

CAST POLYMER

Summer 2021

CONNECTION



Marketing: Telling your company's story

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- Investing in people

POLYCON
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Cover: One way manufacturing companies can better reach today's audiences is to learn to tell their stories through digital and other marketing means. Digital storytelling can be a powerful tool when used the right way. Tips for doing so begin on page 4. Image: Getty photos.

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PRESIDENT'S LETTER

The perfect storm



WHEN WE FINALLY GATHER TOGETHER IN SEPTEMBER FOR POLYCON 2021, we will have fought our way through almost two years of the perfect storm. The headwinds of that storm began last March when COVID brought a new set of challenges no one could have foreseen. We dealt with employee absenteeism, worries over how to keep our staff and our customers safe and

happy with how we were handling the situation, the beginnings of disruptions to our supply chain and challenges in how to market our products at a time when people were mostly staying home.

Then, when that storm calmed and the sun began to peek through, people started coming out of isolation, project managers and homeowners started buying again and demand suddenly boomed, creating a situation where it was hard to keep up. At the same time, it was hard to find the workers we needed to keep our operations running smoothly. By the time 2021 arrived, we faced huge opportunities we haven't seen in many years. Then of course, the latest headwind hit: a freeze in Texas and the Gulf area that created nightmares for our distribution and supply chains including threats to getting access to the resin we need.

We have faith our suppliers, our employees and our customers will help us through this latest storm and hopefully, by the time we are swapping stories over cocktails during POLYCON, we'll be exchanging not only war stories, but tales of success and maybe even thinking about ways we can begin to market ourselves again, both as an industry and individually.

This issue of your magazine is devoted to both what's happening and what should happen next. Because we tackled what

people are forecasting in the residential markets in Spring's issue, we continue forecasting by looking at the commercial side of our business. We touch upon the resin issue and we talk about a new study on the manufacturing skills gap challenge

and who's winning the competition for staff. We also approach the issue of marketing from the perspective of thinking differently about what it is we are telling our publics.

Most importantly, we provide you a look at what to expect September 13-15 as we gather in my neck of the woods—the Salt Lake City, UT area. There is much to look forward to, including a beefed-up technical program—

PolyTECH—which will be held over two days this year, offering a wide selection of hands on demonstrations and learning opportunities. We have a day set aside for general sessions and breakout meetings including a crucial one on what's happening with styrene.

But most of us are perhaps looking most forward to another aspect of 2021's event: the chance to see each other face to face and share our experiences working in this great industry. Please stop by and say hello when you see me at this year's event. We can talk about how we've weathered this perfect storm! ■

ReBecca Erdmann
ICPA President
Co-owner, Sand & Swirl

WE HAVE FAITH
OUR SUPPLIERS, OUR
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STORIES OVER COCKTAILS
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BE EXCHANGING NOT
ONLY WAR STORIES, BUT
TALES OF SUCCESS...





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Unlocking the POWER of digital storytelling

BY LISA APOLINSKI

ACCORDING TO A RECENT FORBES ARTICLE¹, global online content consumption doubled in 2020. On average, people are spending twice as much time on digital assets, including mobile phones, tablets and laptops.

Another Forbes article, which was on 2021 digital marketing predictions², further predicted these pivots to virtual are likely to remain the new normal.

Today, digital content is a key driver in connecting and engaging with our customers, and the trend is not slowing down anytime soon. However, all digital content is not created equally. Also, even though the large increases in content consumption will continue, the goal for companies in creating that content is to make it great—you are building your reputation and brand over the long haul. That's why smart companies are learning to spread their message in new ways that both reach and stay with those that buy their products.

The move to digital storytelling

Cast polymer companies have a great opportunity to develop digital content that resonates and persuades potential buyers to learn more about their products and to purchase from them. They can do so by turning their approach into digital storytelling. Digital storytelling takes content and structures it into a compelling story.

The reason this approach works so well is that people are hardwired for stories—from the fairytales read to us in childhood, to the books we read and the movies and television we watch every day—we all love and are affected by a good story. Digital storytelling taps into that mindset and reality.

By leveraging digital storytelling, cast polymer companies can share features, benefits and data about their brands, their companies and their strengths in an engaging way with their audiences.

Here are my six secrets to unlocking the power of digital storytelling and helping to increase sales.



Digital storytelling tips

Secret #1: Talk about benefits the buyer receives versus the benefits your company provides. These two aspects of your business may seem almost the same, but this slight shift in point of view can make all the difference in effective storytelling. Instead of discussing the features and benefits of your product, share how those features and benefits affect your clients. For example, one feature may be that your product is stronger and lasts longer than other surface products. Instead of stating “our product has better durability,” share a buyer benefit, such as “because of our product’s durability, homeowners have their showers/sinks/countertops much longer than they would with other types of surfaces. They don’t have to come back in five years to refresh their looks because the product remains beautiful and strong for a long time.”

This is a subtle shift but provides a direct link to your audience. Always bring the content back to the benefit of the buyer, since that is who will read what you create.

Secret #2: Think about what your products and services are solving, not what you are selling. Position your digital content story to first discuss what problem the buyer faces, then discuss how your product solves that problem.

When digital storytelling taps into problem solving, it allows the audience to picture your company solving a dilemma for them—alleviating a concern or fulfilling an unmet need. Now, instead of content that simply pushes products and services, the content (and the solution), becomes relatable. In the cast polymer industry, one of the problems facing homeowners might be that their kitchen counters are difficult to maintain or to keep clean. A problem for a commercial building such as a dorm might be that showers have to be replaced frequently because they are used so much. Instead of simply stating “our products are easy to maintain,” share specifics instead of how your products are used in certain applications, such as how (in referring to customers’ cleaning routines) use of your products frees their time for other, more important items



or how the product can help commercial customers with tighter and tighter budgets because showers have to be replaced less frequently.

Secret #3: Structure your content so it can be easily read and followed. When developing digital content, good structure in what you present, including defined sections of information, accomplishes several things for your audience. First, it provides an easier read for both mobile and laptop viewing because the content is divided into chunks. Second, it allows natural breaks for your audience to take in the various points of your message and move from point to point. Last, by having a set structure for your content, your audience will start to recognize and leverage patterns within that content. This will affect how they read and comprehend what you present. Use your content structure to lead your audience into and through your digital content. An added bonus here is that having structure can make your content writing more balanced and clearer.

Secret #4: Create the visual in your words. One reason storytelling is so powerful is because it helps us visualize a scene set by the author. Digital content for your company can provide the same experience. When creating your content, use visual cues for the audience to bring them into the story. This could be describing what the narrator “sees,”

(e.g., a frustrated homeowner on the phone trying to get in touch with a supplier and getting more and more tense as the hold time increases). This also could be describing what the narrator “feels” (the smooth surface of the new kitchen countertops with no seams). If you can add a few words of what is being seen, heard, or felt, the audience can fill in what that visual is for them. They may picture their own kitchen, or their spouse or friends in that same situation.

Secret #5: End every piece of your digital content with a magic phrase. A final sentence in your digital content should share a memorable phrase. This is the morale of your story. Stories teach something to the audience, and the final sentence should quickly and clearly state what the lesson of the story is. If the content was sharing the story of a homeowner, for example, and how your company’s product made their home beautiful yet durable, the magic phrase at the end could highlight that sentiment with something as simple as “Durability does not need to be sacrificed to style.”

These phrases can also be easily incorporated into a tweet, email subject line—or even quoted by the media. When coming up with that wow thought, think simple, short, and easily remembered and repeated by the audience.

Secret #6: Always provide a call to action. Once someone has read your content, think in terms of what you would like

them to do next. This call to action outlines to your audience what their next step should be. It varies depending on the content, but could include setting up a call, visiting your website, completing a form, etc. Never leave this critical next step up to the whims of your audience.

When creating your call to action, make it easy to do. This could include sharing a hyperlink to your website, providing the phone number to call or having a contact form on the landing page to fill out. At the same time, do not go overboard and ask for too many things. Choose the most important action for that particular piece of digital content.

Practice, practice, practice...and measure

I want to share one last point on using digital storytelling. Practice and testing new types of content can help cast polymer companies choose what problems are critical today, what detail makes the story persuasive and what call to action is the most appropriate for different types of content. Digital content allows for fast fails: If a piece of content didn't resonate as much as anticipated, you should repurpose it and modify it to make it stronger. If there are pieces of content that work well, they can be repurposed into video content, guides, etc.

The way to determine if digital storytelling is well received is by tracking key pieces of data. If you add digital content to a website, for example, how was the website traffic to that page? If you provided a call to action to complete an online form, how many times was the form accessed and how many forms were completed? If you shared digital content on your social media channels, how many likes, comments and reshares did the post receive? Benchmark your current engagement on your digital content and then watch the trends as you add more.

Trends tracking clearly shows digital engagement is here to stay and increasingly a part of our everyday lives. With so many cast polymer companies potentially adding new content into the digital mix, storytelling can set your company's content apart from the rest of the digital pack.

This practice will take time to perfect. However, by developing digital stories and being deliberate with your company's messaging, you will remove the dreaded mistake of random acts of content. There may be instances where you need to develop less content. You should still create that content with a purpose, a story and a message that persuades.

Remember, too, that digital engagement is like a climb with no summit – it is never too late to try new strategies because your challenges will continue endlessly and reach new heights. There is always an opportunity to get into the digital storytelling game and see how, when used properly,

it will affect the levels of prospects and growth of revenue.

By leveraging each of these secrets, your cast polymer company can create more than just digital content. There is the potential for your company to create inspiration for your audience. At the very least, your company will be providing content that helps customers solve problems and move them in the direction of success. By sharing your knowledge, the audience will come away with more wisdom, more solutions and more power to overcome roadblocks.

This is the ultimate goal of the digital story—to provide customers the ability to be the hero in their own stories. By seeing themselves in your digital story, they can leverage your company's products to reach their goals.

In other words, the greatest power of digital storytelling is not what your content shares with your audience, but what that content inspires them to do. ■

LISA APOLINSKI is an international speaker, digital strategist, author and founder of 3 Dog Write. She works with companies to develop and share their message using digital assets. Her latest book, *Persuade With A Digital Content Story*, is available on Amazon. For information, visit www.3DogWrite.com.

¹<https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnkoetsier/2020/09/26/global-online-content-consumption-doubled-in-2020/?sh=2e52d9402fde>

²<https://www.forbes.com/sites/henrydevries/2020/12/16/seven-digital-marketing-trends-for-2021/?sh=5f1853146d56>

Telling our industry's story

One of the tools ICPA members now have to create a compelling story and make customers the hero is LiveGroutFree. The website and social media channels are designed to outline the benefits of using cast



polymer products that have no grout lines. The lack of grouting makes the products cleaner, easier to maintain and more durable while offering a wide range of design options.

The site explains the broad array of bathroom products (vanities, shower bases, surrounds, tubs, and shower/bath accessories) and kitchen products (countertops, backsplashes, windowsills, islands) that can take advantage of the benefits of living without grout.

The website is designed to both inspire and educate potential customers to the industry, appealing to builders, designers, architects, project managers, fabricators, cabinet makers and others who sell into the commercial and residential industries. It's also for businesses and individuals looking for a better product than the traditional tiles, acrylics, fiberglass, granites and other materials that require much sealing, cleaning and periodic repair.

The site also has frequently asked questions educating the general public and customers about how to clean the products, how long they will last, how they compare to other materials and specifics of why they are so durable, sanitary and easy to clean.

For more information, go to www.livegroutfree.com, Instagram (@grout_free_designs), or Facebook (@groutfreedesigns).

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POLYCON 2021 will be held September 13-15 in Salt Lake City, Utah.

PHOTO BY DENIS TANGNEY JR/GETTY IMAGES



POLYCON 2021

Together again & building our future

AFTER ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT YEARS IN DECADES, ICPA members will celebrate the reality that the industry has made it through and looking toward a bright future when they gather in person this fall for POLYCON 2021. The event, which is September 13-15 in Salt Lake City, UT, is the annual gathering of the association to share ideas and concerns, build connections, and learn best practice techniques for running cast polymer companies.



This year's event will be headquartered at the Marriott Salt Lake City University Park with tours and technical sessions held at two local member companies—Sand & Swirl, Ogden, UT, and Whitewater/Tyvarian in Lindon, UT. The 3-day convention is packed with educational sessions, breakouts, plant demonstrations and tours, and opportunities to test or train for the Certified Composites Technician program. But the real value this year will be the opportunity to see old friends and meet new ones.

“We are delighted that this year's meeting will be face to face and that it will be held in our neck of the woods,” says ICPA President ReBecca Erdman, co-owner of Sand & Swirl.

“Utah is one of the most beautiful states in the country, offering an array of natural features and recreational activities that I know ICPA members will enjoy. We're proud to show you our state as well as our businesses,” she adds.

ICPA Executive Director Jennifer Towner adds that, “ICPA has kept up our educational and networking goals for members through virtual events, constant communication with members and other efforts but we all know there is no substitute for meeting in person when it comes to keeping a pulse on what's happening and learning from each other.”

The first PolyTECH training

One of the highlights of a new, expanded agenda for this year's meeting is a broad technical program called PolyTECH Training. The program will include two days of hands-on demonstrations and educational sessions on topics such as:

- Veining techniques
- Installation issues
- The challenges of spray application
- Building and maintaining production molds, and mold release best practices
- Repairing gel coats
- Autocasting machinery
- Techniques of showroom selling

PolyTECH takes place at Sand & Swirl Monday, Sept. 13 and Tyvarian on Wednesday, Sept. 15. On those two days, attendees also will be given the opportunity to tour the host companies' showrooms. Transportation to both facilities will be available.

A day of learning

On Tuesday, Sept. 14, the general session will take place back at the Marriott's convention facilities where attendees will gather for a keynote address by Doug Westmoreland, COO of Mincey Marble. Attendees will also hear association and industry updates, and new product presentations by industry suppliers. After a luncheon, attendees will break out into smaller groups for face-to-face discussions and talks.

One session many attendees won't want to miss this year is a workshop on "Workplace Styrene Exposure Limits." The session will bring attendees up to date on where regulatory



PolyTECH hands-on training and educational sessions are stretched over two days this year.

agencies are headed on the issue of styrene including what the Occupational Safety and Health Administration is doing, what safety advocates and scientists are saying and what employers should do.

Breakout sessions address more specific issues such as bolstering marketing efforts and "ask the experts" roundtable discussions.

New to the breakout sessions this year is a get-together for women managers/owners who want to address their issues, exchange ideas and make connections. Returning to the agenda this year is a breakout for the next generation of leaders in the industry—those who have taken over their companies from their forebears or are looking to do so.

Visiting vendors/networking

An exhibit hall featuring the suppliers that help the cast polymer industry produce high-quality products opens Monday evening Sept. 13 at 6 p.m. so that attendees can get a jump on learning what is available to help them with cast polymer manufacturing and running their businesses. The exhibits are also open all day Sept. 14.

As far as making new friends and touching base with old ones, several functions are planned including receptions on Monday and Tuesday evenings. A special luncheon will be held Tuesday, and on Wednesday night, the gala dinner where awards are presented will be held.

CCT training/logistics

Training will once again take place during POLYCON so that company managers and leaders can study for the Certified Composites Technician–Cast Polymer program. Testing for the certification also will occur. Participating in the training or testing requires a separate registration ahead of the event. The training is free to ICPA members (a cost savings of \$250).

The Salt Lake City Marriott University Park is just 15 miles from Salt Lake City's main airport. The restaurant itself has one formal dining area, a bar and an informal snack bar with breakfast, lunch, dinner and coffee. Register for POLYCON 2021 at www.polyconevent.com. ■

Thanks to our Sponsors

POLYCON would not be the successful event it is if not for the generosity of its sponsors. This year, three major supporters of the industry are serving as Platinum sponsors:

- **Composites One** will host Monday's cocktail reception
- **The R.J. Marshall Company** will host the luncheon reception during Tuesday's general session
- **Interplastic Corporation** will host the cocktail reception on Tuesday evening



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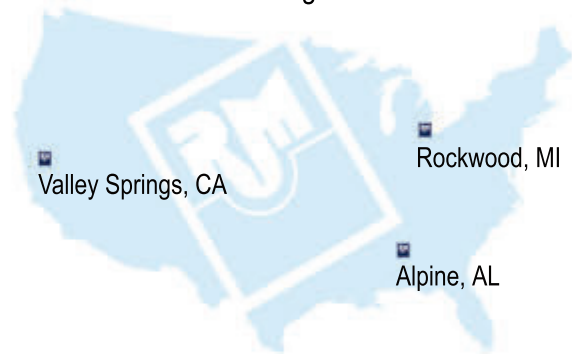
The advantages of using less resin

- ◆ Lower cost
- ◆ Less shrinkage
- ◆ Lower VOC emissions
- ◆ Reduced chance of stress fractures & cracking during cure
- ◆ Decreased chance of warping

The advantages of lighter parts

- ◆ Less labor used in manufacturing, handling & installation
- ◆ Lower shipping & distribution cost
- ◆ Less potential for part damage during installation

Manufacturing Locations



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Conventional lightweight fillers can be difficult to wet out and require extra mixing time. Resulting matrixes are often dense and "stiff"; resisting flow and inhibiting air release. This is not the case with Prolite.

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Independent testing has proven that products made with R.J. Marshall Company lightweight fillers perform better than conventional marble fillers; up to three times better in many cases. When casting according to standard marble manufacturing procedures, Prolite fillers exceed all ANSI certification standards.

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Prolite 15 and Prolite 25 can be used as a direct, one to one, replacement for calcium carbonate.

Typical Physical Properties	Prolite 15	Prolite 25	Prolite 35	Prolite 50	Prolite 50FGA	Prolite FR50
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"

Southern freeze creates new resin issues

AFTER A YEAR OF CHALLENGES brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the cast polymer industry was ready for a break. But 2021 brought on a new challenge: a shortage of resin.

Manufacturers and suppliers in many industries are now scrambling to get what they need to make cast polymer products. The industry was already feeling the effects of price increases from last year when a freeze in Texas in February 2021 threw a big wrench into the situation. Texas is not used to sudden drops in temperatures so even though the freeze was predicted by weather channels, facilities that produce the raw materials that go into plastics and resin didn't have sufficient time to shut down properly.

"Most of these plants don't have insulation; they rely on good weather and their own processes," explained Steve Wetzel, Interplastic Corporation, in a recent Cast Polymer Radio episode (Episode 76). "When these facilities lost power, they lost their ability to run their equipment and produce heat."

The result was that materials froze or gelled up in plant pipes causing the plants to shut down or remain shut down so they could clean up the piping and get production started again. Unfortunately, cleaning and reopening is a lengthy process so the supply line has backed up.

"These plants have miles and miles of pipes and equipment and they are literally having to dig out from this issue," Wetzel commented. "Some of the key suppliers are still down and the timing of when they get back up is critical to our supply chain," he explained.

Even those that have been able to start back up need time to get back into their former production levels so the issue is likely to remain key for a while.

Heavy reliance on Texas

One factor the problem has revealed in full is how much the nation's industrial businesses rely on what comes out of Texas and the Gulf Coast area to operate.

According to the Wall Street Journal, the freeze and the power crisis that hit Texas caused shutdowns as high as 75% for polyethylene and 65% for polypropylene. More plants in the Gulf of Mexico shut down than what occurred from Hurricane Harvey, and unlike with hurricanes, plants did not have days to prepare for what was coming.

The unexpected cold snap also revealed the vulnerabilities of Texas' electrical grid, which relies heavily on locally produced natural gas. The freezing temperatures shuttered not only the plants, but also the natural gas wells in that



PHOTO BY CHRISTINE KOHLER/GETTY IMAGES

The state of Texas experienced a prolonged period of freezing temperatures not seen in years.

area of the country. Texas suffered most of the \$150 billion in damages caused by the sudden winter storm—millions of homes and businesses were without power for several days and as much as a week.

Freight woes compound challenges

The U.S. Energy Information Administration said the weather event also took out 28% of the Gulf Coast's refining output, and decreased ethanol output about 38% from February 2020 to February 2021. The result is that the resin shortage has been compounded by high freight prices and low availability of trucks to transport here in the U.S.

All of this translates into higher prices and challenges in getting what's needed.

Suppliers to the cast polymer industry have reacted to all this however they can to lessen problems for manufacturers and their customers and keep all parties informed about what's happening so they can plan for short-term pressures.

"We are doing our best to maintain normal lead times and avoid any product shortages," says Tim Price, vice president, The R.J. Marshall Company. Price increases from R.J. Marshall's own suppliers and logistics providers (distribution channels) is a reality, however.

“Several raw material providers have raised prices to us two times since Jan. 1, 2021. Many polymer-based raw materials (as well as others) continue to be in short supply and our suppliers are asking for longer lead times on our purchase orders,” he points out.

Suppliers are trying to look first at what current customers need before looking at adding new customers.

“Our district sales managers and customer care department are in continuous contact/communication with our customers regarding order status,” Price says, “We are making every effort to ship on time, and we are working overtime in many of our processes and locations,” he said. Whenever possible, the company is increasing inventory levels on standard products, he explains.

Wetzel adds that the problem is also compounded by the reality of timing.

“What makes it even more difficult is that the cast polymer industry is in a very busy time right now. Traditional composites industry companies are busy starting the end of March into May,” which is happening at the same time inventories and ability to supply are low, he said.

Manufacturers react

According to Dirk De Vuyst, International Marble Industries (IMI), (who was the other featured Cast Polymer Radio session speaker), manufacturers are reacting the same way as suppliers: by concentrating first on current customers.

“We call it the first “p” of four p’s we are concentrating on in response to this situation. We are protecting current

customers first: concentrating on those that have been with us the longest and are key to survival over the long term,” he said.

The other “p’s” of IMI’s response are:

Price: “Knowing it’s going to be more expensive to produce our product, we have to price based on a new costing model,” he explains, which includes the increased costs of freight and packaging that relies on products made from resin.

Procurement: IMI is paying close attention to weekly needs to make the products it produces. “We have to make sure the lists for weekly inventory are tighter and more controlled than ever,” he said.

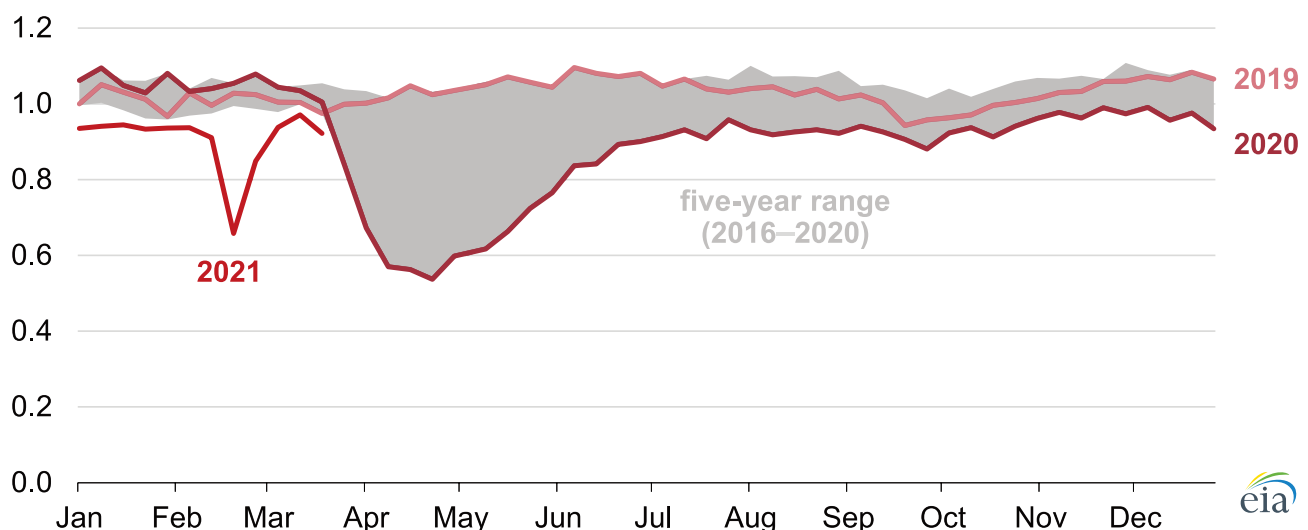
Production: IMI is also keeping a close eye on certain factors in the production process such as labor costs and how it communicates with customers. “You have to keep in very close contact to understand better what you need to schedule products and production from your facility,” he said.

During the Cast Polymer Radio broadcast, De Vuyst also added a very important fifth “p”: **planning**.

“Nothing is more important in looking four to six weeks out than planning,” he commented.

As Wetzel and De Vuyst emphasized in the broadcast, the most important step both suppliers and their customers can take is to focus on what they can control. “We expect this situation to last a while, not necessarily in how tight the raw material market is, but over the long haul: we are in an inflationary period where we will be paying more for raw materials, labor freight and other factors. All we can do is to control the controllable,” De Vuyst said. ■

Weekly U.S. fuel ethanol production (Jan 1, 2016–Mar 19, 2021)
million barrels per day





POLYCON SALT LAKE CITY

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SEPTEMBER 13-15, 2021

POLYCON 2021 begins Monday, September 13th at Sand & Swirl in Ogden, UT; continues Tuesday, September 14th at the Marriott with exhibits, general session, training and breakouts; and concludes Wednesday, September 15th at Whitewater/Tyvarian in Lindon, UT.

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Construction forecast:

Commercial falters, but looking up



BY GENILEE
SWOPE PARENTE

WHILE IT'S BEEN HIGHLY REPORTED that construction in the residential market helped the nation recover from last year's sudden economic collapse, the commercial field did not fare as well. Still, figures show glimmers of hope in certain sectors as well as recovery down the road.

What's to come

Most economists point to slowed or postponed projects in the commercial industry because of COVID-19 challenges and rising material costs as the main culprits in how the industry is currently faring.

Economist and author/lecturer Ed Zarenski said that, by far, the greatest impact the pandemic had on construction is a massive reduction in new nonresidential construction starts for 2020. While residential starts rose 7% during the year (an all-time high) and will reach 5% growth in 2021, nonresidential building starts were down 24% for 2020 and are expected to fall 11% in 2021. The largest declines are for lodging (-37%), amusement/recreation (-26%); manufacturing (-19%) and power (-15%).

Zarenski points out that nonresidential construction is heavily dependent on backlogs—nonresidential construction starts in backlog at the beginning of 2021 will account for 75-80% of all spending for this year.

Residential, on the other hand, has benefited from an increased call by homeowners for moving into new homes in the suburbs and a decreased desire for moving to urban areas and living in multi-family residential units.

Another well-known expert, Richard Branch, chief economist at Dodge Data & Analytics, predicted a 7% gain for single-family construction starts for 2021, while multi-family construction will pay the price with an anticipated fall by 1% for the year. Branch said that as far as commercial building, the market dropped 23% in 2020, but it will see a better year this year. Commercial starts for 2021 will increase by 5% dollar value for 2021 (a measure that takes into consideration inflation and how much the dollar is worth compared to the past), with warehouse construction the big winner.

Meanwhile, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) says that nonresidential construction will decline by 5.7% in 2021 with the big loser hotels (with more than a 20% decline), followed by offices and amusement/recreation (an almost 13% decline) and office construction (9.3% decline). Health care/public safety are the only two sectors that will see increases (1.2% and 1%).



AIA has predicted that nonresidential construction spending will rise by 3.1% in 2022.



However, AIA Chief Economist Kermit Baker said that considerable pent-up demand for nonresidential space will lead to growth by 2022. AIA has predicted that nonresidential construction spending will rise by 3.1% in 2022.

In 2022, AIA predicts the only two industries that will see declines will be religious (2.9% decrease) and public safety (.4% decline). Amusement and recreation will see the biggest gains of 11.1% followed by hotels (8.8% increase). Health care and education will see increases of 3.2% and 2.7% respectively.

Sean Jacobs, vice president for ICPA member MPL Company, agrees that things are looking up in areas that felt a lot of pain. MPL Company, which does a lot of business in the commercial field, is starting to see the relief happening.

For example, “The hospitality industry has experienced unprecedented challenges the past 12 months, but is seeing increased optimism as occupancy levels begin to rise,” he says.

Despite continued headwinds as far as rising material costs and issues with bank financing, “most industry experts predict a strong rebound beginning in late 2021. We are already seeing pockets of increased activity around the U.S.,” and MPL feels “well positioned for the future,” he says.

David Henrickson, plant manager, Inpro, (which also has much commercial business) also predicts 2021 will be a profitable year for his company.

“With supply chain constraints at a level not seen since World War Two, our solidly built relationships with our suppliers have paid dividends we never expected to reap,” he says. Those partnerships have allowed the company to operate “without missing a beat” through one crisis after the other, he adds.

“As we see the commercial construction industry rebound, we are seeing all areas of our business rebound as well,” he said. Solid surface, for example is benefiting from a ramp up by universities that previously put projects on hold.

Another area where optimism is shining through the darker clouds is in bidding. Henrickson says that in healthcare, Inpro has seen quoting activity pick up as of late, which is adding to what Inpro sees as a strong 2021.

Autodesk, Inc.’s recently released “Construction Outlook 2021: Risks and Opportunities” reported that short-term relief is enroute for nonresidential spending for this year as projects that have been delayed or rescheduled come back online.

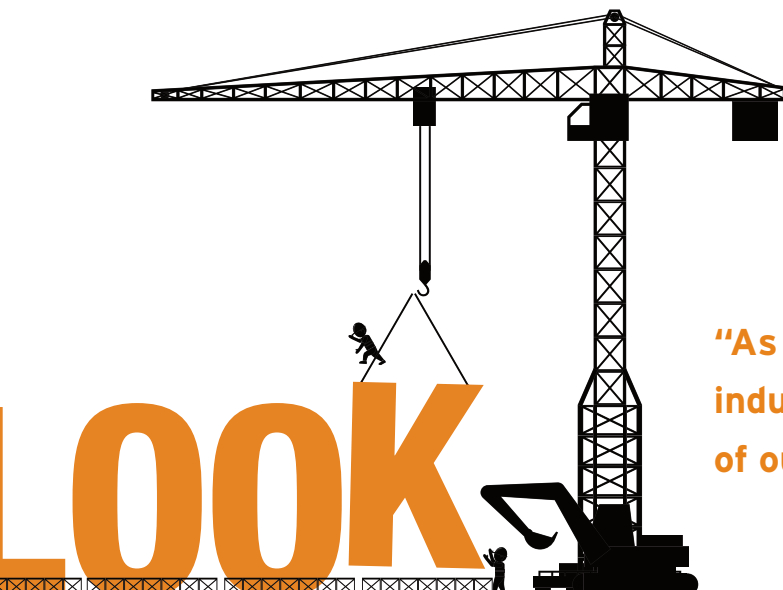
Autodesk said in March 2021 that “real-time bidding activity” has surpassed prepandemic levels, reaching an all-time high in January 2021.

Autodesk’s report also found that:

- Bidding activity in the commercial industry was on the rise at the beginning of 2020 but dropped 34% in the 60 days following March 19, when stay-at-home went into effect.
- The industry began to slowly recover from March to October and hit a high in November with a 15% increase. It saw a 36% rise in January 2021.

“While it’s not an indication that we’re entirely out of the woods, real-time bidding data ... suggests that delayed or rescheduled projects may be coming back online,” Ed Zarenski said in comments on the report. “Increased levels of bidding activity, paired with the data that project volume has remained consistent, signals the industry is getting back to work—and doing so quickly.” ■

GENILEE SWOPE PARENTE is executive editor of **Cast Polymer Connection**. Please send her ideas on issues of importance to ICPA members: gsparente@verizon.net.



“As we see the commercial construction industry rebound, we are seeing all areas of our business rebound as well.”



Nation seeing a giant leap in material prices

An unprecedented increase in the price of goods used in construction as well as supply-chain disruptions is wreaking havoc on contractors and slowing projects, according to an analysis by the Associated General Contractors of America (AGC). The analysis looks at government data released in April of 2021.

A government index that measures the selling price for construction goods jumped 3.5% from February to March 2021 and almost 13% from where it was in March 2020.

AGC released an alert to its members regarding the development and called on the Biden administration to end tariffs and quotas on imported construction inputs to ease the problems.

"Today's producer price index report documents just some of challenges contractors are experiencing with fast-rising material costs, lengthening or uncertain delivery times, and rationing of key inputs," said Ken Simonson, the association's chief economist. "These problems threaten to drive up the cost and completion time for many vital projects and potentially set back the recovery in construction employment."

ICPA members are tracking what happens and feeling the pressure.

"The construction materials industry, which affects our industry directly, will be challenged throughout 2021 because of the reality of both increased cost and lack of raw materials and labor combined with a volatile demand picture, which exists in both residential and commercial markets," says Dirk De Vuyst, president of International Marble Industries, Woodstock, GA.

As far as residential material prices, the Bureau of Labor Statistics said that prices paid for goods in residential construction (except energy) rose 2.4% in March but have increased almost 10% from March 2020 to March 2021. Lumber prices remain a top concern with prices rising more than 88% between April and September 2020 then falling almost 23% between September and November.

NAHB said in April 2021 that inflationary pressure is at the top of most builders' concerns with lumber up 200% from a year ago and aggregate residential construction costs up about 10% over a year ago.

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Construction industry will need 430,000 employees for 2021

According to the Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC), the U.S. will need 430,000 more workers than it had in 2020 to meet the demand for project work. Interestingly, ABC said that a paradox occurred in the industry in 2020, namely that spending on construction rose by 4.8% overall while employment fell by 6.8%.



A number of factors contributed to the paradox, ABC said:

- 1) Increased building materials and labor costs pushed up construction spending.
- 2) The mix of construction changed, with most of the increase in spending occurring in residential construction, which had some of the largest price increases.
- 3) Reduced labor supply because of the pandemic encouraged builders to adopt labor-saving technology faster.
- 4) Builders improved scheduling and logistics of building materials delivery.
- 5) Increased use of prefabrication and modularization reduced the amount of labor needed.



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Growth requires investing in people



TECHNOLOGY IS ADVANCING AT A RATE FASTER than the training workers receive to use that technology, which is compounding the skills gap problem, according to a report by Tooling U-SME. SME is a nonprofit association of professionals, educators and students committed to promoting and supporting the manufacturing industry.

The report, “Industry Pulse, Manufacturing Workforce Report,” acknowledges that finding skilled talent is a top challenge for industry and says that the greatest barrier to addressing the gap is too much acceptance of the status quo.

“We are the culprits—at least those who fail to act,” the report’s intro says. However, there is much that can be done if priorities include “finding skilled new hires, upskilling the incumbent workforce and retaining employees,” it concludes.

The situation

The manufacturing industry has been sounding an alarm about “the skills gap” for so long it’s become a “nearly invisible warning,” the report says. The top three workforce challenges today, according to the study behind the report, include: finding skilled new hires (99%); upskilling the incumbent work force (92%) and onboarding new employees (84%). All three directly affect another top challenge for industry: expanding the business (88% of manufacturers cite that as a top concern).

The report says the retirement of Baby Boomers has begun and will continue to be a problem, which means transferring incumbent knowledge needs to be occurring now. More than a third of respondents to the study said more than 20% of their workforce will be eligible for retirement in the next three years and 59% reported that their leaving will result in a loss of embedded knowledge.

At the same time, advanced technologies such as 3D printing and smart equipment are offering “amazing opportunities” in the areas of efficiency, quality, lead times, reduced costs and other areas.

The companies that will succeed in addressing the lag between retiring employees and the ability to take advantage of the new opportunities are those that have “structured programs that capture institutional knowledge,” the report says.

Survey respondents said that currently, successful companies are addressing workforce challenges by:

- Partnering with educational institutions
- Enhancing compensation: raises, recruitment bonuses, and retention bonuses
- Offering 100% tuition reimbursement
- Providing internal training
- Creating an apprenticeship program
- Increasing training investment
- Strengthening onboarding processes
- Hiring full-time trainers
- Starting a pay-for-skill system
- Building qualification profiles

Best practices

The report offered these five best practices for building a high-performance workforce:

1) Identify business objectives.

The report points out that a successful training and development program must have the support of senior management and that the best way to get that support is to find ways to demonstrate learning’s impact on the business—to tie training to the bottom line.

2) Use performance-based competency models.

Such systems codify knowledge and skills required for specific job roles, which ensures institutional knowledge is passed on to the next generation as veteran workers retire.

THE HUMAN FACTOR



3) **Develop a well-defined competency framework** and align that to a learning plan, which eliminates unnecessary or redundant training, and maximizes training time.

4) **Structure on-the-job training (OJT).**

Performance-based training programs should require the use of standardized OJT tools and techniques to ensure consistent delivery of training. Companies should also ensure they “train the trainers.” Only about 13% of manufacturers currently use standardized OJT, the study found.

5) **Develop and execute a measurable impact study.**

At the start of designing a skills program, a company should document goals related to production, quality, innovation and employee retention. Later, the team can refer back and see how the program measured up.

Developing the next generation

The report says that while some of the statistics are discouraging, there is much hope, and many manufacturers today

are realizing they must look to younger generations and work with local communities to “build the talent pipelines they will need in years to come.”

The study found that currently: 75% of manufacturers offer internships, 69% support community college programs and 64% provide financial support to programs that build the pipeline.

Millennials (92 million people, ages 22 to 37 in 2018) and post-millennials (oldest turned 21 in 2018) represent the greatest opportunity to meet workforce needs, the report says.

“By understanding what motivates these new generations of manufacturing workers, companies can better build targeted training and development programs that appeal to their desire [workers’ desire] for experiences and connections,” the report advises.

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Celebrating OSHA Safe + Sound Week

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s (OSHA) annual Safe+Sound Week is August 9-15.

ICPA has partnered with OSHA in creating its SAFE PLANT program and has encouraged all member companies to participate in that program. Safe+Sound Week focuses attention on the issues at stake and what various industries are doing to ensure worker safety.

The national event recognizes the successes of workplace health and safety efforts and offers a channel for distributing information and ideas on how to keep America’s workers safe. Information is available on OSHA’s website at www.osha.gov/safeandsoundweek.

For information about the ICPA SAFE PLANT program and its partnership with OSHA, visit the website at www.theicpa.com/programmevents/safe-plant-campaign/.

Cast Polymer Radio continues to help our industry

As the industry recovers from the COVID 19 pandemic and faces new issues, it has come to rely on the programming of Cast Polymer Radio. The podcast, which was created to highlight and connect the cast polymer industry, is pulling in new audiences with every podcast.



“We hit more than 4,100 unique downloads in the month of April—our highest number yet for the show,” reported Jonathan Taylor, who hosts and produces the show.

Here are samples of recent episodes:

- COVID’s effects on the trucking industry and supply chain disruptions with Jim Grundy, CEO of Sisu Energy and John Barnett of Steamboat Transportation Group
- Resin supply chain issues (see story, page 11)
- Turning culture into a competitive advantage featuring author Jeff Grimshaw
- How to maximize the value of your company with consultant/business owner Joel Strom
- Creating molds that exceed customer expectations with Bobby and Tim Brooks of Brooks Molds
- Attracting & retaining top talent with talent consultant Kathleen Quinn Votaw

All of the more than 80 shows recorded are available at the Cast Polymer Radio website: www.castpolymer.com.

June is ICPA membership renewal month

ICPA members should be on the lookout for renewal invoices. No increase will occur in dues for the 2021-22 membership year, and invoices will be sent out at the end of May. Payment is due on or before July 1.

“ICPA member benefits are vital in this time of challenge and recovery from what’s happened the last few years,” says ICPA Executive Director Jennifer Towner. “I encourage our members not just to renew, but to spread the word to others about how important it is for all of us to join forces.”

Renewals or new membership registrations and payments can also be made online at <https://theicpa.com/join-today/>. Contact ICPA Membership Coordinator Beth Kubinac at Beth@TheICPA.com for more information.

Registration for POLYCON has begun at discounted rates

Those who want the early bird rate for POLYCON should register soon. Early bird registration runs through June 30.

POLYCON is Sept. 13-15 in Salt Lake City, UT. For more information and registration, go to www.polyconevent.com and see page 8. Companies interested in exhibiting should contact Jennifer Towner at Jennifer@TheICPA.com or visit the exhibitor information page of the polyconevent.com website.

New members

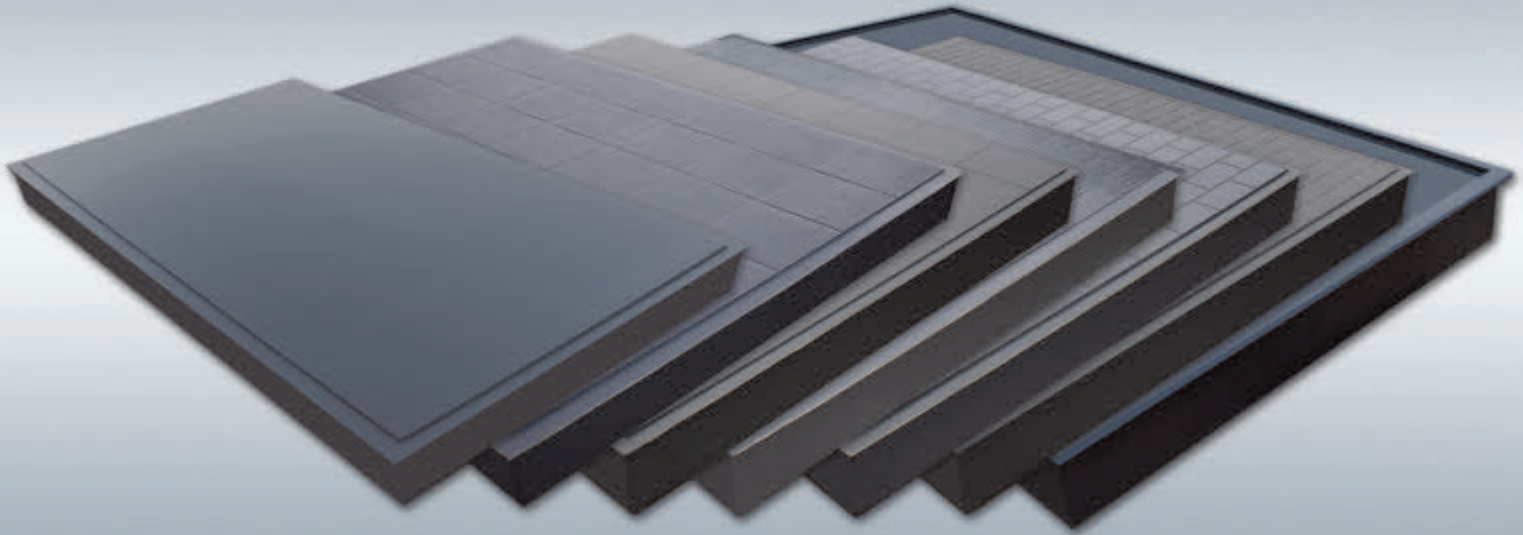
ICPA welcomes these new members to the association:

- Marble-Lite, Hialeah Gardens, FL: www.marblelite.com
- RimCraft by ROI Equipment LLC, Simpsonville, SC: www.rimcraft.com
- The Engineered Stone Group US, a European holding company: <http://engstone.com>

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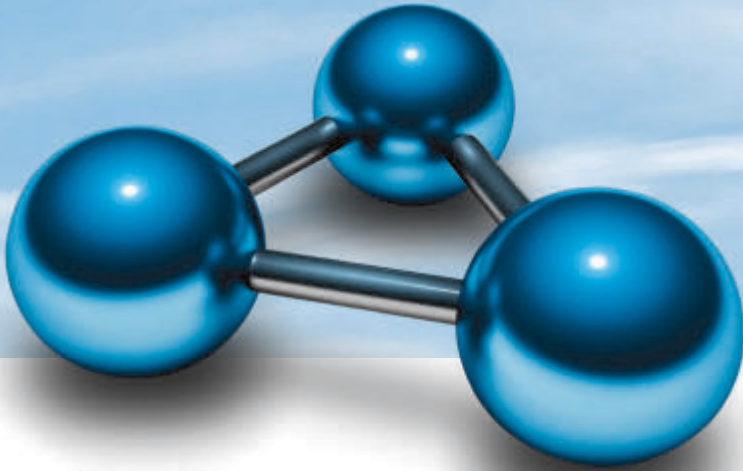
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