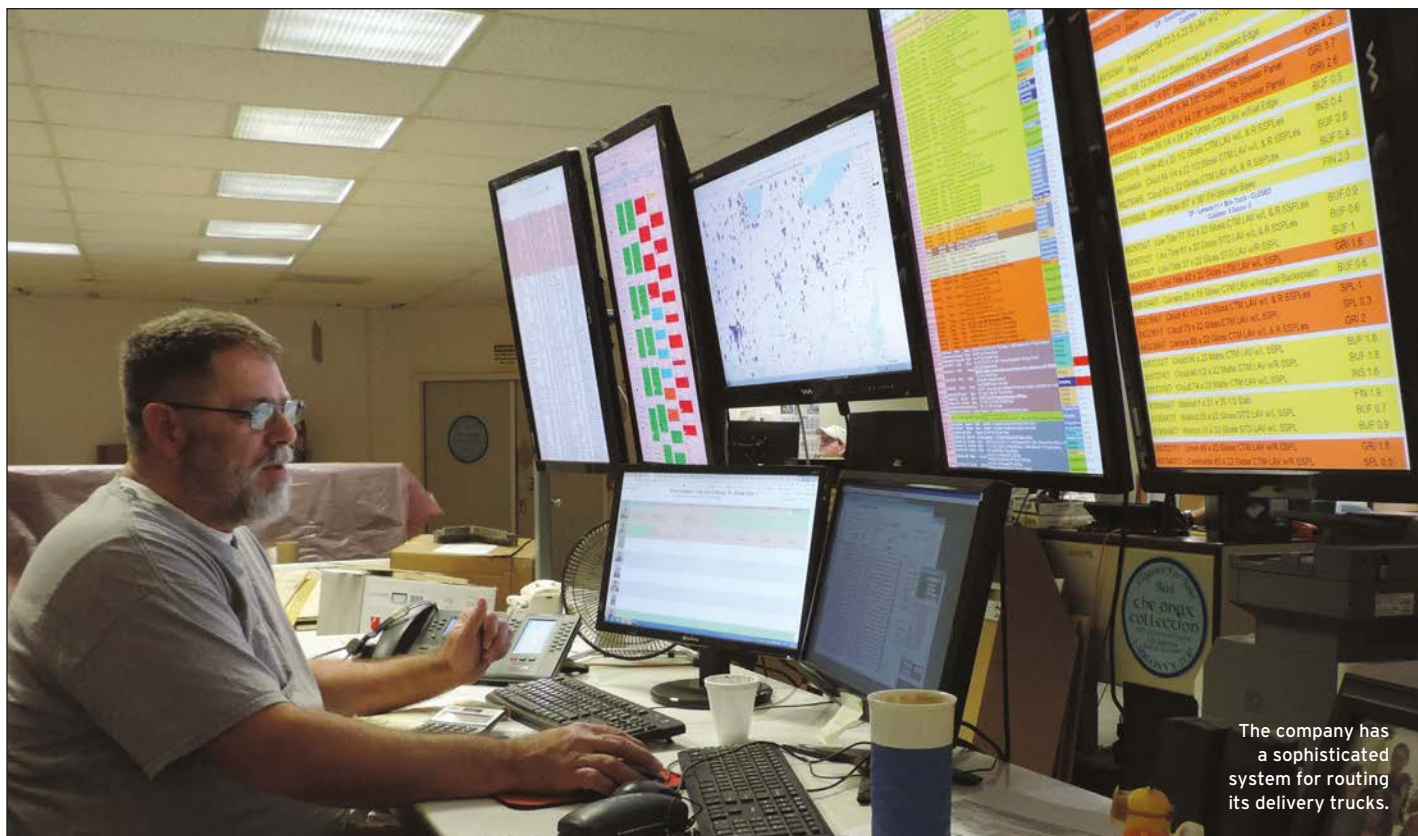
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# The Onyx Collection: How to create a forever guarantee



The company has a sophisticated system for routing its delivery trucks.

**ATTENDEES WERE EXCITED** to be offered a tour of the Onyx Collection, Belvue, KS during the recent POLYCON Kansas City 2019. The association has no other member set up quite the same way as this company, which offers its products almost exclusively through 6,500 dealers stretched coast to coast.

Few people knew during that tour, however, that what they were seeing is a company that started the same way many traditional ICPA companies began: a small operation with a few employees operating out of a garage.

It's hard to imagine those humble beginnings when walking the 140,000-square-foot plant of today with its sophisticated machinery, top-notch computer systems and bustling, always busy, two-shift floor of employees.

That history and the family that now is the backbone of the company is an important part of who and what Onyx is today.

## A business is born

Robert Awerkamp Sr. started the business in a two-car garage in 1985, hiring one person to help him cast about three or four cultured onyx lavatories each day. By 1991, the company had expanded into shower bases, wall panels and shower accessories, and in 2001, it began delivering products coast to coast in the continental U.S.

Awerkamp Senior, chairman of the Board, is still active in the business, coming into the office every day and keeping an eye on the numbers and customer feedback, as well as conducting analysis. His son Robert Awerkamp Jr. (Bobby) took over as president of the company several years ago and is responsible for plant operations, the chemistry and composition of products, manufacturing equipment and capital improvements, and managing the supply chain of alumina trihydrate by rail car. Bobby's brother Francis, vice president, is responsible for customer relations and sales, design of

new products and sales tools, and manages the catalog and website. Their sibling Louise, treasurer, heads up accounting and taxes, and designs and selects Onyx's new colors. She also designed the new administrative building shown on the cover of this issue. The siblings started working in the company when they were teenagers.

"All four of us stuck with the business during the difficult start-up years. It was our dad's strong work ethic and never-quit attitude, and his instilling in us and in the company a strong customer service philosophy, that became the solid foundation of the company, a philosophy this next generation is committed to continue," Louise says.

The four work closely together today, a relationship Bobby says succeeds not only because they get along so well, but because, "We share the same Catholic faith. We are working for the same common goal," he says.

When the senior Awerkamp is asked why he feels the company itself has done so well, his reply is straightforward: "Never water down your guarantee."

What he's referring to is the fact the Onyx Collection has built its reputation around being able to offer a "forever" guarantee on its products.

Today, those products include everything from shower bases, wall panels, tub surrounds, fireplace hearths, slabs, trim and accessories. The reason the company can guarantee "forever" is that most of the products are made of cultured onyx using a formula that has more expensive ingredients, but creates a strong, rich-looking result that is semi-translucent: The majority of the product is hydrate crystal and the rest is a special polyester resin the company developed over the last 30 years. The product has become so well known, it's simply referred to as "Onyx" by most of the dealers, which include big box stores, remodeling contractors, kitchen and bath designers, commercial and residential builders, plumbing wholesalers, hotel chains, cabinet shops, hardware stores and a few other cast polymer manufacturers.

"Several other manufacturers have opted to buy and install our products," Bobby explains. "Some offer our products alongside their own because we have more mold design options than they can efficiently offer. It makes sense for them to buy the product from us rather than purchase a mold they might not use often."

The forever guarantee of the product is possible because the company has built it into its culture.

"We've given anyone who deals with our customers the green light to do what it takes to make customers happy," Bobby explains.

That's extremely important to a company whose success



A grinding machine helps to shape a custom shower caddy.

### Operating a big company

To get a feel for the size and extent of a company as large as Onyx (over \$100 million in annual gross revenues), here are a few statistics of what occurs regularly:

- The company runs a fleet of 65 trucks with about 50 drivers on the road most days.
- The shipping department loads about 14 of the box trucks daily for deliveries.
- The Onyx Collection recycles 20 tons of cardboard scraps every month.
- The facility receives seven to eight truckloads of raw materials and packaging supplies every day.
- The 140,000-square-foot facility will expand by 27,000 square feet this year with the addition of new administrative offices (due to be operational by the end of the year. See the cover of this issue).
- The Onyx Collection can produce about 100 custom shower bases per day.

Robert Senior (left) and Robert Junior (Bobby) (right)





is based on its ability to customize. The Onyx Collection operates using an on-demand business model: no product is made until an order is placed.

“By customization, we are referring to size, shape and color,” Bobby explains. “Our online ordering system is capable of allowing dealers to enter most custom sizes with many design options. Occasionally, the design is unique enough to require a cardboard template to be mailed to our drafting department.”

Most frequently, the requirements for a product are simply input by the dealer—93% of orders are placed online by dealers; the rest are faxed in or arrive as mailed-in templates because of complicated designs.

The company’s most popular product is its custom shower bases, which Bobby explains are easy to install “because of the flange shelf system, which we use on all wall sides of the base. This flange shelf system reduces the amount of shaping the installer has to do to get a perfect fit,” he says.

The biggest percentage of dealers are ordering for remodeling jobs, a reality that Bobby says got the company through the housing crisis, allowing a 5% growth in 2008, when many companies were shrinking.

**Advantages, challenges of the business**

Bobby says the dealer model offers several major benefits.

“The advantage of selling through dealers is that, when we receive the order, much of the preparatory work is al-

ABOVE LEFT: Gel-coat is sprayed on a lavatory mold.  
 ABOVE RIGHT: An employee modifies a custom mold.  
 BELOW: An employee sets up a custom lavatory project.



ready finished, such as design and color choices,” he says. A side benefit to that is, “A lot of ideas for new products and improvements to existing products come from our dealers,” Bobby says.

The main ingredient for competing using such a system is the forever guarantee and customer service.

Another key ingredient is the right staff and finding ways to keep them onboard.

“I would attribute much of our success to the people that work here,” says Bobby. “We are fortunate to be in a rural area where we have very loyal people. But we cannot take that situation for granted.”

The company must offer a competitive salary and good benefits to keep the skill level it needs to run such a large company: it employs over 500 people.

A third key ingredient is sophisticated computer systems. “The computer network system built by our IT group has allowed the company to grow and to manage the growth smoothly,” Bobby says—the Onyx Collection has grown at a rate of about 15% annually over the course of its history.

“There are so many new, really great tools both in the office and down on the shop floor that were developed by our IT group,” Bobby explains. For example, at the loading dock, workers have a giant computer screen that tells them exactly what must be loaded onto each truck and in what

order it should be packed into the truck for efficiency and protection of the product.

These systems, including those used for dealer order fulfillment, efficient ordering of supplies and the monumental task of knowing where everything is at all times will only get more complicated and important in the future.

“Our IT group has many more projects planned that will help us manage the expected growth over the coming years,” he says.

### Joining ICPA

The Onyx Collection is a fairly new member of ICPA: the company joined a few years ago after a long absence.

“We were members back in the 1980s when it was the Cultured Marble Institute, but in those days, there were more than 10 times the number of manufacturers there are today. Most of them are gone. However, the ones who are left are true ‘survivors’ and that is part of the reason we rejoined,” Bobby says.

“It’s interesting to find out how each of these survivors made it through very difficult times and to learn what they are doing to ensure the future of this industry and their companies,” he says. ■

**GENILEE SWOPE PARENTE** is executive editor of **Cast Polymer Connection**. She can be reached at [gsparente@verizon.net](mailto:gsparente@verizon.net)

A special panel is set up for production.



# Polynt's NKC site:

## Where testing/ training and grey matter stimulation occur

**IN NORTH KANSAS CITY**, tucked between other industrial and office buildings, is a blue-faced structure owned by Polynt-Reichhold. The unassuming building does not reveal on the outside what goes on inside: major research and development (R&D) and training for the composites and cast polymer industry.

POLYCON visitors recently traveled to the campus (Polynt-Reichhold calls the area NKC for North Kansas City) that houses the blue building for plant demonstrations. However, most of them probably didn't realize the full extent of what gets done at the site and how its history is tied to the current world of resins and gels.

The campus houses three major buildings: that blue building, which is the Polynt Composites Applications Center (PCAC); a facility behind it the company refers to as the 820 building; and a manufacturing plant. The 820 building holds the key to the company's past and houses many of the company's brainy employees. It's where the R&D labs are housed and everything that happens in all the buildings is administered.

### The 820 building

The brick-faced 820 structure was registered in 1994 on the National Register of Historic Places. It was built in 1920 for the Wheeling Corrugating Company Building. Cook Paint and Varnish purchased the structure in 1956 and remodeled it from a warehouse into laboratories and office space. The site was converted from Cook Paint to Cook Composites and Polymers in a joint venture with French energy company Total, then remodeled again in the mid-1990s to become



Linda Bergstrom  
reviews the  
schedule.



the world headquarters of Cook Composite and Polymers. The company was renamed CCP in 2011 when the polymers business was sold.

In 2014, CCP was acquired by the U.S. subsidiary of Polynt Group and Investindustrial. The resulting company (Polynt Composites) is headquartered in Carpentersville, IL. It combined with Reichhold in 2018 to become Polynt-Reichhold.

While all this was going on, the work conducted at NKC increased and expanded in the continuous effort to keep up with what is happening in the world of composites. Most recently, the company made the decision to move all research and training on the composites division of Polynt-Reichhold to NKC, while keeping the research done on coatings in Carpentersville.

In 2019 and 2020, the lab space at NKC will expand even more and the applications center will be renovated and modernized.

### The facility today

The NKC site now houses 23 administrative and research staff in the 820 building, 12 in the manufacturing building and three in the training center.

People in the lab environments are primarily chemists, engineers and technicians with a wide range of backgrounds.

“We have a mix of employees in terms of experience ranging from more than 35 years to new hires at NKC,” says

Terry Chance runs a water content analysis



Frank Zapata inspects gel coat spray equipment.

Linda Bergstrom, technical assistance manager. The staff is headed by Steve Voeks, R&D manager for Polynt-Reichhold. Most NKC staff work in composites. Bergstrom’s Technical Assistance group includes four people at NKC (as well as 13 others located all over the country). The group provides technical support to customers of the company.

The labs in the R&D facility are the UPR/VE [unsaturated polyester and vinyl ester]; gel coats; and the pilot lab. UPR/VE and gel coat help to develop new products and enhance current products for those respective product lines as well as provide support to Polynt-Reichhold’s own plants. The pilot lab participates in product development through process studies and looks at ways to conduct product scale-ups.

North Kansas also has an analytical lab that supports the other labs with analysis and mechanical properties testing. All of this is done both for customers and to improve and develop new Polynt-Reichhold products.

Because of an expanding workload and the consolidation of research capabilities with some of what was once done in Durham, NC, the lab spaces will be increased by 50% in the next few years.

### The training facility

The blue building that is PCAC is a multipurpose facility used for training and product testing. It includes a 40-50-seat stadium-style auditorium where classes are offered and a 12,000-square-foot shop where hands-on training, demonstrations and non-lab R&D work occurs.

“In this shop, we have the capability to replicate the main processes used by the composites fabricators, which allows us

to train customers on the processes they will be using in their own shops as well as to test existing and new products in a production environment close to what they face in the real world,” Bergstrom explains.

Demonstrations and workshops are an important part of the schooling that goes on because, “We follow classroom sessions where we explain concepts with hands-on demos to reinforce what we’ve discussed. These sessions really engage the attendees, and help with understanding and retention,” Bergstrom says.

Being able to replicate customer processes also helps Polynt-Reichhold in its own development process.

“We can assess and analyze new products in a near-production environment to help ensure that they are ready for our customers to test and use,” Bergstrom says.

The company hosts four classes a year that are open registration.

These open classes include popular topics such as gel coat application and patching, mold building and closed mold processes; whereas training classes are targeted at composites fabricators at all levels.

“Operators and technicians, shift supervisors, plant managers and owners all benefit from these classes,” Bergstrom explains.

“In the last few years, we’ve also served as the host site for ACMA’s [American Composites Manufacturers Association] Certified Composites Training instructor courses and put on special events such as what we did at POLYCON 2019 with the plant demos,” Bergstrom says.



Kelly Potterf microscopically evaluates a laminate cross-section

The basic purpose of the application center, which is to assist customers and its own divisions in advancing their businesses and to advance the use of composites technologies in general, has not changed over the years; however, the capabilities have expanded as technology has grown—a doubling in size occurred in 2007. In 2019/20, “We’ll be adding updated equipment for the manufacturer of sheet molding compounds, improving our capabilities for press molding and cast polymer and adding the capability to do pultrusion and cured-in-place pipe,” Bergstrom reports.

Bergstrom credits Polynt-Reichhold’s partners for assisting with developing the PCAC capabilities. For example, she said Magnum Venus Plastech, which makes gel coat and resin application equipment, outfitted the center with two gel-coat spray units, a unit for chopped lamination and an injection unit for closed mold processes.

Other partners who have provided equipment, materials and support for training classes are 3M (spray guns, sanding and buffing tools, and materials for gel coat repair), Chem-trend (mold release), Farécla (buffing compounds for gel coat repair), and United Initiators (initiators for gel coats and resin).

“Having these partners allows us to give big-picture or comprehensive composites training on all aspects of part fabrication,” Bergstrom reports. ■

**GENILEE SWOPE PARENTE** is executive editor of **Cast Polymer Connections**. She is looking for suggestions on other companies and vendors to the industry to profile. Contact her at [gsparente@verizon.net](mailto:gsparente@verizon.net).

FROM LEFT: James Schaeffer takes color readings; Steven Herzig analyzes data on color; Janna Smith checks a resin blend batch.





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Specific gravity	2.3	1.8	1.5	1.0	1.0	1.0
Free moisture content	< 0.4%	< 0.4%	< 0.4%	< 0.4%	< 0.4%	< 0.4%

\*Resin % recommendations are based on an 800-1000 cps casting resin at 70° F.

*"We Seek To Make Our Customers Successful"*

**ON THE MINDS OF ANY EMPLOYER** in manufacturing today is: how do I get the right people to come on board, and then, how do I get them to stay?

The topic came up again and again in discussions between people and in sessions at POLYCON Kansas City 2019 (see page 16), including during the keynote presentation by Lisa Ryan. Ryan has a long career helping employers find ways to tackle the expanding hole in today's factories caused by baby boomers leaving industrial jobs at the same time more positions and opportunities are opening up.

She says the first step is an attitude adjustment.

"The very first response I received from an innocent question posed years ago on social media about incorporating gratitude into the strategy for handling employees was: 'if I do that, my employees will just take advantage of me,'" she said. "When you look more closely, you see nothing could be further from the truth."

Too many employers today think a paycheck is the best way to get and keep employees and that finding ways to show appreciation is a waste of time.

"They think, 'I don't have time to catch staff in the act of doing things right. I'm too busy hiring all the time. You don't know what it's like to find good people in this industry,'" Ryan said.

But that thinking is deadly today because more and more studies show that people do not work simply for money. Paying a fair wage is a vital part of the picture; however, they strive for jobs that make them feel like they are part of a bigger picture.

"When you ask employees what will make them happy in their jobs, their answers reveal they are looking for a certain culture, recognition of what they do; they want to work for a greater mission," Ryan said.

### **Changing the culture**

Ryan explained that in her research for speaking at POLYCON, she talked to several ICPA member companies about what they are doing towards building the right employee culture, and she found some cast polymer manufacturers are headed in the right direction. But the road for those that are enlightened has not been easy or quick, she said, and many of those stuck in traditional thinking have a tough journey ahead of them.

"Yes, you've been in the business a long time and you do things a certain way, but unless you are willing to look at every single aspect of your business differently and start to bring a different attitude into the workplace, you can't hope to change the culture to one that gives employees pride in the beautifully crafted products you make," she said.

# Engaging Your Employees: How to Hook and Keep the Best

BY GENILEE SWOPE PARENTE



It starts with changing the perceptions and practices of the entire company starting at the top, she explained.

This is a challenge because “remember, your company culture did not happen overnight and it’s not going to change overnight. It takes time, and it begins with establishing channels for basic human connections,” she said.

This process begins by building trust between workers and supervisors, she said, a process that takes patience.

“You know that many of your employees who know you’re at this conference [POLYCON] are dreading your return to the office and plant,” she told the audience. “They hate it when you attend a conference, then the following Monday



**“WHEN YOU ASK EMPLOYEES WHAT WILL MAKE THEM HAPPY IN THEIR JOBS, THEIR ANSWERS REVEAL THEY ARE LOOKING FOR A CERTAIN CULTURE, RECOGNITION OF WHAT THEY DO; THEY WANT TO WORK FOR A GREATER MISSION.”**

— LISA RYAN

morning, you come back loaded with ideas, which you want to put into effect. *Right that moment*,” she joked.

Finding ways to change how people feel about working for you “is not a shiny rock in the stream”—that attractive business idea you can’t help but pick up out of the water and put in your pocket to show off later to other rock lovers. It’s putting together many shiny rocks and seeing how they might fit into the situation and circumstances of the individual company. Instead of bringing one great idea home from POLYCON and hoping it will solve many problems, she challenged attendees to focus on bringing home a few solid tips that they can put into place to start the process of creating the right atmosphere.

One of the simplest ways to build trust, for example, is to show people before they even walk in the door what it’s like to work for your company, she said.

She suggested that most people today have a simple tool that can help them: cell phones on which videos can be recorded of employees talking about what they do. These videos can be uploaded to YouTube, the company blog/web site and social media channels.

“Just think about this: 500 hours of video content is uploaded to YouTube every single minute: there are 65 years of content posted each day. This has become a powerful channel for reaching people,” she said.

Creating these videos is simple, free and it creates connections “not only with your own people and between your people but for them to share with friends and the outside world, including potential job candidates,” she said.

Building trust also requires believability, Ryan pointed out, because even though it takes time to develop it, “it can be broken by a single instance of eye-rolling,” she said. In other words, good listening skills are a must.

“We need to be the master of the poker face, because no matter what an employee says when you ask them how you, as the leader, can make their jobs better, if you argue with them about what they say, they’ll never trust you again,” she said.

### **Investing in their future**

Once trust is established, employers must go onto the next step, which is finding ways to help staff be better tomorrow than they are today, Ryan said.

For purposes of making her point, she separated staff into three levels for the audience. The top level, which is about 30% of the workforce, are the “rock stars”—those employees who already have the right attitude and are excelling at their jobs because they have both desire and skills. The biggest layer is the next 50% of the company, which are “steady Eddies”—those employees who show up to work every day, collect a paycheck

and go home. The key is to find ways to move people from this middle category up to the top 30% instead of allowing them to be influenced by the lowest level: the 20% she called “bottom feeders.” These are the people who are unhappy in their jobs and let everyone else know it. Despite a company’s best effort, they can “suck the life right out” of a positive culture, she said. “And when a company’s culture is negative and people are unhappy, guess who leaves the company first: it’s that top 30%,” Ryan pointed out.

Bottom feeders must be encouraged to seek employment elsewhere not only because they lose the business money (Ryan said they cost about \$3,400 for every \$10,000 in salary they make), but because by taking this action, other employees see that you recognized they are different and appreciated for what they can accomplish (even when it’s only showing up), and that you care about the overall atmo-

sphere in the workplace.

“All of you have worked in that job where a horrible person finally left and the entire rest of the company collectively went ‘ahhhhhhhhhhhhh,’” she joked.

Investing in an employee does not have to cost much, but it has to be done the right way, Ryan said. “That means changing the conversation when it comes to how you send people into training,” she pointed out. In other words, instead of chastising them about how badly they are doing or where they are falling behind and then sending them into training as a “prison sentence,” employers need to present training as what it is: a way to provide that employee opportunity for growth.

“We should say, ‘I see so much potential in you that is not being brought to the table. I want to invest in you, put you into this program, then encourage you to come back and share what you’ve learned with the rest of us,’” she explained.

## Golden nuggets from the audience

One of the points Ryan stressed in both her keynote and in sessions that followed was that conferences such as POLYCON are valuable for giving attendees specific tips on what others have done to solve problems such as how they’ve gotten employees engaged or showed them their appreciation. During both the keynote and several sessions that followed, Ryan and speakers encouraged those who are already working on changing their companies to share their golden nuggets of what has worked.

Ryan was helped by the industry people she met with and talked to before the conference and by people such as Kathryn Perry, vice president at International Marble Industries (IMI), who oversaw a major human resources cultural change at that company and helped Ryan facilitate discussion during the smaller breakout sessions. Here are a few tidbits that attendees took home with them about what other organizations are doing:

### Hiring the right way

Several people talked about changing their hiring/firing practices. Ryan called it “speeding up the firing and slowing down the hiring.”

At IMI for example, one of the first things that happened during the cultural change is that the company “encouraged people who were not moving in the same direction as the company to ‘get off the bus,’” Perry explained. This was a hard task for a company used to trying to hold on to all its employees because skilled crafts people are so hard to find. However, those who were not on board with what the company was trying to accomplish



were not doing the company any good so they were encouraged to leave or change positions.

This move was followed by a change in attitude in hiring from focusing on just people who already had the right technical skills to “looking for people who had the right attitude and enthusiasm and then teaching them the technical skills,” Perry said.

“We began looking for the people that say, ‘I can do that’ or ‘I can learn that’, instead of those that said, ‘oh that last job was horrible and the people and the company were just terrible to work for,’” she said.

IMI also adopted a one-week trial period for new hires, which allowed the potential candidate some time with the staff, and the staff some time with the candidate.

“You’d be surprised how in just five days you can ascertain either that this employee really gels with others or this person is not going to work out at all,” Perry explained.

Perry and several other people in the sessions said their companies have stopped asking for references because it’s too easy to find five people to say good things about any single individual. Instead, they are focusing on asking the right leading questions that reveal attitudes about work or tools such as taking the candidate and his/her family out to dinner to get to know them.

Audience members also shared how they are looking at new sources for candidates. One woman told a story about how her company has learned that halfway houses can provide a good source of skilled people. A busload of such candidates showed up during one open hiring session, but the company hesitated to hire people with criminal backgrounds. However, upon further examination, they discovered that many of these candidates had

## Thank you

After trust is established and investments are made, the third step is keeping employees happy by learning ways to acknowledge, appreciate and applaud them.

Again, there must be a level of sincerity and there must be specificity in the way the person is thanked and reference to why they are being thanked. In other words: "If I just say, 'good job,' employees wonder, 'what was good about it? What was I doing wrong before?'" This is because, face it people, we were wired for negativity," she said. This goes back to the days of the saber-tooth tiger, because if you were nice to the tiger, "it ate you," she joked. She backed up her point with the reality that when looking at reviews, people look first at the few negatives before moving to the many positives.

What this means is that we are used to focusing on what's broken and not acknowledging how and why it

might be fixed, "so if the boss says thanks, the employee is thinking, 'oh-oh, she's never said that before. She must want something,'" Ryan said.

The best way to overcome that is to gear gratitude towards exactly what the employee did and give a reward or thanks based on what that individual actually wants.

"If we buy the whole office pizza when a big project gets done, it just comes to be expected after every project. But if we walk up to an individual and say, 'I appreciate that extra hour and a half you put in; what you did made the customer very happy,' and maybe give them something geared to their own tastes such as a sports ticket or a particular candy, the thanks really sticks," Ryan said. ■

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**GENILEE SWOPE PARENTE** is executive editor of **Cast Polymer Connection**. She is always looking for story ideas. Please contact her at [gsparente@verizon.net](mailto:gsparente@verizon.net).

great skill levels and eagerness to learn. "These are good workers in bad situations," she said.

She explained how her company also learned that a major challenge with ex-criminals is that they are lacking access to some of the basic elements of life that people need to succeed such as a place to live. Her company bought a house at auction close to the plant and is remodeling it so that hires have a source of access to affordable housing.

Another audience member talked about an exercise the company used to come up with a list of attributes to look for in a candidate. Managers were asked who within their own company they would rehire and why they would hire that person. The resulting reasons were compiled on a whiteboard at a special meeting, which allowed the company to look at what it needed to change within its own culture to encourage people who had those attributes to come on board.

"Those managers weren't even picking the same people, but by putting this together, we were able to create a list of what we needed in employees," she said.

## Tools of appreciation

Audiences members also shared a wide range of ideas on how they show employees that they acknowledge and understand how important they are to the company.

One woman explained how all the employees at Sand & Swirl, Ogden, Utah, are included in any meeting that discusses the company's progress and that part of what's shared at those meetings is what comes back from customer service surveys. "This allows people to see how they fit as individuals into the overall picture of our company," she said.

Ryan shared her experiences with one of her clients who created a bring-your-family-to-work day where managers run the machines while employees show what's done in the factory to their own families and friends. "Not a lot gets done on that day, but you should see the pride these employees have," Ryan said.

Perry explained how IMI implemented a way to target thanks to the specific employee to make it more meaningful. The company created new hire forms that put together information on each employee's likes, dislikes and specifics such as spouses' names, wedding anniversaries, favorite foods, children's names and ages, hobbies and special interests.

"During times when you're all working hard and a manager or supervisor wants to reward one particular person for going above and beyond, he or she can just pull up that form on a phone and pick up a specific item at the store or find something geared to their tastes or goals," Perry said.

## Building connections

Luke Haas, ICPA president and owner of Elite Marble, shared with people how his small company (15 employees) has learned to use the WhatsApp application for mobile devices to engage employees and get them to share what's happening with each other.

Haas explained that this particular way of communicating engages employees by allowing them to send casual messages back and forth about what project they're working on, how its progressing or what problems they seek to solve.

"It keeps our people interactive and interested in what others are doing, but we also have fun with it. Using the app allows our employees a way to connect," Haas said.



# The head of steam that **POLYCON** has become

The crowds gather as the event begins.



**ACCORDING TO ATTENDEES**, features of POLYCON 2019 Kansas City that stood out included a larger number of younger attendees, changes in format with demos on Wednesday and a tour of the Onyx plant on Friday, and a dynamic keynote speaker who stayed for follow up sessions and for mingling with members (see page 12).

But what was clear to all attendees and what came out in the evaluations of the event is best summed by one exhibitor's pleased comment, "It was clear the momentum of POLYCON builds every year."

ICPA board member Sean Jacobs, MPL Company, referred to that momentum in the opening session, including the growth just in the last year.

"We were sizeable at last year's event with 165 total registrations. This year, we exceeded 200—we're up 22% just in this audience," he said. The association itself has grown an astonishing 578% since 2014, when the drive to become an independent organization began, Jacobs pointed out, which means POLYCON has become an amazing head of steam pushing companies and the industry forward.

"That's a credit to all of you for wanting to continue your learning and growth as well as your networking so you can get a feel for what's going on in the industry. You're breaking out of your boxes back at your offices," he said.

## **The new kids**

Several speakers during the show and many commenters after the show referred to younger faces in the audiences and wandering the exhibit hall. "We saw a new generation at this year's show and that is good," one vendor exclaimed.

Training for the Composites Technician Program for Cast Polymer (CCT-CP) may have drawn some of the younger



crowd. But manufacturers also commented that they are starting to realize the worth of bringing their up and coming leaders to the event for the same reasons they come themselves: learning and networking.

One new attendee put it this way: “This was my first POLYCON event and it was so educational! I was able to meet other people in the industry, and I learned a few invaluable things I can bring back and implement at our factory.”

The top three reasons why people said they came to the Kansas City event were for the networking (more than 90%); the sessions (almost 79%) and for the special tour of the Onyx operation (almost 77%).

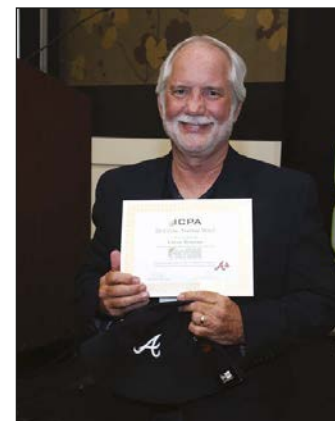
Whatever their rationale for attending was, it was clear the conference was a success: over 92% rated their experience as very good to excellent.

### Awards presented

An important part of POLYCON is recognition of people who have shown excellence in their efforts.

The top ICPA award was presented to Bill Sanders, Alamo Marble, Ltd., who is the immediate past president of ICPA and a current board member. Sanders received the Royce E. Newsom Pinnacle Award (see page 18).

Current president Luke Haas presented his President’s Award to Genilee Swope Parente, executive editor of **Cast Polymer Connection** for her contributions to improving the magazine and for help with beginning the process of putting together a history of ICPA.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Attendees voted on their choice in the Best of the Best contest; Luke Haas presented his President’s Award to a very surprised Genilee Swope Parente, **Cast Polymer Connection’s** executive editor; Larry Branan was honored for his role in putting together the plant demonstrations; Nic Hedges accepts the Best Manufacturing Technique award on behalf of PremiumRock

BELOW: New exhibitors joined those who have been around since the beginning.



Awards of appreciation went to:

- The Polynt Application Center (see page 8), which hosted the plant demonstrations at their North Kansas City facility.
- Larry Branan, The R.J. Marshall Company, for coordinating and facilitating those demonstrations.
- The Onyx Collection (see page 4) for opening up its 140,000-square-foot working manufacturing plant in Belvue, KS for tours by ICPA members.

The Best of the Best contest award participants this year included: Tyvarian International, House of Marble & Granite, Tile Meister and Premium Rock. Contest participants displayed their products at a special touch-and-feel table in the exhibit hall where attendees voted for the anonymous entries.

Winning an award for a product voted by attendees as the Best Manufacturing Technique was a PremiumRock design by Nic Hedges. The product voted the Best Innovative Design was a PremiumRock design by Chad Wood.

## Bill Sanders: Winning an award that means a lot

Everybody has a different story to tell about how they got into the cast polymer business, and Bill Sanders, this year's Royce Newsom Pinnacle Award winner is no exception.

Sanders was a certified public accountant with a national firm in 1989 when a friend approached him with what he said was a lucrative deal: buy out a cultured marble company that was bankrupt. It was the era when the downfall of the savings and loan industry had created a crisis in the housing industry, and Sanders had been looking for business and investing opportunities.

He put together the financing deal to acquire the assets of Alamo Marble on Jan. 1, 1990. The firm had no customers and one employee, but a business plan and the two partners. However, Sanders soon discovered irregularities in the plan and in his partner's business practices so after a legal fight, he became sole owner of a company with many challenges.

In those early years, the company's method of operation was designed, "just so we could survive. I had to learn this business from the ground up and find the right people, which was never an easy task," Sanders says. Fortunately, he had some help along the way in the form of a competing company that joined forces with him and helped get the business off the ground.

But Sanders faced many difficulties on his journey from those days, when the shop was about 2,500 square feet to today, at 35 employees and over 17,000 square feet including the plant, administrative offices and storage.

Sanders gives much credit for his success to professional organizations in which he's been active, and to individuals such as Royce Newsom, who provided critical advice during a time when Sanders needed it. He tells the story of a time when he was struggling with how to find the right people to manage Alamo—he was trying to maintain his accounting firm at the same time he ran Alamo. He knew Newsom from meetings and they were already

**"IT'S AN HONOR TO RECEIVE AN AWARD NAMED FOR THE MAN WHO GAVE SO MUCH TO THIS ORGANIZATION AND INDUSTRY."**

— Bill Sanders



The 2019 Royce Newsom Pinnacle Award winner was Bill Sanders.

friends when Sanders and his wife headed up from San Antonio to the Lubbock, TX area for a basketball game and decided to swing by Royce's shop and spend what he thought would be a few hours looking at how Newsom operated his well-run shop.

"That short day turned into an all-day process. He let us take pictures, gave us all kinds of advice on what we needed to do. He was full of ideas and inspiration," Sanders recalls.

Sanders was active in the regional associations that were part of ICPA's predecessor, the Cultured Marble Institute, and later in the national association. When ICPA started talking about becoming its own entity, "Royce called me and told me to get to POLYCON Atlanta," a move that resulted in Sanders coming onto the board.

Sanders says that winning the award named for his friend Royce means a lot to him.

"Royce helped me like he had so many others during a time I was struggling. It's an honor to receive an award named for the man who gave so much to this organization and industry," Sanders says.



People learned techniques from live demonstrations the first day of the conference.



Educational sessions included topics on plant operations, the current regulatory environment, employee engagement and more.

## This year's sponsors

Another outstanding development with this year's POLYCON was an expanded list of sponsors as well as more and new types of exhibitors.

ICPA sent special thanks out to:

- **Platinum Sponsors** Composites One, which hosted the Wednesday Evening Welcome Reception; The R.J. Marshall/Marshall-Gruber Companies, which hosted the Thursday luncheon; and Interplastic, which hosted the Thursday Evening Cocktail Reception.
- **Gold Sponsors** including: ACS International, a Dorfner Company; Advanced Plastics; AOC Resins; HK Research; Huber Engineered Materials; Mercury Molds &

RFP; and Ventilation Solutions.

- **Bronze Sponsors** including: Caddo Pigments; Farécla; GS Manufacturing; Hastings Air Energy Control, Inc.; North American Composites; Sanco; and Tvarian/Whitewater.

"I've been delighted since the beginning of POLYCON five years ago how many strong supporters we have in this trade association," said ICPA Executive Director Jennifer Towner. "We could not put on this event without the financial help from our sponsors and exhibitors. This year, we had a deeper support system than ever, and I expect that trend to continue with more companies wanting to exhibit at POLYCON 2020 and beyond." ■

BELOW LEFT: The Polynt application center's auditorium served as a good place for video demonstrations. RIGHT: Executive Director Jennifer Towner received accolades for planning and carrying out the biggest and best POLYCON to date.



# Launching the **SAFE PLANT** Program



**WHEN IT COMES TO INVOLVING EMPLOYEES** with what happens in the plant and within the company, no area is as critical as safety.

“We all want to keep our employees free from harm and injury, and in good health. But we can’t do that without having a program that ensures we recognize and can react to the challenges and specific hazards, then a commitment from our own employees to follow that program,” said Kelly DeBusk, one of this year’s POLYCON speakers and owner of Composites Compliance LLC, which helps companies put together safety programs.

That is one of the key reasons members asked for help in the area of health and safety and a major driving force behind ICPA’s decision to offer the SAFE PLANT Program, which was created by a team of ICPA members in partnership with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

The SAFE PLANT Program was introduced just before POLYCON Kansas City 2019, and ten companies have completed the beginning assessments and organization, and have officially launched the program within their sites. Several more are in the planning stages.

“I congratulate you on your effort to create this program,” William G. Perry, OSHA director, directorate of Standards & Guidance, told POLYCON attendees. “We [OSHA] think it’s a really big deal when a trade association, on its own, encourages members to develop a safety program just because it’s

the right thing to do.”

Perry spoke twice at the event about the OSHA initiative upon which SAFE PLANT is based: the Safe + Sound Campaign. The initial effort for that campaign began three years ago with OSHA publishing “Recommended Practices for Safety and Health.”

Perry stressed at POLYCON, however, that Safe + Sound does not carry the OSHA logo for a reason—it’s not meant to be a regulatory agency effort, but rather a partnership among many organizations.

“This is not OSHA telling you what you should do, which is a unique event in OSHA’s history. Instead, we’ve partnered with the entire safety and health community to provide guidance of what you should do,” Perry said.

In just three years, Safe + Sound has 200 partners, which include organizations such as the American Industrial Hygiene Association, the National Safety Council, the American Society of Safety Professionals and other safety-related groups that have helped create many of the resources.

Partners also include labor unions and professional trade associations such as ICPA and the American Composites Manufacturers Association, which have committed to its principles.

“We are all speaking with one voice and using all these communications channels to reach a much larger audience than anyone could on their own,” he said.



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**SAFE PLANT** includes management leadership, worker participation, tools/resources, and a systematic process for finding and fixing hazards.

**JOIN THE CAMPAIGN**

## ICPA's SAFE PLANT Program

ICPA's decision to join the effort came from member-driven requests. Many companies in the cast polymer industry wanted a way to create then sustain a workable safety and health program for their plants.

"We started out with a main goal of putting together a program that could work for all our members, no matter how big or small, complex or simple," said ICPA board member Matt Pulliam, AGCO, Inc., who helped to initiate the effort. "The best route for doing that was to partner with the Safe + Sound program because of the wide range of resources. It's a customizable program that's free and completely voluntary."

On the ICPA website now is an area where members can find information on how to get started, resources to keep a safety and health program active and growing, and a range of information on how to find and protect against hazards.

The first step to get started in the SAFE PLANT program is to fill out a short form on the website. That first step provides access to a range of resources that give companies guidance on what to look for within the plant and how to put a program together based on the Recommended Practices Handbook. The next step is to name a site safety leader or team, complete a plant self-assessment downloaded from the website, and identify at least one of the key elements in the OSHA Recommended Practices Handbook to improve upon in the year 2019. Once the site team has completed these first steps, then they are sent a link to officially accept the year's commitment to the program and receive the SAFE PLANT participation certificate and program packet.

Perry was invited to POLYCON to explain to attendees why such programs are vital and what they can accomplish for a plant.

## The principal elements

Perry, OSHA and ICPA have stressed that the driving force behind Safe + Sound and the SAFE PLANT program is this:

"The idea behind this entire campaign is that every workplace should have a health and safety program, and that it should be based on three key elements: 1) management leadership, 2) worker involvement and a 3) systematic approach," Perry said.

For any safety and health program to work in a plant, "leadership has to send a message from the top that safety and health is critical to the operation of the facility," Perry told POLYCON attendees. "That requires a bit more effort than popping out an email to staff. It means management must be engaged and fully committed."

As far as worker involvement, "A key to all of this is to have ways to encourage employees to [comfortably] report

## The economic benefits

Both Bill Perry and Matt Pulliam stressed the advantages to companies that commit to these safety and health programs. Those advantages range from preventing injuries and illnesses, which means more time for people in the plant, to happier, more secure and productive employees, to ensuring compliance with regulations. Perry also stressed that studies now reveal solid advantages for the bottom line.

"There are now many case studies that prove the economics behind this thinking," Perry stressed to one POLYCON audience.

For example, he pointed to a study of small businesses done in Ohio under the Safety and Health Achievement Recognition Program, which is tied to OSHA's onsite consultation program.

The study found that companies that put a safety and health program into action saw a 52% decrease in the average number of claims and an 80% decrease in cost per claim. Meanwhile, the average lost time per claim went down 87%, while claims per million dollars of payroll decreased by 88% (Source: Ohio Bureau of Workers' Compensation).



William G. Perry,  
OSHA



Matt Pulliam,  
AGCO, Inc.

potential hazards. Reporting of injuries is standard in the industrial field. But you need a channel for employees to also help identify safety concerns before incidents happen," Perry explained.

The systematic approach is a way to keep the whole process moving forward by "being proactive, going out and doing the hazard analyses, helping employees identify concerns within your individual organizations and then working with employees on solutions," Perry explained.

The last element requires teaching employees what to look for, then how to safeguard plants and themselves and conducting periodic evaluations to assess how the company is progressing.

"A good safety and health program is really a journey of continuously evolving developments," Perry explained. "As a manufacturing company, you are always introducing new products and procedures," he added. Because of this, any safety and health program has to be able to grow with the company.

"You have to keep employees engaged with the program to keep it vital. We are never really 'done' creating a perfect program," Perry concluded. ■

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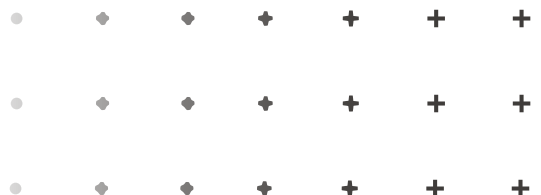
  
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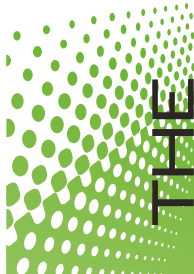
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## New leaders for coming year

The ICPA Board of Directors elected the following officers to the Executive Board for the upcoming 2019-2020 membership year beginning in July 2019:

- **President Elect—Mark Buss**, general manager, Virginia Marble Manufacturers Inc.
- **Secretary—Dirk De Vuyst**, owner, International Marble Industries, Inc.
- **Treasurer—Matthew Pulliam**, vice president, AGCO, Inc.
- **Immediate Past President—Luke Haas**, owner, Elite Marble

The board is currently working on updating the strategic plan for moving the association forward into its next phases.

ICPA also recently welcomed **Steve Wetzel, Interplastics**, to the board to fill an open supplier seat.

## How to sign up for SAFE PLANT

The SAFE PLANT program, which ICPA created in March 2019 in partnership with the Occupational Health and Safety Administration, is now up and running with ten companies having completed the beginning assessments and organization, and officially launching the program at their sites. Several more are in the planning stages.

The program was explained at sessions during POLYCON Kansas City 2019 (see pages 16 and 20). It's part of OSHA's Safe + Sound campaign with a team of ICPA members finalizing the association's customized SAFE PLANT program.

Everything members need to participate is on the ICPA website.

To participate, members must have a safety leader or team in place, complete a plant self-assessment and identify



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at least one of the core elements in OSHA's Recommended Practices Handbook to improve upon in 2019. Companies must be willing to commit to following one or more of OSHA's recommended practices for safety and health in their plants, then be willing to make year-to-year continual progress. All resources are free and customizable to each plant.

A checklist for starting is on the site, and it links to recommended guidance documents for each step.

Go to the [ICPA.com/safeplant](http://ICPA.com/safeplant) to find out more and get started.

## Salt Lake City here we come!

The area chosen for the 2020 POLYCON meeting is Salt Lake City, Utah. ICPA has several members in the area that have agreed to help with planning and carrying out the event.

They include Sand & Swirl in Ogden and Tyvarian International in Lindon.

Salt Lake was chosen because ICPA membership continues to grow in that area of the country. Also, the association moves the convention around to different locales to familiarize new people in the industry with ICPA and its benefits and



members. Salt Lake also has a large international airport as well as many convenient and suitable venues for hotels and convention space. The Salt Lake area has a reputation as a favorable place for recreational activities and interesting places to explore.

## ICPA welcomes new members

ICPA's membership ranks continue to grow. Most recently, these companies have joined the organization:

- **Bathroom Designs**, Tucker, GA
- **Brooks Mold and Patterns, LLC**, Elmore, AL
- **Canyon Kitchen & Bath**, St George, UT
- **Carlisle Manufacturing**, Cunningham, KY
- **Complete Home Concepts**, Riverside, MO
- **Daze Marble**, Pineville, LA
- **Marble Concepts & Design**, Central Point, OR
- **Midac Equipment Limited**, Kingston, Jamaica
- **Prock Operations, Inc.**, Saint James, MO
- **Pure Liberty Manufacturing**, Ottawa Lake, MI
- **ROI Equipment Company**, Simpsonville, SC
- **Ventilation Solutions**, Oakridge, TN
- **Wagler's Custom Marble**, Odon, IN

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