

CAST POLYMER

Winter 2020

CONNECTION



AGCO: Traditional Roots Blossom through Diversification

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

- Marketing during a pandemic
- Keeping staff engaged
- Avoiding damaging business practices

**POLYCON 2021
PLANNED**



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Cover: The Pulliam family is now in its third generation at AGCO, Inc., a diversified company headquartered in the Atlanta area. Pictured here is (from right) Larry Pulliam, the current president (second generation); his daughter Lindsey; his wife Melinda Pulliam, who is still in the business; and Matt Pulliam, director of Manufacturing (third generation). They are gathered under the University of Georgia Arches to celebrate Lindsey, who is now a speech pathologist. All of them graduated from the university.

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PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Leaving the year behind



AS THIS ISSUE WENT TO PRESS, the presidential election had just passed us by. No matter which side you picked, one point was clear: the American people care deeply. More people voted in this election than have ever voted in a presidential battle, despite the threat of COVID, the accusations of mail and ballot fraud and the unrest of the country.

Hopefully this passion will continue in a positive manner as we leave a very difficult year behind and look with hope towards a new year in which we conquer the worst pandemic the country has experienced since the Spanish flu of the early 1900s.

Within our industry and our association, the new year will bring new actions towards bolstering both the industry and our individual members' business. As this issue reports, we're starting a new website in January called LiveGroutFree.com that will show the world the benefits of cast polymer, cultured marble and solid surface kitchen and bath products. That site is one of several major efforts our Marketing Committee has launched this year, and I believe we are already seeing benefits from their hard work. We've built up our social media presence significantly in the last year, a major advantage to us given the increased importance of this channel of marketing in today's more closed-off world. See the article on How COVID-19 is Affecting Marketing on page 12 for more information in this area.

We've learned to use new tools, made invaluable by the fact we cannot meet in person. Our Zoom-in meetings, some of which are now available on theicpa.com's "member resources" site, have tackled vital issues while also providing us a way to network with fellow members. I personally have found these sessions extremely helpful in keeping up with what's going on today, specifically within our own membership.

We also are increasingly using a new channel of learning: Cast Polymer Radio. Jonathan Taylor has done a spectacular job at finding speakers and conducting interviews with leaders in our industry. His podcast listener numbers are climbing upwards steadily, which means we not only have a solid, invaluable toolbox of learning for our industry, we're also getting terrific exposure for the industry.

Such actions show how strong and resilient our association is. Instead of sitting back in a year when life was presenting all of us great challenges, we've found new ways to grow, learn and network. I think it's appropriate that this issue features AGCO as

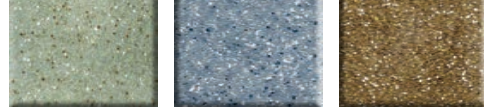
our profile subject. Here is a company that started as a traditional family business in 1979, but has grown steadily and survived the tough times by diversifying their product line and keeping track of what's going on in the world of kitchens and baths.

Finally, I am especially excited and thankful that the year to come will once again see us gather in person. We have all missed our friends and long to reconnect with the ICPA family. I am looking forward to having all of you travel to my neck of the woods next September 13-15 (see details on page 24). We will certainly have much to share about what's happened in the last year, and how we've championed through these difficult times. ■

ReBecca Erdmann

ICPA president,
Co-owner, Sand & Swirl

INSTEAD OF
SITTING BACK IN A
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AGCO: Flourishing in times of challenge

BY GENILEE SWOPE PARENTE

THIS YEAR IS LIKELY TO BE ONE COMPANIES IN THE CAST POLYMER INDUSTRY WILL NOT FORGET FOR A LONG TIME.

Businesses have faced challenges they never could have foreseen, and owners have sought ways to keep operations running smoothly, and employees and customers safe under extreme circumstances. For AGCO, Inc. headquartered in the Atlanta, GA area, this milestone year will also be noted because of another development—in January, U.S. Marble (USM), one of its main competitors, was closed abruptly, shocking the industry. AGCO made the decision to step in and buy the assets and business of the shuttered USM.

“It’s been a wild year, to say the least,” says Matt Pulliam, director of Manufacturing, AGCO (and a member of the ICPA board of directors). “It seems like so long ago now that we heard about the sudden shutdown and the thousand-plus families affected,” he says.

Like most of the industry, AGCO felt the pain of the abrupt departure of a long-time player in the industry, “even though for us (AGCO) it meant unlimited opportunity,” he explains. It also meant having to step in and somehow fulfill the needs of thousands of customers left behind by the sudden closure and more recently, it has meant finding a way to rebuild the USM management team and integrate the employees, facilities and business into its operations.

However, AGCO, Inc. has a long history of success and steady, constant growth, so the company rolled up its sleeves and found a way to make it all work.

From mom and pop to diversified winner

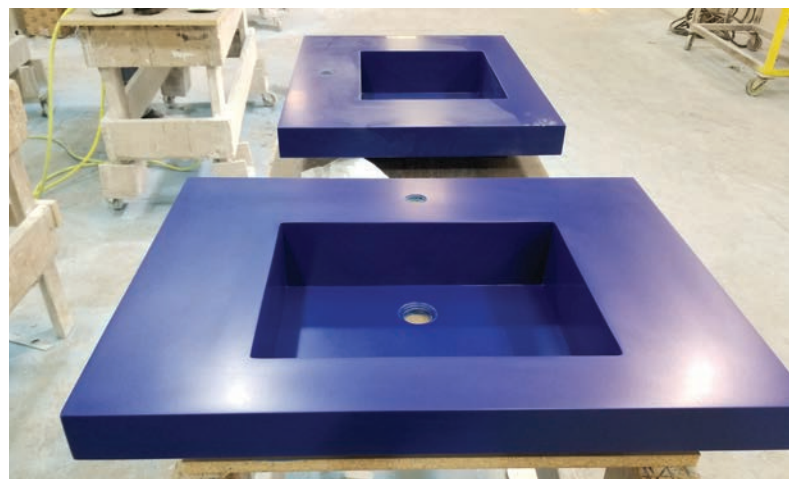
AGCO’s origins are planted firmly in the same ground where much of the traditional cultured marble industry lies. The Pulliam family opened the company’s doors in 1979 as a small family business operating out of a 500-square-foot building.

Their son Larry, who is the second generation to lead the company, recalls the early days of the business.

“AGCO (which stands for A Georgia Company) was founded by my mom and dad, with my older brother Gary, my sister Paula and myself as the employees,” Larry says. “I was still in college and worked on the weekends helping out when I could.”

The company was “pretty basic,” as Larry puts it—producing cultured marble products for multi-unit apartment builders, sourcing materials from major suppliers on a very limited scale, buying resin in 55-gallon drums and calcium carbonate in 50-pound bags, “a pallet at a time,” Larry says.





AGCO's products now stretch across a wide array of materials for the kitchen and bath as evidenced in these photos of cultured marble and solid surface. The company has also taken over the assets and facilities of the former U.S. Marble. That plant remains in Remus, MI (pictured top right), complementing AGCO's other facilities in Georgia and Tennessee.



A casting machine operator pours marble into molds.

Contrast that with where the company is today and a picture forms of a company that has successfully blossomed using a strategy of diversification.

AGCO, which manufactures a variety of cast polymer products including cultured marble, granite, onyx, and solid surfacing materials is also the parent of two other businesses. MarCraft (founded in 1977 and bought by AGCO in 2015) operates a home-center/dealer business, and Craftmark (founded in 1991) fabricates and processes natural stone, quartz and solid surfacing materials. The company employs more than 150 people in its manufacturing and fabrication operations, using 350,000 square feet of facilities in Georgia, Tennessee and Michigan.

This move towards diversification began very early in the company's history.

The first branch out was in 1982 when the business went from apartments into high-end, custom cultured marble work—intricate custom applications that opened the door to a new and lucrative market. In early 1987, the company began its first solid surface sheet production line with the introduction of Diamonite, a private label brand that is offered to other fabricators, builders and homeowners.

By 2000, the company added natural stone into its offering, building a new stone shop in 2002 and adding quartz into the product line-up.

In 2015, the company took a leap forward into a new type of business by purchasing MarCraft, which opened the door to the retail world.

“The MarCraft team had already spent the better part of 40 years expanding its footprint with major retailers. This

was a large part of our decision to acquire the company,” says Matt Pulliam, who is the third generation of Pulliams at the helm.

The result is that “Today the public can walk into any of more than 4,000 showrooms of our retail partners, most notably Home Depot and Lowes, and purchase a MarCraft custom vanity top or shower,” he adds. The products are also available in several substrates including cultured marble, cultured granite, natural stone, quartz and solid surface.

As this timeline shows, getting into new areas of business has been part of the company's backbone, a strategy that has served it well and “been a contributing factor to our ability to make it through the great recession and the current pandemic,” Matt says.

The different value propositions

One tool the Pulliam leaders have used over the years to be able to offer such a diverse product lineup is to fine-tune its business philosophies.

For example, “Our philosophy on developing retail partnerships (the MarCraft line) is to provide a value proposition for our partners. That means a quality product, shipped fast and priced low enough our partners can make a profit,” Matt says.

The value proposition for its private-label sheet goods, on the other hand, is to offer “virtually unlimited customization capabilities and no minimum orders,” he adds.

To be able to meet those types of ambitious goals has required having the best processes in place, the most up-to-date technology and the willingness to change where change is required.



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THINKING OF TOMORROW

When the company bought MarCraft from the Chambers family, they were buying a company that had been through the process of going lean. In 2007, MarCraft conducted a major reorganization, taking apart its lines of operation and putting them back together following 5S organizational methods (sort, set in order, shine, standardize and sustain) to create logical steps for more efficiency in the plant.

“Even though this was done before our acquisition, it was a critical part of the business. At the time of the acquisition, for example, we operated the plants in Douglas, GA (where the original MarCraft company was headquartered) for a few months and learned a lot from the streamlined processes. When we moved those operations to Norcross, we reengineered the plant there, combining best practices from each of our plants,” he explains.

“You can always learn something from how other people do things,” he adds.

The company has taken that same perspective in regards to integrating the old USM plants into its operation as well.

For example, “the ordering software is a key to our success. It allows us to have orders processed in a matter of minutes and electronically submitted to whichever plants may be doing the manufacturing,” Matt says. MarCraft and USM both had “homegrown” systems they had built and improved on over the years.

“We have had the opportunity to combine the best elements of each system to create efficiencies. I think our software will be something that is constantly evolving to fit the needs of the time,” he says

Today's operations

With all that AGCO and its other companies offer, Matt says the most ordered item by volume is still classic cultured marble.

“I would say quartz is our most desired product, but it is hard to beat the price and aesthetics offered with cultured marble,” he says.

Although the company employs more than 150 people in its plants, its administration staff is very small and “we don't have a very large sales force, which is unusual for a company that produces as diverse a line and as much quantity as we do,” Matt says. The company does much of its marketing by word of mouth and building long-term relationships with partners and customers. What sales staff it has markets to the home centers, residential/commercial builders and smaller dealers who require more hands-on selling tools.

Like most of the cultured marble/cast polymer industry, one of today's challenges is finding skilled staff, but Matt says the company is constantly adapting its ways of pur-



The Norcross plant has implemented many lean practices to create efficient ways of operating.

suing new talent. Meanwhile, one of its main strategies for keeping skills within the company is “to provide careers, not just jobs. We have had many work their entire career with us and even have some second-generation employees,” he says.

As witnessed by the decisions to purchase companies such as MarCraft and USM, companies that already had strong management tools in place, AGCO also believes in the process of studying and adopting best practices and new technology. In the early 1980s, AGCO became the first cultured marble facility in the southeast to automate its production facility.

The company has moved forward in leaps and bounds since then. Today, the plants use some of the most technologically advanced equipment available including water jets, automatic cutting machines, CNC milling machines automated-edge profiling equipment and more.

As far as ordering systems, “over the years, we have gone from hand-written setup tickets to instant order entry via electronic data interchange. We have our own internal ERP (enterprise resource planning) system that we are constantly improving to fit our needs,” Matt says.

The company also has the ability to integrate customer points of sale systems so they can communicate directly with the ERP system, thereby allowing orders to flow from any of the more than 4,000 showrooms of dealers “almost instantly to production,” he says.

“It also allows our customer service representative to be able to get an accurate look at where an item is in production/transit. We are currently working on a new user inter-

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The inside of the Remus, MI plant

face for our dealers as well as some other sales tools in the form of a software application,” he adds.

During COVID-19, the company also put into practice new tools for dealing with uncertainty and new requirements that came from the pandemic.

For example, beyond educating employees and keeping them updated, the company adopted new social distancing practices. “We had to reimagine how we used our break-rooms, including new outdoor designated spaces and split breaks. We are screening temperatures on entry to the building for all employees or guests,” Matt explains.

These new practices are likely to become part of the company culture because, “I think many of the sanitization practices will never go away even after the virus is under control,” Matt says.

The wild ride

With all that’s gone on over the past year, Matt still points to the USM merger as the most significant challenge for the year.

At the time the shocking closure occurred, “we were the only other national vendor for many major retailers. By default we inherited the business overnight because retailers had no other choice,” he says.

Just a few weeks into the year, AGCO realized there would be no way to keep up with the thousands of orders that were suddenly unfillable because USM was no longer there.

“We had the machinery available to set up new plants, but



A spraying specialist applies gelcoat to the molds before casting.

the time and personnel were going to be a problem,” he said.

At the same time, as with the rest of the industry, the company was saddened and disgusted with the way employees were treated: those employees learned in an email they no longer had jobs or insurance just before the Christmas holidays.

However, AGCO also knew how well USM had been run under its original owners the Bishop family, prior to their retirement and the sale of their company to a holding company (2017).

“We knew USM had a great team with all they had been able to accomplish over the years, so we began brainstorming on how to secure that team. At first, we looked for space close to the old plant to set up a new plant until by fate we were lined up with the bankruptcy attorneys for the holding company. We acquired the assets and quickly leased the old facilities from the Bishop family, and began to rebuild the team in both Remus, MI and Johnson City, TN,” he says.

Association involvement

Matt Pulliam, who came onto the ICPA board of directors in 2019, is following in the footsteps of his grandfather and father who both have served on the board. The company has been active in several organizations for many years.

“In the early days, the organization was vital in helping manufacturers and suppliers work out chemical formulation to better the industry,” Matt says. Today, involvement in organizations helps push products and companies into new areas and higher levels of quality and creates access to relationships with other manufacturers who will share best practices.

“It is important to be active so that you can always keep your finger on the heartbeat of the industry. When you can see what is successful in other areas of the world or other companies, you have what you need to better your own company,” he adds. ■

GENILEE SWOPE PARENTE is executive editor of **Cast Polymer Connection**. She welcomes ideas on other companies to profile. Reach her at gsparente@verizon.net



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Manufacturing Locations



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Resin % required in matrix*	23 - 24	27 - 28	32 - 33	42 - 43	45 - 46	47 - 48
Loose bulk density (lbs./cu.ft.)	65	58	46	29	29	28
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"

How COVID-19 is Affecting Marketing



BY GENILEE
SWOPE PARENTE

WITH THE MANY ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC BROUGHT TO BUSINESSES, marketing may not be up-permost in anyone's mind. Most cast polymer companies have been focusing on keeping their heads above water, keeping staff happy and healthy and keeping up with project demand—a challenge that now includes finding ways to make people feel comfortable in showrooms or with installers or estimators going into homes and businesses.

However, the reality is that the pandemic has changed the landscape of marketing, and the industry needs to be thinking about strategies that may need to be adjusted.

A white paper by Selligent Marketing published when

the nation was well into the pandemic (“Customer-First Marketing in the Age of COVID-19”), backs this reality up. According to Selligent, the coronavirus pandemic has “forever broken the traditional marketing model” and changed “the fabric of consumer relationships,” making traditional ideas about marketing obsolete. For one thing, social distancing isn’t going anywhere for the foreseeable future, which means that digital communications have taken a giant leap forward in importance.

For some people in the cast polymer business, that reality brings a heavy sigh. Executives and leaders were already being told—before the crisis—that they need to keep up with social media channels, another task in an already overburdened industry.

But according to Selligent and many other marketing consultants, social media is only a part of what's happening. A more important piece of the puzzle is that companies need to be aware that buyers today think differently, have new expectations from companies and shop and buy much more through digital channels. Even businesses that don't relish the idea of trying to come up with content for Facebook or Instagram or getting involved in newer social media channels such as the mobile video site TikTok, need to be aware of what's happening because audiences are evolving.

Here's a summary of what some of the top marketing companies and experts say is happening:

What consumers want

One of the main developments in the world of purchasing today is that people are scared, confused and in need of reassurance, and they will seek out first any channels that offer reassurance and comfort. Trust and authenticity have taken front and center stage for what companies need to project, and the companies that can build up those two aspects of their image are the ones that will attract the most attention.

A Forbes article interviewing officials from the giant marketing firm McKinsey & Company said one of the most critical considerations today is how to handle the human element.

"Marketers need to manage the here and now of the situation by putting the needs and wellbeing of employees and customers first," said Brian Gregg, senior partner at the San Francisco office of McKinsey and Jesko Perrey, senior partner at the Dusseldorf office.

Paige O'Neil, CMA at Sitecore, a web development firm, and other experts quoted in an article that appeared on the

Global Marketing Alliance website says this development is part of a re-emergence of what's known as "helpful marketing," and that this is not a short-term trend.

"At the end of the day, customers are all human beings; the brands that understand this, and adapt customer communications appropriately, will not just make it through this current crisis with better customer relationships, but will establish lasting and long-term connections with those customers," she says in the article.

How cast polymer companies react will depend on their individual circumstances and resources, but the term "helpful" is going to stick around. In a July 6 blog post by consultant Todd Hockenberry on "How to Market a Manufacturing Company," Hockenberry quotes several sources who say that almost three-quarters of sales go to the first company that was helpful to those that are buying. The reason, he says, is contained in the book: Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion. The first principle quoted in that book is reciprocation:

"The implication is you have to go first. Give something: give information, give free samples, give a positive experience to people and they will want to give you something in return," the book says.

Selligent's paper defines the changes in how companies are looking at marketing another way.

The paper says marketing for many businesses is shifting focus from what a company offers or what's profitable for that company to finding more ways to fulfill the needs of individual customers. In today's environment, that means 1) identifying opportunities to fulfill unmet needs, 2) providing entertainment (distraction) or 3) providing specific solutions for solving problems through channels such as education.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "HELPFUL MARKETING?"

The Global Marketing Alliance website article provides four examples of the most common ways companies today are providing helpful marketing. They are:

1

Providing genuinely special offers and promos. (Offers that can show people the company is aware of financial challenges.)

2

Creating new products or pivoting the business model to where there is demand. (In today's germ-aware world, that could mean hands-free for kitchen/bath fixtures and easy to maintain/mold-free for surfaces.)

3

Switching to platforms that most suit the needs of consumers or clients. (Today, that means more digital.)

4

Offering valuable information and thought leadership (How-to videos and educational materials on websites are two examples.)

What can be done

Most cast polymer executives are not going to get on YouTube and start cracking jokes or singing, which rules out the entertainment aspect of what Selligent suggested. However, there are certainly ways to look at fulfilling unmet needs and providing education, as well as shoring up the trust and authenticity of a business through empathy.

For example, bargains and price point awareness may be two ways companies can show consumers and buyers that they know many people are going through hard times. That doesn't mean cutting prices or product quality. It may mean acknowledging in marketing materials and customer communications that times are tough, and the business knows it.

Companies can also show empathy by acknowledging the extent of what's happening. Emails and follow up calls today should include some form of asking customers how they are faring. Customers also need to know what steps a company is taking to protect the public and its own employees.

Meanwhile, one of today's unmet needs is the desire for connectivity. With more people staying at home and going out infrequently, many consumers today want to deal with companies that appear to be about something other than a business out to get their money. Companies and their staff who can find ways to reach into homes to connect with customers and prospects can provide some of the connectivity audiences crave. That's one of the reasons social media, while it may not be popular with busy company executives, needs to be part of the marketing strategy now more than ever. But email communications and telephone conversations are also part of everyday business and both can be used to touch base with current and prospective customers.

Another reality of the at-home aspect is that people today are looking around at their homes and seeing what could be done to improve them. A Bank of America poll conducted this summer found that 70% of Americans have decided to tackle home improvement projects during the pandemic and

How can manufacturers showcase products online?

Adapted from an October 8 blog by Alan Lucy, WebStrategies

In many cases, manufacturing companies don't have complex eCommerce platforms that allow customers to purchase products directly from their website. However, that doesn't mean you shouldn't list all products or services on your website and have a strategy for how they will appear.

After all, the number one reason for having a site is to attract new customers. If those potential new leads that come to a site aren't able to immediately find what they're looking for, the chances of them disappearing and never contacting your company are much higher.

Enhancing the Experience of Your Product Pages

There are several ways you can turn your product pages into well-oiled machines that drive potential customers towards contacting you. They include:

Include large, clear images

According to HubSpot research, when people hear information, they're likely to remember only 10% of that information three days later. However, if a relevant image is paired with that same information, people retain 65% of the information after the three days.

Marketer Jeff Bullas states that articles with images get 94% more views than those without. These numbers are most

likely even higher for product-related pages.

Therefore, one of the most notable best practices for optimizing a product page is to place a high-resolution image of the product above the fold of the page.

Embed videos

You should keep in mind that even when you include images, users still are unable to see your products in place or understand how they work with the design of a kitchen or bath.

Consider including a short video comparing different types of the product, a product demonstration or what different materials are and how they are maintained, or any other type of relevant video. This keeps users engaged and potentially answers questions they may have had to research otherwise.

Use a clear call to action

Your product pages' ultimate goal is to convince website users to contact you and make a purchase. Therefore, the most important aspect of these pages is the call-to-action (CTA).

A CTA can come in many different forms, but the most common that we see from industrial manufacturers are buttons directing users to request a quote or a link to contact the business.

Your priority should be to make your call-to-action as

more projects are planned for 2021.

Companies that offer any product that might be part of that thinking can use that reality when thinking about marketing approaches. Communications with existing customers could remind them the company offers a product for the kitchen or bath. Companies may even consider tying into the reality that more people are working remotely by finding a way to focus on office areas of the home.

One of the most accepted aspects of what COVID-19 has done to the world of buying, however, is that people are spending more time online, on their phones, on their tablets. The statistics were astounding in the first few months of the pandemic. For example, Selligent's paper says that email volume grew nearly 20% from January to March of this year, while Facebook use rose 27%.

eMarketing's website shows how deep the changes are. The site recently said that the pandemic has accelerated e-commerce growth to such a degree that online sales have

already reached a level not expected until 2022—14.4% of all U.S. retail spending will be over the internet this year, a number that will grow to 19.2% by 2024.

PC Magazine, meanwhile, reported that broadband data usage in the U.S. increased 47% in the first quarter of 2020; Facebook increased daily website contact by 27%; TikTok increased monthly downloads of social videos 25%; and Whatsapp increased calls and videos two times over.

For the most part, cast polymer companies don't sell directly from their websites so the significant increase in online buying may not appear to be relevant. But a deeper look at this issue reveals that people are using their time online also to research companies and products, including those for the home. That means any industry that sells either directly or indirectly into markets that involve consumers, including business decision-makers, need to know how their websites and their mobile/online tools look to the general public.

Additionally, cast polymer companies who operate within

prominent as possible. Place it above the fold, use bright colors, and make it clear to your audience the action that they need to take to speak to you regarding the product they are viewing.

Answer questions and provide social proof

If a user arrives on one of your product pages and has questions they cannot find answers to, they are much more likely to leave your website than contact you with those questions.

We recommend you take any commonly asked questions regarding your products and place them right on your product pages.

Additionally, adding social proof is a tried and true approach to building credibility and boosting conversion rates. Reviews or testimonials from recent projects can be extremely effective in website marketing.

You should display these on product pages by pasting them into the copy or using a website plugin that automatically pulls reviews from Google.

Improve the chances your products rank in google

Outside of improving the user experience and increasing conversion rates, you should also strive to have your product pages rank as high as possible in Google search results.

According to Hubspot, 51% of shoppers surveyed say they use Google to research a purchase they plan to make online. That means there are many potential customers out there

looking for products just like yours, and you want to be visible when they conduct their research.

Keep your product descriptions crisp and informative, and include any alternative product names or other terms you may want Google search results to reveal.

Getting started with content marketing

Product pages are only a small piece of the puzzle of a more general need: content marketing.

Content marketing is the creation of content (website pages, blog posts, videos, etc.) with the intent of attracting and engaging with potential new customers on your website.

Content marketing generates three times as many leads as traditional methods but costs 31-51% less per lead.

The great thing about content marketing is that it does not require outside investments if your resources are limited. You are one of your greatest assets when it comes to writing content for your customers because of the level of understanding you have about your products and their value.

However, if you have the funds, there also are many agencies who specialize in technical writing and producing content for manufacturers that would be happy to work with you and create a comprehensive content marketing strategy for your business.

ALAN LUCY is a digital marketing specialist with WebStrategies (www.webstrategiesinc.com), a consulting company that focuses on online and digital marketing for manufacturers. He can be reached at alan.lucy@webstrategiesinc.com



One of the most accepted aspects of what COVID-19 has done to the world of buying ... is that people are spending more time online, on their phones, on their tablets.

smaller regions should be aware of the online presence they have throughout their local area. When someone searches online for a product in a particular location, these search results are dominated by platforms such as Google My Business, Yelp and local business directories. When these profiles are fully developed with an accurate name, address, and phone number along with high-quality photos, reviews, and other relevant information, the chances of a business being visible in these local results are much greater.

One step many companies should be considering right now, according to website developers and marketing strategists, is looking carefully at what impressions their digital presence makes on people. If someone is using a tablet or a smaller device, is the company's goal and mission coming through? Do people find the website useful for narrowing down decisions?

Final thoughts

Because the industry is so diverse, with small and large companies all over the U.S. and ICPA members now coming from several countries, the individual approaches to what's going on will vary by resources, geography and audience.

What they all have in common, however, is that the world of manufacturing and of making and selling kitchen and bath products is changing. Recognizing how that reality will affect marketing will be a key to success in handling the future of the business. ■

GENILEE SWOPE PARENTE is executive editor of **Cast Polymer Connection**. She welcomes ideas on what issues readers would like to see in their magazine. Contact her at gsparente@verizon.net.

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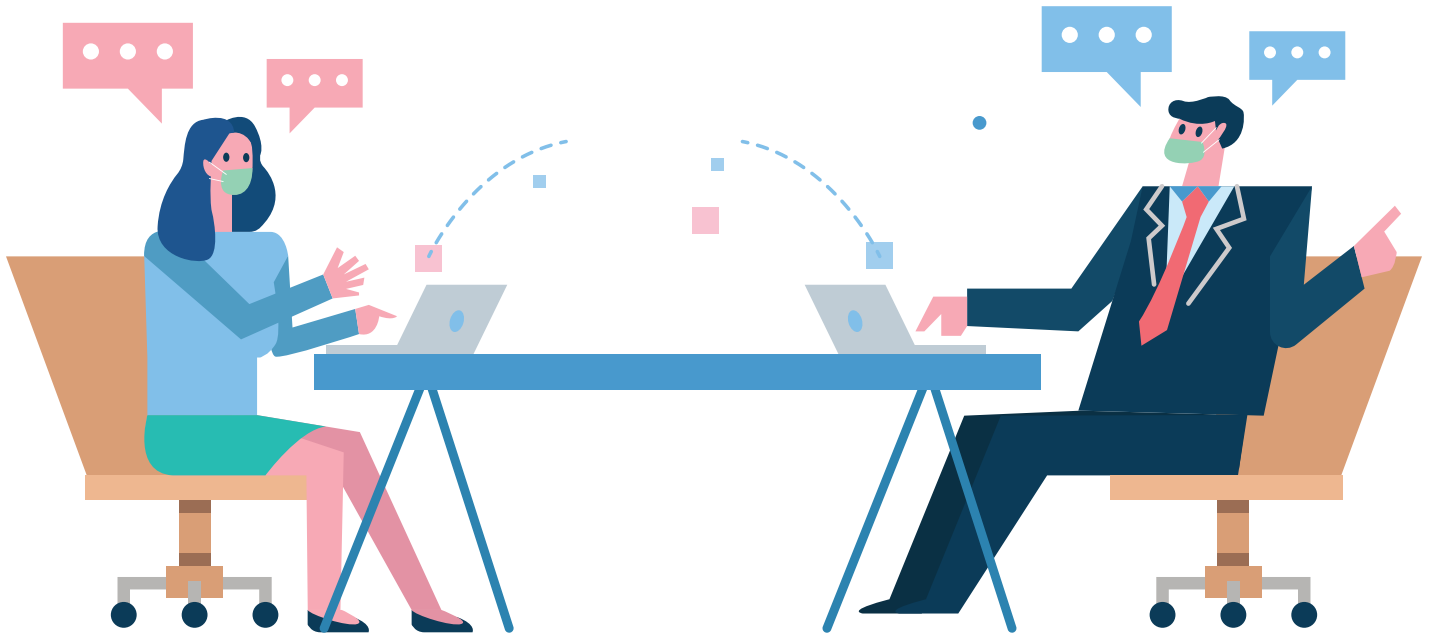
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Finding/keeping skilled talent during turbulent times



**GENILEE SWOPE
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STAFFING ISSUES WERE ALREADY A MUCH-DISCUSSED CHALLENGE

BEFORE COVID-19 HIT. Then, the first quarter of 2020 arrived, bringing with it the pandemic and the economic crash, which have compounded the challenges several times over. A poll by the Associated Press and the NORC Center for Public Affairs Research (part of the University of Chicago) conducted in mid-October shows just how deep the concern goes. The study found that a quarter of U.S. workers are thinking about quitting their jobs—about 7 in 10 workers today say they are stressed by juggling jobs and other responsibilities right now, and one of their top concerns remains contracting the virus.

This is despite the fact the same poll found that 57% of workers feel their employer is doing “about the right amount” to respond to the pandemic while another quarter feel their employers go above and beyond (about 18% reported their employers were “falling short.”)

To complicate matters further, it is the lower-income workers that are most likely to quit despite the fact they need the paycheck: about 39% of workers in households making \$30,000 annually are considering quitting while 23%

of higher-income households are thinking about it.

What that means is plant owners today have to worry not only about replacing people who retire and how to train those on the job so that they can move up within the company, they also need to find ways to hire new people during a crisis—not to mention ways to keep the talent they already have from walking out the door.

Creating employees who are engaged

One of the most accepted concepts in human resources today is that the best way to retain a workforce is to keep staff “engaged” in what they do.

Gallup, which conducts the world’s largest study on employee engagement and its link to company performance, defines engaged as: “the involvement and enthusiasm of employees in their work and workplace.” Employees become engaged when their basic needs are met, they feel they can contribute to a cause, and they feel they have an opportunity to grow.

With so many frightening developments going on in the world right now, people need to be engaged and be part of something more than ever.

In October of this year, Gallup released the latest figures for its ongoing study on these issues. “The Relationship Between Engagement at Work and Organizational Outcomes” accumulates about 450 research studies from 276 organizations in 54 industries, including manufacturing. The studies were based on looking at more than 2.7 million employees around the world.

The latest study report says that during the past 20 years, employee engagement has transitioned from a “nice-to-have metric to an essential strategy for doing business.”

Among the most recent findings was that, when the top quartile of company performers (in terms of how well the company does financially) are compared with the bottom quartile, highly engaged teams result in fewer negative outcomes including:

- 81% less absenteeism
- 43% less turnover in low-turnover organizations and 18% less in high-turnover industries
- 64% fewer safety incidents
- 41% fewer defects in quality

It also found more positive outcomes including:

- 14% higher productivity rates
- 23% higher profits

One of the main ways to engage employees is to create a sense of wellbeing, experts say. But the pandemic has had an extraordinarily negative impact on wellbeing, Gallup reports. One of the indexes it measures looks at how employees feel they are doing— “thriving,” “struggling” or “suffering.” This year’s numbers showed a 10% drop in how people felt during March and April of this year, a drop to a level that matched the Great Recession. Even though many businesses today have created programs within their companies designed to create physical wellbeing, the research company says those programs alone cannot bring the numbers up given today’s situation.

As Gallup’s experts and any human resources consultant will tell you: what’s needed is to create a company-wide culture that gives people both the sense of wellbeing and of being engaged.

Here’s what Gallup and other sources writing about employee engagement and the current situation say might help in today’s situation:

Include employees in the discussion of what can be done for them.

Many employers and managers in the cast polymer and

On the minds of ICPA members

A recent Zoom-in event for ICPA revealed that the skills and hiring issues are very much a concern among ICPA members. Without revealing who said what, a few of the issues brought up during that event included:

- Possible sources for hiring can include temporary agencies. One company explained that people who work for temp agencies have already been pre-screened and using those employees allows an employer to check out how a potential new employee can work within the company’s teams.
- The problem of hiring seems to be compounded in some areas of the country where projects are plentiful and demand for workers is high by an abundance of applicants, but many no-shows or applicants who don’t follow up after initial contact. One company reiterated that the best way to stay in contact with many young people today is texting, including after they apply for a job. Many people today do not even answer phone calls, the person pointed out, but texts are hard to ignore. Employers should not be afraid to be aggressive in using them to follow up and ensure someone intends to show up for a job interview.
- One method to find candidates who show promise is to use screening tests. One employer said her company routinely gives applicants a test that looks for a candidates’ skills in attention to detail. Other tests can look for emotional intelligence in areas such as adaptability, teamwork and empathy; integrity as far as core values, honesty, ethics; and personality such as whether the person might fit within the company’s culture. The Society for Human Resources Management’s vendor list includes many companies who offer these tests (<https://vendordirectory.shrm.org/category/pre-employment-testing-screening>).
- One employer brought up the reality that pay has become even more important today because of competition from industries such as construction, which is currently doing well during the pandemic. Another person pointed out, however, that people today also are increasingly looking for benefits to help them navigate today’s special challenges such as flexibility in the workplace so they can deal with what’s happening outside the job.
- Lisa Ryan, the founder of Grategy, who has spoken to ICPA audiences and written for the **Cast Polymer Connection** magazine, gave several key pieces of advice to callers. She suggested members find ways to create materials or videos that recruit or can be used as follow up to applicants, explaining exactly what the company does and why it’s “a cool place to work.” She also applauded the actions of one of the callers who explained that her company recently fired an employee who was bullying and harassing others. “You’ve shown them, during a time when people are looking to feel protected, that the company does not tolerate bad behavior,” Ryan pointed out.

other manufacturing industries practice an open-door policy. They encourage staff to tell them how they're feeling because they recognize the first step in engagement is letting employees know they are heard, a reality that's even more important in times of crisis.

"Right now, it feels as though everyone is starting at the beginning and scrambling to keep up," writes Kara Cutruzulla in an article on the website "From Day One—a forum on corporate values" (www.fromdayone.co).

Cutruzulla makes the point that leaders themselves also are feeling this way, which makes it harder for them to get those under their supervision engaged in their work. What's needed during such uncertainty are assessments that measure what employees need *right now*.

Gallup's Director of Research Dan Witters, in an article that came out about the same time as the study, provides specific actions leaders can take to affect business outcomes by increasing engagement and wellbeing (www.gallup.com, "insights"). The actions are listed in order of importance, and Number One on the list is asking employees directly to contribute ideas on what the company can do. This is a "great way to galvanize the workforce and make them feel like they are part of the wellbeing movement," Witters says.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, in an article on its website that gives the opinions of five experts on "How to Manage Employees Through Difficult Times" (www.uschamber.com, "human resources"), advises companies set their employees up for success by checking in frequently to ask them what they need to do their jobs better and more efficiently.

Communicate frequently and transparently with those employees.

On top of asking employees what they need, the chamber also advises companies to keep in constant contact with employees during times such as this pandemic.

"Today's employees value open, transparent leadership," the chamber says. After you've shared your plan for guiding your organization through the crisis, give your teams a sense of direction by being honest about the reality of the company's challenges, the article says.

"When you assign a task, tell your team members why you're assigning it to them and how it will help achieve your business results. If an employee asks for something you can't say yes to, such as more paid leave or additional

resources, explain your reasons for saying no. There's really no such thing as overcommunication," the chamber advises.

The Harvard Business Review (HBR) recently reported key recommendations taken from an assessment on how companies are handling the COVID-19 crisis (the assessment was done by a software company that makes a program designed to give real-time employee feedback—www.tinypulse.com). The first point on the list of what leaders should do was: communicate frequently.

"Most leaders need to communicate to staff far more often than they think is necessary," HBR reports.



Create new and bolstered ways that employees can share how they are feeling.

How organizational leaders communicate can make or break employee commitment to their organization, HBR reports. As one respondent to the assessment study put it: "[Our leader's] calls with us and reassurances that the company has our back are inspiring. I even used it as a humble brag on social media to make sure people know we are still hiring and that this is the sort of company you want to work for when the going gets tough."

The next greatest need reported by HBR is to find ways to get employee feedback that are not intimidating. The journal suggested a multi-channel approach that encourages employees to reach out to human resources, talk to senior leaders, discuss issues during one-on-one meetings with managers and have a channel of communication that is anonymous.

"Having a variety of options is important because individual employees may view the safety of a given channel differently based on such factors as their relationship with their managers, whether they view HR as supportive, and their views of the responsiveness of anonymous formal channels," HBR reports.

Link the wellbeing of individuals to the mission or purpose of the organization.

Number two on the list of actions that Gallup's Witter recommends leaders can take is to have employees review the mission of their organizations and pinpoint how their wellbeing can be critical to the mission's success, and conversely, how that mission can help them lead a good life.

"Defining wellbeing in the context of mission and purpose makes it actionable and demonstrates that it's a part of your

organization's culture, not just the latest buzzword," Witter says.

A blog on connecting employees with the company mission by HR specialist company Insperty (www.insperty.com) recently pointed out that: "Most employees want to do the right thing. They want their company to succeed. But even the best employees with the best intentions need to know where to go."

Insperty suggests ensuring the mission itself is both clear and motivating, then narrowing down that mission by defining company vision: the goals and strategy used to pursue the mission.

"Your vision should make it easy to explain business decisions to employees," Insperty says. For example, for a car company, the vision might include why employees make the product a certain way (to keep it safe and be responsible) or why a quick turnaround is needed (to lead the way in the industry).

Once a mission and the company vision are defined, aligning employees becomes easier in the same way a band might relate to the drum major waving his baton to give general directions for marching.

Find ways to allow employees to focus on what they do best in the job.

This last point is stressed over and over by consulting firms that advise businesses on how to engage employees. The reason is simple: people who use their strengths every day are six times more likely to be engaged on the job, according to Gallup's research.

"The best way for people to grow and develop is to identify how they most naturally think, feel and behave—their talents—then build on those talents to create strengths or the ability to consistently provide near-perfect performance," Susan Sorenson writes in Gallup's Business Journal.

Sorenson gives these six steps managers and leaders can take to accomplish this goal:

- Don't assume that employees know their strengths. Find out through assessment tools.
- Once an assessment shows those strengths, look for ways to apply them in a team setting to achieve common goals. Help coworkers learn and understand each other's strengths and how their talents complement those of others on the team.
- Use team meetings to help team members deepen their understanding of an approach based on strengths, and assign team projects based on employees' strengths.
- Help employees align their greatest talents to the expectations and responsibilities of their roles.

- Incorporate strengths into performance conversations and reviews, and help employees set goals based on their strengths.
- Create a community of strength advocates and champions to act as internal experts who help everyone in the company use his or her strengths.

Conclusion

Most cast polymer companies and manufacturers were already thinking about many of the issues included in this article before the crisis erupted. The need to keep the skill levels and knowledge needed to continue producing quality products has been a hot topic for years.

The uncertainties of today's new world just make the issues more time-sensitive. As this article shows, the amount of advice on what to do is broad and diverse. The companies that can fine-tune the information and make it work within the constraints of their own situations and that know the strengths and weaknesses of their staff stand the best chance of conquering the challenges. ■

GENILEE SWOPE PARENTE is executive editor of **Cast Polymer Connection**. She welcomes story ideas from readers. Write her at gsparente@verizon.net

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What makes a business a success?

PETER CHRISTIAN

In my recently released book, “What About the Vermin Problem?” I explain that it’s generally accepted that 15-20% of the workforce today is self-motivated—real go-getters that pursue excellence for both their companies and themselves. Another 60-65% do what they are told, not going above and beyond without some direction while the bottom 15-20% of the workforce are unmotivated people who often get in the way through their negative attitudes and ineptitude.

It may be necessary to remove the bottom level of people because what they do affects the entire team, and that’s a situation that’s not likely to change.

The middle level, however, offers an opportunity for any company with a solid foundation of building blocks. If properly motivated, the middle level may go above and beyond based on motivation and reward. If neither of those are provided, they will not.

I recently appeared on Cast Polymer Radio (www.castpolymer.com, episode 48) to talk about my book and how to create the right kind of business atmosphere that rewards the top level of the force and find ways to encourage the middle level to move closer to the top.

One of the issues that host Jonathan Taylor asked me about is what I found to be the solid building blocks for a company that can accomplish those goals. Here’s what I said:

The building blocks of success

The building blocks that lay the foundation of a successful business are:

Those that can minimize bureaucracy. Companies that can keep bureaucracy to a minimum have a way to cut through what’s keeping people from doing their jobs.

Size is not the issue in how well companies perform; rather success comes from an attitude and willingness to admit to issues and shortcomings, and a readiness to do



what it takes to correct the problems and move ahead. If as much effort and energy were put into making things better as goes into repeatedly correcting problems or situations, companies and organizations could be wildly successful.

In many cases, company executives are the worst offenders.

Unfortunately, obstacles such as inept managers who are functioning—or not functioning—stand in the way of progress. Their inability to lead, make important decisions or persuade those higher up the organizational chart to do either of those things, impedes progress. This frustrates those they are supposed to direct and causes them to

be apathetic about the daily complications that arise.

Executives who turn a blind eye to this reality confirm the meaning of the phrase: “A fish rots from the head down.” Knowing that your organization is underperforming, and not realizing it is being mismanaged, is a leadership sin.

Those who control office politics: I quite often caution companies that they need to keep the political games to a minimum. Reward people based on accomplishment, not on who has the widest smile or brownest nose.

It is sad when managers are rewarded just because they are liked when all they do is occupy a space or when they screw up regularly. Fortunately, smart, dedicated employees and managers can work behind the scenes to make things right. Without their dedication, successful companies would not survive.

I hope that the managers, directors and senior-level directors who are reading this are above such actions and value their personnel for their loyalty, accomplishments and sense of duty to do the right thing—not the expedient or politically correct thing.

Those with clear objectives and follow-up: Objectives must be meaningful and help the organization to meet its overall goals—whether that is increased revenue, increased profit-

ability, entrance to new markets, providing customer value or something else. Companies need to assure their objectives complement each other and are not in conflict. When everyone within the business contributes to being a successful company, people generally are rewarded with a good, viable and enjoyable place to work.

Objectives also need to take into account that normal duties must not be forgotten or set aside to pursue a single person's or department's goals. They must be jointly developed between different managers and those that report to those managers. People who are simply handed objectives and have had no input in developing those objectives have no buy-in. That doesn't mean that each person sets his or her own objectives. We are all human and are looking for an edge to stack the deck in our favor. Setting good objectives that help the organization meet its annual and strategic goals is important and takes work.

Companies with values: Establish how you want your company and employees to behave. Then, walk the talk.

Values play a key role in how organizations operate and their long-term success, especially in today's workplace, where people change jobs regularly. This is especially true when they do not feel they are being treated fairly or properly, or when they are being fed a line by their leaders who espouse company values, but do not "walk the talk." Dedicated employees want honesty from their leaders and want to feel they care about something.

To show the seriousness of values, they must be emphasized, discussed and practiced by everyone, especially those who establish what they are. If not, cynicism creeps in, and that indispensable middle group will realize it doesn't matter what they do because whether what they do is exceptional or subpar, it will be accepted.

Companies who define responsibility: Everyone in the organization needs to know what is expected of them and that they will be accountable for their performance.

Successful companies have a clear delineation of employees' roles and responsibilities in the organization. Most have detailed job descriptions that are reviewed and updated annually. While there are many things that each person does on a daily, weekly or monthly basis, I suggest limiting the list to the top 10 tasks most important to the organization. I often suggest that Number 10 be simply, "And all other things as asked or directed by the manager." I suggest this because there are times we are asked to do something that is not nor-

PEOPLE WHO ARE
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mally required. One factor that always makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck is when someone is asked to do something and the reply is, "That is not my job." Really? You are asked to contribute something to the betterment of the organization or to help out a fellow employee and your answer is, "That is not my job?"

The point is everyone has responsibilities to make the organization successful.

Those with top-notch communication: Essential information needs to be shared all the time and leaders should ensure that information is acknowledged, understood and acted upon.

Effective communication is not just an exchange of information, but also a thorough understanding of what has been shared so that action can result because of the exchange. Too many times information is shared, but an understanding of the message is either ignored or not understood. When that happens, meaningful communication has not taken place.

Even with the proliferation of emails and text messaging today, lots of information that is shared is still ignored. It is a regular habit of mine to follow up within 24 hours to verify that people received my communication, have read it, and are taking some action. It is a shame that this extra effort is necessary, but as I remind people: "Something may be important to you, but not necessarily to someone else." If you want to ensure that you get what you need, you cannot assume that what you send will be read, absorbed or acted upon.

Conclusion

These foundational basics come from studying and working with more than 300 companies over 40 years. When I talk about the vermin problem, I am talking about those who deny responsibility or are unwilling to change.

Fortunately, there are many talented executives and managers who "get it." They realize they have made mistakes or become complacent and that we all have our moments, including dealing with the stresses of everyday work life. Sometimes we just need a reminder to pick up the pace and not forget what we did when things were not chaotic and difficult. ■

PETER CHRISTIAN was a founding partner and president of Enterprise System Partners Inc. His follow up book to "What About the Vermin Problem," will be released this winter. He can be reached at phchristian53@gmail.com.

Mark Your Calendar for 2021 POLYCON

ICPA is excited to announce that association members and friends will meet up again in person September 13-15 in Salt Lake City Utah for the sixth POLYCON at the Salt Lake City Marriott University Park, Salt Lake City, UT. Because of its location at the base of the Wasatch Mountains, the seven-story, atrium-style hotel has been labeled as having “million dollar views.” It is also located just minutes away from all that Salt Lake City has to offer.

Sand & Swirl, Ogden, UT, and Whitewater Tyvarian in Lindon, UT, will be the host companies for PolyTech training sessions and plant visits, and the agenda and venue are now being finalized.

Updates on programming and other details will be posted on the POLYCON website (POLYCONevent.com) and registration begins March 1, 2021.

The originally scheduled sixth event, set for Spring 2020 then rescheduled for Fall 2020, was eventually canceled when the COVID-19 situation continued to heat up.

“This difficult year is ending on a positive note with plans for an excellent event next year. We are all anxious to get together again in person to learn about how to make the best products, to network with our fellow professionals and to reconnect with friends,” said ICPA President ReBecca Erdmann, co-owner of Sand & Swirl. “Our two Utah companies are pleased that we’ll be able to host in an area of the country that should be a draw for west coast members as well as those throughout the U.S.”

Members have access to Zoom-in discussions and more

The roundtable discussions that have been taking place this fall are now available as videos on the Member Resources Hub of the ICPA website under the “educational support and videos” section.

The talks have been on a wide range of topics including:

- Gel coat repairs and best practices
- Mold repair tips and tricks
- Employee staff issues affecting the industry

The portal where the roundtable videos appear also includes some training videos provided by Polynt-Reichhold that were created for 2019 plant demos at POLYCON. Those include:

- Gruber mold repair
- Cultured marble vessel bowl manufacturing



- Spray granite with gelcoat
- Artificial marble casting and coloring (basic procedure)
- Cultured marble top gel coat repair

SAFE PLANT aiming for full participation

Although COVID-19 has complicated operations in some companies, the association is hoping it won't get in the way of the goal of getting full participation from members in the SAFE PLANT program, which was created in partnership with OSHA's Safe + Sound program.

The ICPA-tailored program, which is free to members, offers several tools members can use to create their programs. The first step is to identify the areas a company wants to improve upon or new areas to develop for its plant safety program. ICPA offers a self-assessment tool on its website that can help a company with this step.

After a company goes through that process and commits to the program, the business receives a certificate and packet of information that can help move it along towards the goals. Many resources are available both from OSHA and from ICPA's safe plant campaign website, which offers suggestions for participation and lists the benefits that companies who have committed are already experiencing such as: improvements in preventing workplace injuries or illnesses, compliance with laws and regulation, reduced costs, more engaged workers and increased productivity.

Go to www.theicpa.com and click on the Safe Plant tab.



ICPA new website launch in early 2021

ICPA's Marketing Committee is currently concentrating efforts on a new website, exclusive of the association's site, to launch in early January of 2021: www.LiveGroutFree.com.

The site is designed to provide a resource for promoting the benefits of cast polymer, cultured marble and solid surface kitchen and bath products and will include marketing materials and language, photographs and other materials to showcase the industry.

ICPA welcomes these new members

Joining the ranks of membership recently are:

- Manufacturer **Lone Star Surfaces**, Texline, TX
- Supplier **Omya, Inc.**, Cincinnati, OH (www.omya.com).
- Manufacturer **Midac Equipment**, Kingston, Jamaica

Please help provide more details for membership listing

The ICPA website's membership directory is an important source of information on the industry and who belongs to the association. How individual companies are reflected is vital to the association's image. That's why Executive Director Jennifer Towner has asked members to make that directory a more valuable tool by sending her a high-resolution version of company logos and short overviews of companies' businesses. The overview can include information such as products a company makes or sells; a general description of client bases, and an emphasis on business specialties. Towner gives this example:

The ABC manufacturing company has been in business for more than 25 years headquartered in Louisville, KY, with locations in Jefferson City, KY and Jeffersonville, IN. ABC manufactures cast polymer vanity tops and shower panels. Specializing in decorative tile patterns in beautiful white or trending colors and textures, the company sells to residential home builders and remodelers. Our cast polymer products are strong,

durable and mildew resistant. Come visit our showroom and see our website for more information. We also have a cabinetry division to help complete that bathroom project.

The directory also needs company websites and addresses for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Houzz, or whatever social and communication channels businesses use.

Send the information to Jennifer Towner at jennifer@theicpa.com.

ACMA Monitoring Styrene Situation

The American Composites Manufacturing Association's Regulatory Steering Committee is currently meeting monthly to study and discuss the impacts of several different styrene studies that have been published throughout the years.

The issue has become a top priority for the committee because of the likelihood the new presidential Administration may present stronger regulatory legislation.

Mock permissible exposure limit studies are being conducted and "argued" by meeting participants to prepare for potential changes in the styrene industry so that the com-

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mittee can recommend a course of action beneficial to all manufacturers and suppliers in the industry.

Cast Polymer Radio continues to provide excellence

The number of people who tune in to hear the latest podcasts by Jonathan Taylor continues to climb upward with each airing as people discover the valuable information Taylor provides on the cast polymer industry.



The podcast, which is sponsored by ICPA, Sanco and PowerBlanket, recently aired these episodes:

- Pending Update on Styrene Exposure Limits featuring John Schweitzer, senior advisor to the president of the American Composites Manufacturers Association
- Leadership Lessons & Becoming Stronger through Adversity with author Joseph Micchelli
- Creating a Brand Name That Builds Intrigue with branding consultant Mike Garr, founder of NameStormers
- How to Avoid Damaging Business Practices with author Peter Christian (see page 22)
- Quality Control Tips presented by Andrew Pokelwaldt, director of Certifications, American Composites Manufacturers Association
- Leading and Inspiring Creative Breakthroughs with author and innovation expert Bryan Mattimore

Taylor also interviews executives from Bradley Corporation as well as Mike Grogan of Source 1.

OTHER NEWS OF NOTE

KBIS goes virtual

The National Kitchen & Bath Association and the National Association of Home Builders announced that this year's Design & Construction Week will be an all-virtual event. The onsite event, which was canceled, was slated for February 9-11. Its replacement will take place the week beginning February 8 and will include an expanded program.

As this issue of Cast Polymer Connection went to press, the associations were putting together the Kitchen and Bath Industry Show and the International Builders Show events. Programs will be posted and information is available on their websites (www.kbis.com and www.buildersshow.com)

Moderate gains for remodeling in 2021

Homeowner spending on improvements and repairs to their homes is expected to experience moderate gains though

much of 2021, according to the Leading Indicator of Remodeling Activity, Joint Center for Housing Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. The outlook said annual growth will be about 4.1% by the first quarter of 2021 with gains softening to 1.7% by the third quarter.

"The remodeling market is bouncing back from the initial shocks caused by the pandemic, as homeowners continue to spend significant time in their homes and are adapting them for work, school and leisure," said Chris Herbert, managing director of the center.

Annual expenditures for renovation and repair of the owner-occupied housing stock are expected to rise from their current level of \$332 billion to \$337 billion by the latter half of 2021, the center noted. While a softening of growth is projected in 2021, the recent strengthening of home prices and sales activity, including second-home purchases, "could provide further boosts to remodeling and repair next year," Harvard forecasters added.

In October, Houzz released its figures on how the remodeling market was doing, saying that business has recovered to pre-pandemic levels for design and construction firms in the industry.

At the start of the fourth quarter of 2020, 85% of firms in the architectural and design services sector and 87% of firms in the construction sector have a neutral to very good outlook for the rest of the year, compared with 73% and 82%, respectively, at the start of the third quarter, Houzz added.

Meanwhile, project wait times are rising nationally. Construction businesses focusing on remodeling reported to Houzz that wait times for midsize projects from new clients are averaging 7.2 weeks, which is up a full week from the previous quarter and up two full weeks from the previous year.

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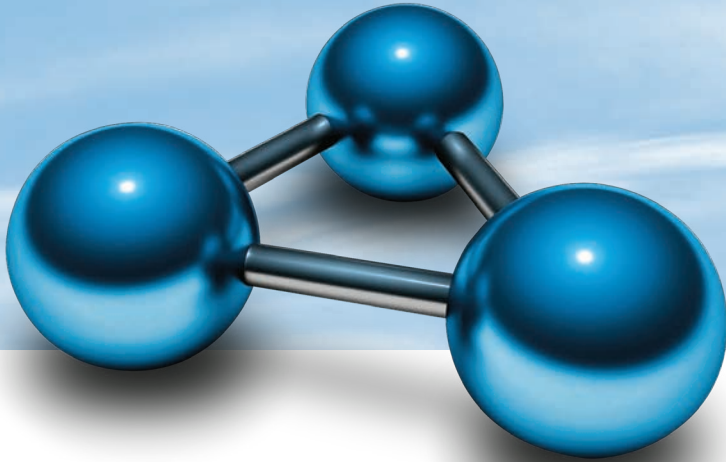
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