

CAST POLYMER

Spring 2021

CONNECTION

SFI: Winning during trying times

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- Good times for remodeling
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Cover: Scott Pirstill (left) and Julie Baginski (right) bought SFI, Inc. in 2015 from the Tripp family, then used a successful business model and beefed up marketing efforts to build a booming business. The Sparta, WI company credits its staff with helping the company through difficult times. Story on page 4. Cover and inside pictures courtesy of SFI.

PRODUCED BY
GSP Publishing
Genilee Swope Parente,
Executive Editor
gsparente@verizon.net

PUBLISHED BY



4949 Old Brownsboro Rd.
Ste. 232
Louisville, KY 40222
Phone: 470-219-8139
www.TheICPA.com

For advertising rates,
please contact
Jennifer Towner at
Jennifer@theicpa.com or
470-219-8139

PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Planning for post-COVID



ALTHOUGH WE KNOW THE PANDEMIC HAS NOT YET PASSED, we entered 2021 with much hope. Now, we are beginning to read about “the light at the end of the tunnel”—what’s to come post-COVID. Discussions about how to survive have been replaced by how to handle some of the changes that have occurred. This issue of **Cast Polymer Connection** tackles issues from

the perspective of what people are doing in their homes, their bathrooms and their kitchens. Editor Genilee Swope Parente and a few members virtually attended Construction Week, and what they found out is that people are more willing than ever to put money into their homes and buildings and that there have been a few bright spots in the gloom and doom that 2020 wrought.

For example, an article based on economists’ forecasts given during Construction Week reveals that building has led the way in this nation’s recovery and that the remodeling industry, in particular, has done very well and is expected to continue booming in the next few years. When you read this issue’s profile of a company (SFI, Inc.), you’ll also see that, like the company profiled in the last issue (AGCO), and like many of our member companies, the business now coming into cast polymer companies has our plants and our people working at capacity.

Granted, some changes have occurred that will be permanent. For example, two articles in this issue—on design tastes and homebuyer preferences—reveal that people’s priorities have changed: buyers/builders want buildings that offer more comfort and warmth; they want cleaner materials that will last a long time; they want kitchens with flexibility for accomplishing multiple tasks; they want grander outdoor living spaces. Perhaps most surprising of all is that, after four years of homes growing smaller, they want more instead of less.

Our mission going forward will be to take this new information and the experience we have garnered over the last difficult year and

find innovative ways to take advantage.

I fully expect this year’s POLYCON, which is September 13-15 in my neck of the woods, (see page 26) will be a key in helping us accomplish that. It will certainly be wonderful to see each other and meet face to face instead of behind a computer monitor or a tablet. I’m sure we’ll also have many stories to share about what we’ve been through and where we’re going.

We also have much to look forward to as an association that was growing in leaps and bounds before the pandemic hit and is growing once again. We have new tools we’re developing to help us with that growth. For example, the Live Grout Free website (www.LiveGroutFree.com) went live in January, offering us an exciting new channel for spreading the word about the many advantages of the product we make. We also have a new membership coordinator, Beth Kubinec, whose goal is to be sure members understand how to get the most from their membership and help us expand our ranks. We have a few new tools such as virtual tours of member facilities, as well as a backlog on our website of information we’ve gathered such as Zoom-in virtual events and regulatory updates. We have an expanding library of great episodes offered by Cast Polymer Radio.

All of these are reasons to be pleased that the “light at the end of the tunnel” is shining brightly.

Registration for POLYCON begins April 1. I hope to get a chance to meet all of you next fall. ■

ReBecca Erdmann
ICPA President
Co-owner, Sand & Swirl





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SFI: Keys to success are employees and a good business model

BY GENILEE SWOPE PARENTE

BECAUSE TWO MAJOR EVENTS WITHIN A DECADE AND A HALF have affected the cast polymer industry in a major way (the housing crash and COVID-19), people have begun to compare the two periods. Some ICPA members are saying that lessons learned during that first crisis helped them face the current one.

Such is the case with SFI, Inc., a company headquartered in Sparta, WI that has built a successful business out of two major bath projects: vanity tops/sinks and windowsills. The company sells its products through the distribution market. One of the lessons SFI says that carried forth from the mid-2000s to last year was that when times are scary, dedicated employees and a strong business model can help get the company through the tough times. That held true through 2020.

Julie Baginski, co-owner of SFI, Inc., says employees who have been on the job a long time or who leave, then return have always been a cornerstone of the company. She has been with SFI 19 years and says there are currently seven people who have been employed more than a decade and another eight that have been there more than four years.

Over the years, seven current employees also left the company hoping for greener pastures, then returned to SFI.

“It’s rewarding to know that employees want to be here, even when there are other options that present themselves,” she says.





Co-owners of SFI are Julie Baginski (left) and Scott Pirnstill (right).

The two crises and SFI

In 2004, SFI made the decision to move out of an old building into one the company built from the ground up. The company was in the process of making the transition when the bottom fell out of the market, which means SFI faced a major move and a declining market all at once.

“I look back now and think holy cow. We really were in the thick of it; we had many sleepless nights,” says Baginski, who joined the staff a few years before the move and recession. “However, we learned the business didn’t have to come to a grinding halt if operated the right way. Back during the crash, that ‘way’ included shutting down temporarily to let orders accumulate,” she explains. During the pandemic, operating the right way included new procedures such as social distancing and extra cleaning and sanitation—the company didn’t have to cease operations.

Even more important than procedures, however, SFI says that both during the recession and the pandemic, the company saw that if you treat employees well, they’ll stay with you through the troubles.

“We took a leap of faith back during the recession that people would stay with us and would want to come back to their jobs,” she explains. That belief became reality, so when the current crisis hit, SFI knew that one of the first steps it needed to take was to assure employees that work would continue. In the end, only a few projects were put on hold and no shutdown occurred.

As a result, 2020 for SFI was “a very productive year,” Baginski says.

From pickle factory to modern building

SFI began life in 1999 as The Sink Factory when the former owner Steve Tripp and another entrepreneur Gerry Henley put their expertise and heads together and started making bathroom sinks.

Henley knew the process and Tripp had a passion for hands-on product-making and a “dogged determination towards process efficiency,” Baginski says.

They located the operation in downtown Sparta in a building lovingly called “the old pickle factory” by local residents who know its history (it was once owned by Heinz). The building, which was more than 100 years old, had large, tall ceilings in rooms, limited warehouse space and one working dock.

“It was hot in the summer and cold in the winter with cracks and seams in the walls that allowed air to flow right in. Heating the facility was expensive and the environment wasn’t ideal for making cast polymer products,” Baginski says.

Baginski and the plant manager at the time were responsible for coordinating the move. Baginski had been hired in 2002 in administration, courted away from the accounting firm that did bookwork for The Sink Factory. She and the plant manager shopped around for a rental location but eventually made the decision to build.

“We started from scratch, designing what we needed, changing plans as we learned more, and eventually, creating a space that works for the efficient flow of our processes. For example, we added enough rollers and carts to greatly reduce carrying and handling of raw materials and finished product and had room to install a second spray booth area and a batch master, which greatly increased our daily capacity,” she says.

Baginski joined the company as the office manager but was also learning the business from the ground up—filling in at the plant where needed while keeping accounting and



How SFI finds vital resources: new employees

One of the major issues cast polymer companies were struggling with even before COVID-19 complicated matters was how to find staff with the right skills and attitude.

SFI relies on three sources:

- An employment agency
- Employee referrals
- A program through the local high school

As far as the employment agency, co-owner Julie Baginski says the company has been working with the same agency since 2014. “They courted us prior to that year, but I was somewhat stand-offish.” However, over time and through persistence “something clicked and we’ve used that agency as an option for temporary to permanent hires.”

One of the reasons it clicked is that the employment company is a good partner that was willing to learn the industry. The agency doesn’t specialize in manufacturing yet it knows how to provide suggestions both for the office and the plant.

“Our contacts at the agency have toured our plant, asked questions and observed first-hand the work we do. That gives them a good idea of what each

position requires, and over the years, our contacts understand the ancillary qualifications we’re looking for: good attitude, willingness to work, good attendance, the desire to learn and willingness to take direction,” she says.

Employee referrals are a natural source that mostly works—if an employee is happy working for SFI, they tell their friends, which can be a great source for new employees. However, Baginski cautions there are issues to consider.

“Having a friend work at the same place is different than hanging out with them on the weekend,” she explains. “Once two people are employed at the same place, it can go either way: well or not well.”

Work brings out a level of commitment, responsibility and accountability and when people work together, they see both the shortcomings and strengths of their fellow coworkers. “Sometimes friends find out that working together is different than what they thought it would be,” she explains.

The high school program started a decade and a half ago when the Transitions coordinator at a local school reached out to Baginski. Transitions is a program

designed to help students who may not be book learners, who may need a setting beyond a classroom, who may have social challenges or a troubled background, but who are willing to learn through hands-on methods.

The SFI Transitions program offers those students a way to earn a paycheck while learning and remaining in school. Baginski interviews the students recommended by the school, then treats those that pass the interview as a new hire using the same paperwork and training as all new hires, and then taking the student out to the plant to start working. The student hires are given entry-level jobs with duties added as they learn. They typically work half a day and attend school the rest of the day.

“The participants get an opportunity to learn outside the classroom, school credit towards graduation, a paycheck and an opportunity to start something that can turn into a full-time position,” Baginski says.

“We (SFI) get an avenue for finding employees, but we also get to help out our community and school. It’s satisfying to know we can influence a student’s trajectory in life,” she says.

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office functions running smoothly. She and co-owner Scott Pirstill bought the company from the Tripps in 2015.

"I've always liked working with numbers; I like working for a smaller company and I like a variety of work and responsibilities," she explained. "So this has become a great business for me."

By the time Pirstill came on board, the company was ready to begin a major marketing effort. Pirstill's background is in sales and marketing with about 18 years in the medical devices/pharmaceutical fields. The fact he ended up in sinks was coincidental: "I knew the former owner (Tripp) through youth soccer, and we had formed a good relationship. It was by luck that I was looking to become self-employed at the time he was thinking of selling."

The business grew quickly and the staff doubled (from about 14 when Baginski was hired to 28 today). Baginski gives some of the credit for that growth to another staff member: Kelly Isensee, executive assistant, who came on board in 2006 the day after Baginski's son was born to become responsible for all aspects of customer service. Isensee also became Julie's right-hand woman.

"As Kelly gets ready to reduce her hours leading to retire-



Kelly Isensee has been Julie's right-hand woman for many years.

ment, it has become exceedingly obvious that SFI's growth over these years would not have been accomplished as smoothly or successfully if not for Kelly, who has helped us implement procedures and checks and balances that reduce any mistakes and guesswork and helped fulfill customer needs," Baginski says.

The company's success

Today, SFI's 28 people work out of the 25,000-square-foot facility a few miles from downtown Sparta. The company sells its products throughout the Midwest under six brand names that come in many colors and finishes. About 80-85% of the products are used for commercial business projects such as apartments, universities, assisted living and more with the rest in the residential market.

About 20% of its business is making windowsills, which are often purchased along with a sink project.

"Our main customers today are distributors," Pirstill explains. "We don't sell directly to retail stores, builders or individual designers; we have a distribution chain that really works for our business model," he says.

The company markets its products largely through a team of outside sales professionals.



Management at SFI believes good pay, flexibility in schedules and a supportive atmosphere creates a work environment that makes staff stay with the company.



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On the production line at SFI, Inc.

“Our team uses our website, social media and recently Zoom meetings to sell the products and inform the public about its benefits and how it should be maintained,” Pirstill explains, and sales often come through word-of-mouth referrals.

Such a model relies heavily on a reputation for quality, which Pirstill says is instilled through a rigid quality check system within the plant and through efficient ordering/fulfillment processes.

Baginski gives credit for the company’s success to the reputation for quality control as well.

“Quality can be subjective; it’s a people-driven process. But people can make mistakes. Our reputation doesn’t come from always being perfect. It comes from correcting what we must and setting realistic expectations with our customers, then meeting those expectations,” she says.

Baginski also credits three major developments in spurring growth since she came on board: a boom in construction in their area of the world; the reality that other manufacturers have retired or gone out of business, which has increased SFI’s customer base; and most recently, a growing customer base watered and seeded by Pirstill’s entry into the SFI picture.

“I think SFI has been successful because we found a business model that works,” Pirstill says. “Within that framework, Julie has built a very efficient production team, which has allowed me and our sales staff to focus on customers and building relationships.”

Baginski adds that, “There are no special formulas or

specific products that SFI makes or sells that are responsible for our success—bathroom sinks are a commodity available from many manufacturers. However, our customer service is second to none. We try to make the ordering, pricing, and shipping processes understandable and our customers comfortable asking questions and working with us.”

“I remember a conversation with Steve Tripp when he was talking to me about working here almost 19 years ago,” she adds. “Steve said his business was about doing things right for both our employees and our customers. When I’m at a crossroads in making a decision, that’s my guidance: to do the right thing,” she concludes.

That includes paying employees well, a 4-day workweek and paid time off as well as flexibility, which helped back in the days when work became scarce (mid-2000s) and helped again last year. But Baginski says she doesn’t believe that’s the only reason people stay or come back to SFI.

“I want employees that want to work. I also understand people have different abilities and limits, but if an employee is not working to their ability, I’m not afraid to have an uncomfortable conversation. On the flip side, I give sincere recognition and praise where it is due. Leading by example, working hard, being truthful with employees and raising the bar for them and our company gives our employees reasons to stay,” she says. ■

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



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THINKING OF TOMORROW

Kitchen and bath design trends



PHOTOGRAPHY: GABRIEL HALL

Large islands of at least 24 square feet will be a staple of post-pandemic kitchens.

BY GENILEE
SWOPE PARENTE

Like just about every aspect of our lives these days, kitchen and bath design has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. All of the stories at the end of 2020 and beginning of 2021 dealing with design trends mention how people's lifestyles have changed and the effects those changes have had on our homes.

But while most people think in terms of choices in colors, finishes, surface selections and other aspects of design, the pandemic has changed the kitchen and bath industry in general ways as well. For example, the National Kitchen and Bath Association's (NKBA) Outlook for 2021 pronounces the Do-It-Yourself mentality of the last few years for remodeling is giving way to another trend: a move towards higher end projects. NKBA gives credit to near-record-low mortgage rates, significant home price appreciation and "cautionary saving" during the pandemic for creating resources people are now willing to spend to upgrade their homes. They also mention the reality that homeowners this last year didn't feel comfortable having professionals in their homes, which

created softer spending and more DIY during the pandemic. However, as the pandemic diminishes, NKBA predicts people will be ready to tackle major projects, including funding improvements for the room in the home where so many people spent additional time last year, the kitchen, as well as projects they may have put off such as bathrooms.

Specifically, NKBA's remodeling survey found:

- High-end (forecasted to grow by 19.8%) and mid-range projects (which should grow 18.5%) are expected to lead the kitchen/bath market rebound. Low-end projects, by comparison, are being forecast to post more moderate growth at close to 10% growth. Each of the three market sectors should achieve their highest revenue levels in at least five years.
- New construction is forecast to grow by more than 22% for the year: 52% of that will be toward the bathroom, and 48% will be for the kitchen. (This compares to a growth overall of about 10% in kitchen and bath remodeling).
- Overall kitchen and bath revenues will increase by 16.6% in 2021 over 2020 levels.

All of this bodes well for companies that offer remodeling and new construction products for those two rooms of the home.

There are also a number of other design trends that hold promise for the industry, as **Cast Polymer Connection** found in its annual fishing expedition for articles and predictions by associations, designers, consultants and home and office trend followers. Here's what the magazine found:

Cleanliness is a little closer to godliness

The nation's fear of germs has magnified to the point of affecting buying preferences. Many reports mention that peo-



PHOTOGRAPHY: GABRIEL HALL

The tub/shower separation seems to be a standard these days.

ple are looking at choices that affect health and safety over personal style, and prioritizing choices for materials that are antimicrobial and will stand up to the tougher chemicals we're now using to sanitize everything.

One Houzz article that came out late last year reported that during the Paris-based Maison et Objet, a major workshop by trend forecasters, sanitation was identified as a core consumer need with an increased interest in antiviral finishes as well as contactless options and hygiene technology (such as antibacterial UV lights).

The NKBA Design Trends 2021 report found that motion-control, hands-free faucets and touch-tap faucets will surpass traditional lever kitchen faucets in popularity (60% motion control, 49% touch/tap compared to 41% lever).

A survey conducted by NKBA of designers earlier in 2020 also found that easy-to-clean surfaces will be an influential trend following the pandemic. For example, in a report on that survey, website Northjersey.com quoted a designer singing the praises of quartz because it's non-porous and cleans like glass.

Houzz noted in its prediction of interior design trends for 2021 that, based on searches for "white kitchen," it expects to see more people that desire clean-looking surfaces as well.

Offering more warm and fuzzy

People have always wanted homes that felt cozy, but that trend has boomed in light of the need for reassurance during these scary times and the reality of more time spent at home than ever.

Designers differ on what creates that increased level of comfort, but a few of the trends include:

- Increased use of warmer and lighter materials such as more natural wood in the kitchen or bath and mixtures of neutral tones with that wood.
- More spa-like bathroom atmosphere including allocating more space for huge showers and stand-alone tubs and incorporating live plants into bath designs. Houzz noted in its most recent U.S. Houzz trends study on bathrooms that people also are increasingly seeking products such as bathtub holders for tea or wine, steam showers and aromatherapy.
- Lighting that warms it all up. The same Houzz study found that 62% of people who were installing mirrors were putting in two or more of them to brighten the room and that most now have some back lighting. In the kitchen, Houzz noted that homeowners are showing increasing interest in swing-arm and sconce fixtures over work areas, as well as under-cabinet lighting.

Different zones

The traditional three-zone work triangle in the kitchen (refrigerator, sink areas, range) is giving way to expanded work zones with dedicated areas for tasks such as baking and prepping and stations to house children doing homework or to dispense snacks or drinks.

Houzz noted this trend in a report on the 10 home design predictions it expects to grow in 2021, calling it an increase in "multi-zone" kitchens. Houzz also mentioned that people are starting to rethink the open-plan concept because they discovered such huge areas don't work well when the kids are doing homework, one parent is cooking and another is having a video meeting with family, friends or business. The company says openness isn't going away but people are looking at options such as partitions or sliding doors to give flexibility and privacy.

People are also looking for ways to accommodate those various tasks going on in one place. For example, the 2021 NKBA trends reports found that large islands of at least 24 square feet will be a staple of post-pandemic kitchens. That's because they are now used not only for food prep and storage, but also to accommodate family tasks such as work and study and as seating areas.

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Soothing Colors for 2021

The different parties that announce color trends each year released a variety of shades predicted to be popular in the new year with one commonality: they all indicated that what they'd chosen was a result of the need for calmness.






One of the best-known color predictors, Pantone, went with two different colors this year instead of their usual one. Calling the selections "a marriage of color conveying a message of strength and hopefulness," the company chose a bright yellow it labeled "illuminating" and a neutral shade of gray it said was "rock solid." Pantone said the two of them together was this year's color, a combination that inspires "regeneration, pressing us forward toward new ways of thinking and concepts."



Remodeling company Fixr, in its second annual report on color in the home, said that interior designers feel this year's choices are very much influenced by what's happened in 2020: 81% of its survey respondents said quarantining has strongly affected homeowners' color choices. Fifty-four percent of the 68 interior design experts that the company queries on color also said that earthy and warmer neutral tones are replacing gray as the most popular shade.

Fixr named Aegean Teal (by Benjamin Moore—named by 54% of designers) and Urbane Bronze (by Sherwin Williams—named by 43%) as its "Colors of the Year" (the colors it expects homeowners will use the most.) The company also said blue will be the preferred option for personal space and soothing vibes and people are beginning to lean toward colors influenced by nature and plants in their homes (greens, beiges, browns, warm tones).

Some of what other paint companies chose include:

- **Sherwin-Williams'** Urbane Bronze is a hue that the company says reflects the reality that homes have become the center of our existence, the "ultimate retreat for reflection and renewal." The company chose a hue whose simplicity and "nature-inspired energy cultivate a sense of calm from the ground up." The chosen color also reflects nature and can be paired with other neutrals to create the feeling of minimalism. 
- **Benjamin Moore's** Aegean Teal is a blue/green hue the company says invites people to "reflect and reset" that goes along with colors that express a "welcoming, lived-in quality." 
- **Behr** released a collection of 21 "comfortable and inspiring colors" designed to "elevate your comfort zone." The palette reflects a number of neutral browns, grays and beiges as well as a range of blues and greens and colors that reflect the move toward nature. 
- **PPG** chosen a palette that begins with a midtone oatmeal-colored hue "that draws on earthy influences and nostalgia" and is an "antidote to the era of cool grays." It mixed that color with shades of ginger with persimmon undertones, "the equivalent of a big, comforting hug for your home" and an aqua cerulean blue that provide "an unexpected pairing of freshness." 
- **Valspar** (a Sherwin Williams company) selected 12 "livable shades" that its color experts say reflect "global lifestyle trends that have shifted significantly from last year," including increased need to lessen stress. 

In the bath, the separate tub and shower is still most popular and larger showers are coming into the picture. Houzz also noted that freestanding, flat-bottom tubs will be more popular than clawfoot models or more decorative bases.

Durability and bigger spaces

As people choose to spend more time in their homes, they are looking at materials that will last longer, investing in high-quality materials that are durable. Quartz dominated all material in the NKBA 2021 bathroom trends survey, picked as a choice by 75% of designers.

They are also looking at materials easier to clean such as quartz, oversized rectangular tiles that have fewer grout lines and engineered materials for walls and other areas such as slab quartz and porcelain showers. "Engineered materials aren't just for countertops and backsplashes," according to a Houzz article on trends ready to "take off" in 2021. Large-scale backsplashes featuring solid slabs or longer subway tiles are also gaining in popularity, according to NKBA's 2021 kitchen and bath design trends report.

Reaching outside for living spaces

The other trend cited by almost everyone as a development that resulted from more time at home is that people are dedicating more resources to the outdoors.

One Houzz study said that 1 in 8 homeowners now feel their homes don't have adequate space for exercising or dedicated work areas. A Houzz article on trends said that one alternative many people are looking at is creating a "backyard cottage" (an accessory dwelling unit that is a standalone structure.)

Also more and more popular are pass-through windows or counter space, which extend the kitchen into the outside though a window-like opening. ■

GENILEE SPOPE PARENTE is executive editor of **Cast Polymer Connection**. She welcomes ideas on companies to profile. Write to gsparente@verizon.net.



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Housing and remodeling set to have a few good years



BECAUSE SO MUCH UNCERTAINTY EXISTS in the country right now, many people are looking closely at what economists and trade groups are saying will happen in housing and construction in 2021.

During Construction Week 2021, for example, speakers at various sessions and press conferences referred often to the economy and what effect the pandemic has had on that economy as well as how developments will affect the outlooks for building, housing and remodeling.

As David Berson, senior vice president and chief economist, Nationwide Mutual Insurance Company, Columbus, OH, pointed out at a Housing and Economic Outlook session, the recession created by COVID saw the biggest single quarter drop in GDP for the nation in history, which was followed by the greatest gain the next quarter.

Those kinds of figures affected every aspect of construction in the U.S.

The housing market is credited with serving as a bright spot overall in the nation, many say, and the industry is poised to continue that upward trajectory with strong growth in 2021, according to several of the economists and experts.

At the same session where Berson spoke, National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) Chief Economist Robert Dietz pointed out that 2020 was “the best year home building has had since the beginning of the great recession,” with single family starts growing 11% for the year, despite a huge dip in the first quarter. Dietz said this rate of growth will continue for 2021, but at a slower pace of about 5% for housing starts.

He said the market will be helped along by mortgage rates

that are close to the lowest in U.S. history and demographics that are favorable because many people are coming into the first-time homebuyer category.

As far as demand, the country saw strong price gains brought on by limited inventories of new single-family homes this year, Dietz said. However, supply-side pressures will bring prices up and mean longer build times for 2021. Those pressures are coming from resurgent lumber prices, a shortage of lots, inconsistent access to building materials and a regional skilled labor deficiency, he said. Of those challenges, lumber is the largest short-term challenge; the limited availability of that material has added about \$16,000 onto the price of a new home, he said.

The housing market is also being deeply affected right now by a dearth of existing homes for sale. Berson said that, at the time of Construction Week, the existing homes inventory stood at a record-low 1.9-month supply (normal supply is about six months).

The multi-family situation

Multi-family construction, which started out the year at historic highs, fell dramatically last spring, which resulted in about a 3% loss for all of 2020. Those losses continue into 2021, which will see an 11% drop, but the market will start to pick up moving into 2022. Dietz predicted a 5% gain from 2021 to 2022.

The weakness that now exists in multi-family housing markets has been compounded by several factors including a desire on some people's part to move away from higher

population areas, a new tenant preference for single family homes to rent instead of apartments and condos, and the same regulatory and supply-side challenges the entire construction industry faces right now.

Frank Nothaft, senior vice president and chief economist or CoreLogic, Vienna, VA, pointed out at a Construction Week economic outlook press conference that, while vacancy rates on single family home rentals have declined (3.5%), vacancies in multi-family units have gone up in equal amounts (3%).

“Homebuyers are now challenged in making the transition to homeownership, but many of them don’t want to rent in downtown areas,” he said. Many of them are now seeking single-family rental located further out.

Meanwhile, after four years of upward climbing, rent growth has flattened. “Due in part to pandemic-related issues, rent growth in December 2020 was up just 0.4 percent from a year ago,” said Danushka Nanayakkara-Skillington, NAHB’s assistant vice president of Forecasting and Analysis, at a Construction Week press conference on multi-family developments.

“Though the multifamily sector is performing much better than nonresidential construction, developers are facing stiff headwinds in 2021,” Dietz added. “Shortages and delays in obtaining building materials, rising lumber and OSB [plywood] prices, labor shortages and a more ominous regulatory climate will aggravate affordability woes and delay delivery times.”

Dietz agreed that multi-family is also affected by the desire

to move further out. NAHB analysis of Census data reveals that 34% of total multifamily construction occurred in lower density, lower cost markets in 2020. “These areas have out-paced higher density markets over the past four quarters, and we anticipate this trend will continue this year,” said Dietz.

The picture for remodeling

Another bright spot in the construction industry is the remodeling/renovation industry.

At a Construction Week press conference on remodeling, economists and remodeling experts said that after a bleak few months last spring, the industry has fully rebounded and projects are coming in at a pace contractors are finding difficult to match.

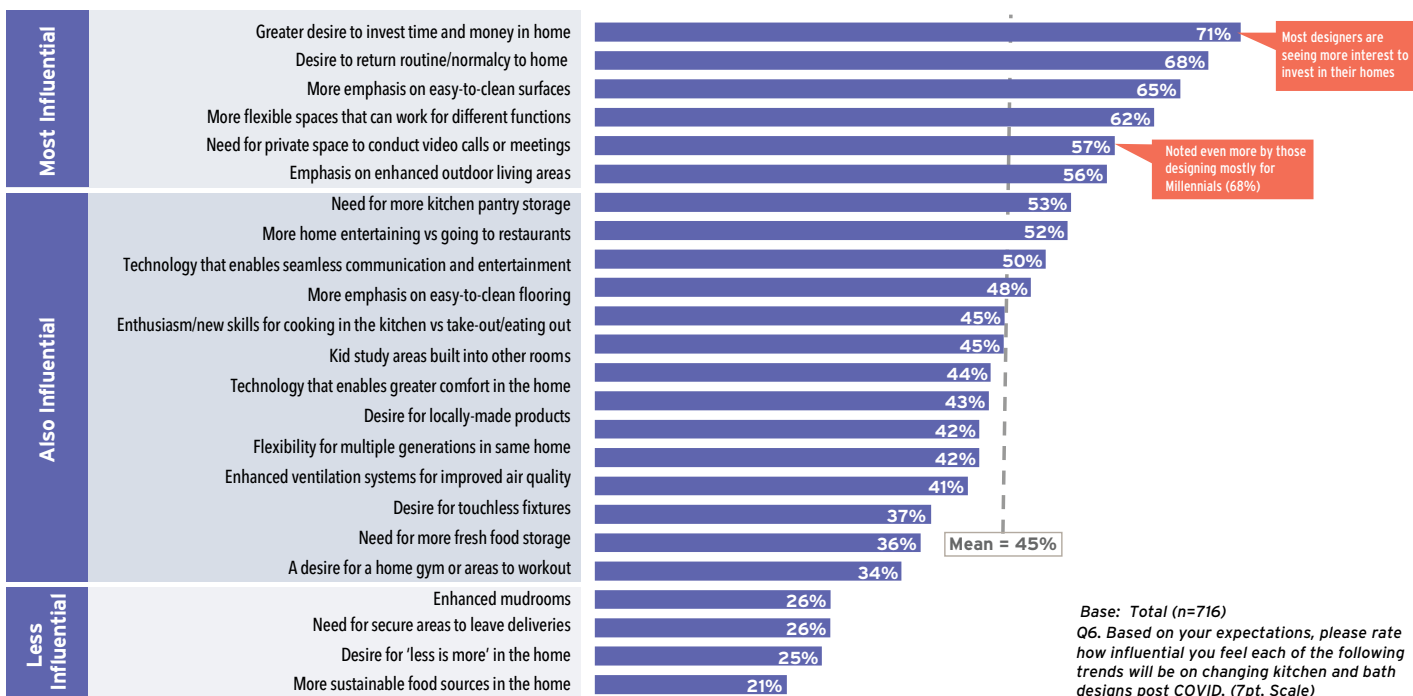
In 2020, first quarter figures show activity slowing to a crawl, according to Paul Emrath, NAHB’s assistant vice president for Surveys and Housing Policy Research.

“This is no real surprise. Practically everything was bad. Demand stopped and homeowners were unwilling to remodel because they didn’t want to interact with people coming into their homes,” he said.

A remodeler from Arlington, TX, Tim Lansfort said that, for the year, “We went from thinking the bottom had fallen out, to having one of our biggest jumps forward.” Like the economy itself, the situation changed rapidly starting in the second quarter and currently, he can barely keep up with the projects flowing their way.

“There is steady consumer demand as Americans are at

Homeowners are willing to invest in their home because of COVID-19, especially for easy-to-clean surfaces, flexible workspaces, enhanced outdoor living areas and better storage solutions



Source: NKBA Design Trends 2021

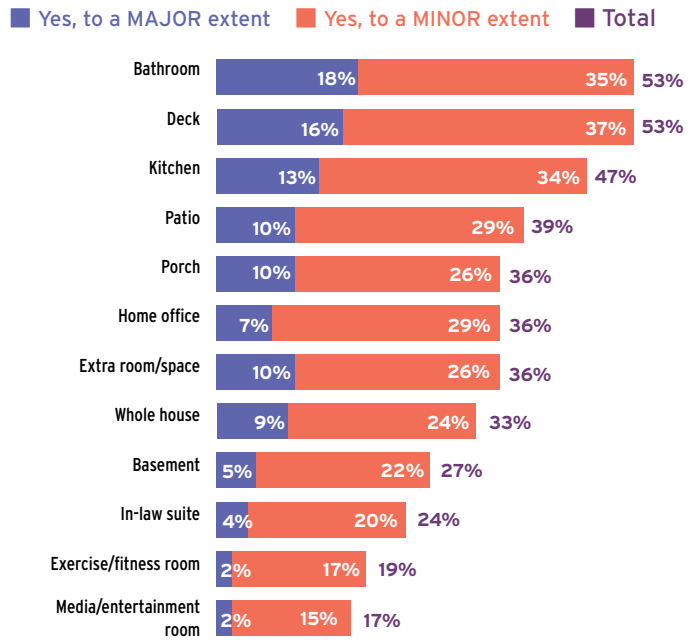
home much more. This gives them more time and the desire to invest in their home,” he said.

Spending on residential improvements will continue to grow at a healthy pace over the next two years. Emrath projected a 6% growth for 2020 over 2019 followed by a 4% growth in 21 and 2% in 2022.

Why people remodel is also changing. Although NAHB’s most recent study (Survey for the NAHB Remodeling Market Index, 4th quarter 2020) showed that the top two reasons for remodeling remained a desire for better amenities and a need to replace old components, the next two reasons on the list are directly related to what happened in the last year, Emrath pointed out. Homeowners want to remodel to create more space and they want to avoid moving or buying another home.

Frank Nothaft pointed out that one reason remodeling is doing so well is that people have the money right now. The average equity gain per homeowners rose \$5,300 per home from September 2019 to September 2020 and that figure is continuing to climb. Nothaft’s forecast is that remodeling will rise 3.7% in 2021 to \$352 billion. ■

Have you noticed an increase in demand for any of the following types of remodeling projects due to the COVID-19 pandemic?



Source: Survey for the NAHB Remodeling Market Index, 2nd Quarter 2020

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What today's buyers want in a home



ONE OF THE MOST ANTICIPATED PRESS CONFERENCES and sessions at the International Builders Show (IBS) covers homebuyer preferences. This year's event, which was part of Construction Week February 9-12, was especially relevant because the pandemic has affected how people feel about their homes. The National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), which tracks what's happening, reports that the crises has had a few overarching effects on buying trends.

Two of the most significant are that "COVID-19 has led a segment of home buyers to desire larger homes and to move out to the suburbs," said Rose Quint, NAHB assistant vice president of survey research.

But other factors affected include what they want from their common areas, what features they favor and how important their outdoor house features are such as patios, decks, porches and outbuildings.

This year's findings

The IBS homebuyer preference session is based on several major NAHB studies including "What Home Buyers Really Want." The 2021 edition of that report included specific research on the pandemic along with the usual questions about what's important to buyers. The IBS session is also based on additional NAHB surveys that go out on a regular basis to the nation's building community.

About a quarter of those questioned for the main study said that the current crisis has changed what they wanted in homes, while 67% said it had no effect and 8% were undecided. Not surprisingly, the figures were influenced by whether households had teleworkers or virtual students at home—43% of those with at least a teleworker and a virtual student in the house said their preferences had changed while only 9% with neither of those types of people said preferences had changed.

A significant finding discussed at the homebuyer preference session and press conference is that the four-year trend of houses getting smaller flattened in 2020 at 2,486 square feet average (compared to 2019's 2,495 square feet. Homes peaked in size in 2015 at 2,689 square feet).

Going forward, "We expect an increase in size for 2021," Quint predicted.

As part of the move towards bigger sizes, the number of bedrooms in the home also has climbed—46% want at least four rooms (compared to 43% last year). Also climbing after



ADAM KANE MACCHIA PHOTOGRAPHY



Outdoor living picked up even more priority because of COVID-19.

declining steadily since 2015 are the percentage wanting at least three bathrooms (now at 33% compared to 32% last year.)

Although several sources have indicated that the open floor plan in the kitchen/living area may have lost ground during COVID (see, “Kitchen and Bath Design Trends,” page 12), Don Ruthroff, architect, principal and leader of Dahlin neighborhood residential sector and a speaker during the IBS session, says that’s not really true.



Homebuyers are seeing creative new ways to break up main living areas.

SUMNER THORNTON DESIGN, INC.

“The open floor plan is not dead, but space is being reallocated; some of that open space is being made flexible,” he says. That means space in a detached building outside or finding a way to shut off portions of large open areas through tools like barn doors.

This is especially true for those who need more office space. “We want to be able to close off an area so we can have those Zoom calls,” he explained.

Two other major developments that seemed to have changed because of COVID are an increased desire to live somewhere less populated and a preference for new homes over existing homes.

NAHB queried homebuyers about how they felt pre- and post-COVID. Before the pandemic, 26% of people wanted to live in an outlying suburb; the number grew to 30% after the crisis, gaining ground over the choices of close-in suburbs, rural areas and city areas. Quint indicated that this move is heavily driven by minority groups with only a 1% increase in preferences for Caucasians.

The move toward buying new as opposed to existing homes is at the highest level since the year 2007, when 63% of people wanted new. Existing homes had been gaining ground since 2007, but in 2020, the percentage of people who wanted new climbed back up to 60%.

Quint said this development is driven by three factors: the current lack of inventory for existing homes, a new concern among buyers about touring someone else’s home and the move towards the less-crowded suburbs, where there are more new homes.

Showers are getting larger and seeking ways to let in more light.



Other developments brought out in the IBS homebuyer session included:

Ruthroff said during the session that an area of the home that has become increasingly important because of COVID are entryways to the home.

“The era of the vestibule has resurged—areas where guests can be greeted, remove their shoes and coats before entering the main area,” he said.

Also important are areas where just the family enters such as through the garage or, in smaller homes, through the backyard, he added.

Although offices in the home have taken on more significance because so many people began working remotely, “that doesn’t necessarily mean book-lined offices. It’s small, hard-functioning spaces that have great light for Zoom meetings and plenty of storage,” Ruthroff said. In fact, storage has become key throughout the house with people giving more emphasis to pantries and laundry rooms, he said.

The features most desired going into 2021 in a home in order of preference include: A walk-in closet in the primary bedroom and a laundry room (both rated 4.9 out of 5), low-e windows (4.8), a great room and efficient lighting (both at 4.7) and a central island in the kitchen, nine-foot-high ceil-

ings and a programmable thermostat (all at 4.6). Just as important to builders and people who sell to builders, however, are features homeowners said would drive them away from a purchase. Leading that list was dual toilets in the primary bath, cork flooring, an in-law suite and location on a golf course.

In the kitchen, the most desired features were double sinks and a walk-in pantry (both desired by 81%), table space for eating (78%), a central island (77%) and a drinking water filtration station (76%).

Laundry rooms are by far the most desired specialty room (87% compared to 70% for dining room and 64% for great rooms, the next two most desired).

Overall, the move towards more rooms at the same time that sizes have plateaued mean homeowners are becoming more creative in how they use the spaces within their homes and placing more emphasis on outdoor spaces such as porches and patios, Ruthroff said.

“The space works harder rather than larger,” he explained. “Open spaces are better defined,” the connections that run between outside and inside are more seamless and all the spaces are more flexible, he said. ■

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Looking beyond the buzz



BY GENILEE SWOPE PARENTE

Ideas on how to be a good leader fill the bookshelves today. To be a truly good leader, however, requires gathering the ideas and then finding a way to make them work personally, according to J. Bradley Simms, Magleby Construction, Sandy, UT, who spoke at Construction Week.

“Leadership is a unique thing, and we should all approach it differently,” he said. “In a forest of a hundred thousand trees, there are no two leaves alike. Leadership is about being your own leaf.”

Simms, who owns several building-related companies as well as a consulting company addressing the skills challenge (Teamworx), gave what he said was his 30,000-foot view of the issues: general ideas he’s gathered as he’s studied what influences people into becoming the leaders they need to be. He started with a few general ways he’s seen leaders cope with daily tasks, then went on to what he called game changers. Here’s what he said works:

Taking time to organize

“Don’t become a fireman always putting out fires,” Simms said. Setting aside time just to organize the day/week/month

allows more tasks to get accomplished in the end. He recalled an experience from when he was president of a regional production company and the staff first got cell phones.

“All of our guys got the phones and our schedule went to hell in a handbasket,” he joked. Any scheduling that got done was done on the fly. The team had to learn to set aside the instant ways to pose and answer questions long enough to organize the schedule.

Entrusting first and entrusting fast as opposed to just delegating

Good managers are those that let their team members know what is expected of them, then finds ways to give them sufficient time to accomplish those tasks.

“Delegation is too often abdication,” he said. Managers put something on someone else’s plate to get it off of theirs, then fail to follow up.

“Entrustment goes far beyond that. I will trust you with this responsibility. I understand what’s on your plate and know how busy you are—I understand your capacity and your ability to stretch that capacity,” he said. “Entrustment is setting the goal with clean objectives, then allowing the flexibility to get across the finish line—not abandonment,” he said.

Doing hard things first

Most people will tackle the easy tasks first as a way to feel like they've accomplished something.

"I'm a list person," Simms said. The temptation is to accomplish what's easiest first to be able to check items off the list. However, by tackling the hard tasks first, "You often find that the hard things aren't as bad as you thought. A good leader can look at what the hard things are and do those first, then when they are tired and the day is long, get those easy things done," he said.

Learning to follow up

Follow up with team members on what they've been asked to do. "Our team members learn what things are important based on what we follow up on. You should create a process where you are not micromanaging, but you follow up," he added.

Understanding the problem before making any decisions

Too often managers look for solutions before they fully understand what caused the problem in the first place. Sometimes when people are challenged directly about the specifics of what's going on, they realize they are looking at the wrong problems in the first place. Managers need to be able to understand the underlying issues causing a situation.

Controlling the inflow

Today's managers and leaders get text, emails, calls, visitors, interruptions, trade partners dropping into the office. "This inflow can be amazingly time consuming," Simms said. A good leader finds ways to control the inflow so that it can be tackled by priority. For example, he files his email by to-do dates: this must be taken care of tomorrow, this can wait until next week or next month, etc.

Learning trench warfare

This lesson is one of the game changers for leaders, Simms said. "Too many of us sit and receive reports. But those reports come into us filtered with other people's biases."

The better approach is go into the field where everything's happening—to learn to fight alongside employees in the trenches. "The key is to have personal, first-hand experience. Often when you get out there, you gain greater perception of what's really going on," he said.

Be an asking rather than telling leader

Another gamechanger for leaders is to be able to stop telling people what to do and start guiding them instead, which is especially true for newer generations of employees. "Younger

generations do not like to be told but they like to answer questions," he said. Good managers guide them with questions. This holds true in educating them as well.

"Humans are not trained, pets are trained. Humans love to discover," he said. "Create discovery steps. This puts the responsibility on them to choose what's best for them."

Taking your show on the road

Nothing makes a person more uncomfortable than calling them into the manager's office to discuss what's going on, Simms said. On the other hand, managers that are in the trenches hear it or see it firsthand. Meanwhile, team members are more comfortable tackling tasks or solving problems from within their own spaces.

Avoid creating dusting situations

"Leaders often come up with all these great ideas that stir up a lot of dust. Then nothing happens. Learn how to avoid such situations," Simms said.

He gives the example of a situation where one of his companies spent months looking into a new phone system, holding meetings, talking to vendors. Once a purchase was finally made, the company discovered it wasn't the right choice after all. An early decision without all the dust may have avoided a lot of wasted time, he said.

Wasted time too often also applies to meetings, he pointed out. To cut down on this waste, he suggested a clear-cut agenda prepared beforehand and meetings designed to let those who don't need to be in the room the whole time, leave when they can. He also suggested acting like a hearing aid, absorbing the sound coming in, then allowing it to filter before its amplified and gets to the inner ear.

"How often do we go into a meeting and immediately blurt out what we want or need. That shuts down creativity right away. Bring up the topic, allow discussion, then act like that hearing aid." In other words, be engaged with what's going on, then make your own comments.

"You'll find you often make different comments than you would have at the beginning of the meeting," he said.

Be that leaf in the forest

While some of what he said was common sense, Simms pointed out that everyone makes decisions all the time about what works for his or her management style.

"You should work every day to make your own leadership style a little better," he said. ■

GENILEE SWOPE PARENTE is executive editor of **Cast Polymer Connection**. Send her your story ideas at gsparente@verizon.net.

ICPA to provide virtual tours of members

ICPA is offering manufacturer and supplier members the opportunity to participate in a new feature: facility tours and educational product demos. The association is planning on virtual tours, which will also be recorded, of members' plants and their showrooms. Supplier members will also have the opportunity to showcase any new product lines in a short video clip that will be sent out to ICPA manufacturer members. These virtual tours and product videos will be published over the spring and summer months—a few new ones each month. More detailed information will be available on the ICPA website and through e-newsletters.

Companies interested in hosting plant visits or showroom tours or producing new product videos should contact Jennifer Towner, Executive Director, at jennifer@theicpa.com.

Matt Pulliam inducted into Thirty Under 30

Matt Pulliam, director of Manufacturing at AGCO, Inc., was named as one of the Thirty Under 30 Class of 2021, a National Kitchen & Bath Association (NKBA) program that rec-

ognizes rising leaders in the industry.

AGCO, Pulliam and his family were featured in the Winter 2020 issue of **Cast Polymer Connection**.

The NKBA honor, which is now in its ninth year of existence, is presented to people under 30 who are making a difference in the industry. Nominees are evaluated on their career or educational achievements, commitment to excellence in the kitchen and bath industry and leadership within their own organizations.

Pulliam and his father Larry are at the helm of AGCO. Matt is also a member of the ICPA board of directors.

"I am humbled and honored to join an elite group of young professionals, designers, and entrepreneurs from around the world," Pulliam said. "I look forward to what the next generation of design and manufacturing professionals can bring because I believe we all benefit from new influence and ideas," he added.

The class of 2021 was officially recognized during the Kitchen & Bath Show (KBIS).



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ICPA welcomes new Membership Coordinator

Beth Kubinec joined ICPA recently as the new membership coordinator. She will be responsible for ensuring that current members get the most from their membership and that new members are educated on how to use the association to their advantage. She also will assist the Membership Committee and Executive Director Jennifer Towner in creating ways to reach out to potential new members.

Kubinec has 23 years of experience in sales and marketing and has participated in membership committees through her local chamber of commerce. She's a graduate of Cornell University and currently resides with her husband John in Louisville, KY.

Rounding out and expanding membership listings

Membership Coordinator Beth Kubinec has created a link on the website to a form that can help ICPA members expand their membership listing. The association has been trying to expand those listings both for the sake of members and so that the public, when they access the site, have a better idea

who individual members are.

Kubinec is asking all members to use the simple form to send a logo of their company as well as a description of what the company does, what markets they have, the types of products they make, business specialties and other relevant information.

To get to the form go to www.theicpa.com.

New members for ICPA

Gem Tech Research Company, Marshall, NC.

Update on industry's new website

ICPA recently launched a new website to showcase cast polymer products: www.LiveGrout-Free.com.

Live
GROUT FREE

The new website is separate from the ICPA website —part of a marketing campaign to enlighten the public to the unique qualities of cast polymer products.

The site features photos and information on products available in the kitchen (e.g. customizable material cut to fit, backsplashes joined seamlessly with the countertop) and bath (e.g. shower bases and walls, tub surround panels, cus-

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tomizable vanities) that offer the benefits of no grout lines. It also answers questions on cleaning, durability, heat resistance and more and provides design inspiration through photos of projects as well as a link to the ICPA interactive member map for those ready to shop for the product.



HK Research's Richard Higgins retires

After more than 60 years in the business, Richard Higgins, HK Research, retired in January. Higgins began his career shortly after high school when he went to work as a laboratory technician for one of the earliest polyester resin and gel coat producers (American Petrochemical Corporation). At the same time, he was taking chemistry classes at the University of Minnesota to cement his knowledge of chemicals and processes.

American Petrochemical was bought by Whittaker Corporation in the late 1960s. At that time, Higgins met Jim Wallenfelsz, who became his friend and lab desk mate. For the next 20 years, Higgins rose through the ranks from lab tech to group leader to the technical service manager for the polymer group. By the late 1970s, he was the new division operations manager where he became responsible for helping failing facilities turn a profit or close down. Whittaker departed the business in 1978, and Higgins went out on his own. He started HK Research in 1980, taking on the staff of the former Whittaker, then forging ahead as the leader for HK Research. Since then, he's overseen the development of many new resins and products that have been responsible for innovations in the industry.

On top of running the company, Higgins has been a leader in the industry, helping to lobby government agencies and bodies and serving as a voice for the fiberglass and cast polymer industries. He has also been a leader and active member within ICPA for most of the association's existence, serving on the board of directors and many committees.

In late 2019 Higgins met up again with his friend Jim Wallenfelsz, who had his own company and the two joined forces under one parent company (IP Corporation).

"The lasting impact Richard Higgins has had on HK Research and the composites industry is immeasurable. While the sun may have set on Richard's career, there is no end in sight to the innovation and standards Richard created in our industry that will continue forward for many years to come," said David Higgins, HK Research's President.

Registration begins April 1 for POLYCON

Those who want the early bird rate for POLYCON can register beginning April 1.

POLYCON is Sept. 13-15 in Salt Lake City, UT. Educational sessions and networking events will be held at the Marriott Salt Lake City University Park. PolyTECH Training Sessions will be hosted by the two ICPA members located in that area of the country: Sand & Swirl in Ogden and Whitewater/Tyvarian in Lindon.



For more information on the event and registration, go to www.polyconevent.com. Companies interested in exhibiting at POLYCON should contact Jennifer Towner at Jennifer@TheICPA.com or visit the exhibitor information portion of the polyconevent.com website.

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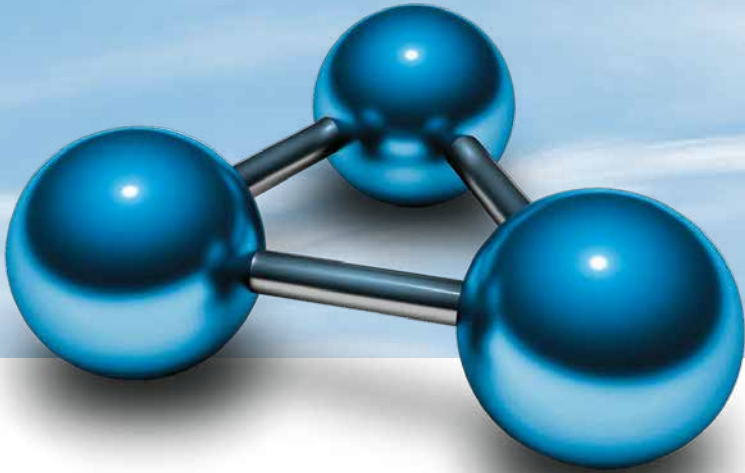
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