

# CAST POLYMER CONNECTION

Winter 2022



## American Marble: Showcasing the strengths of cast polymer

### ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

- Retaining employees in the post-pandemic world
- The need to refresh websites
- Growing smart through EOS
- Regulatory update on climate issues

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**ON THE COVER:**

American Marble Industries was built on the ideas and values of its founder John Stoffer, who has recognized that today's challenges require change. Story on page 4.

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**PRESIDENT'S LETTER**

# Connections that last



**Another successful POLYCON event is now behind us, and I don't know whether to be glad or sad.** I'm relieved because, as one of the hosts this year, it's good to let go of the stress of planning and coordination. I have a high level of admiration and appreciation both for our staff here at Tower and for the staff

of American Marble Industries, the other host company. I thought both crews went above and beyond in their efforts to make this an outstanding event.

I'm sad, however, that the fun of that week is over. It was wonderful to see the faces of our colleagues in this terrific industry, and it was truly refreshing to make new friends. The many lessons we learned from speakers and from each other gave us all a boost that will move us forward as an industry.

POLYCON Ohio was also special for Tower because we were presented with a major honor: we were named SAFE Plant of the Year. ICPA's membership director Beth Kubinec visited us in October to help our staff celebrate and to present us with our plaque. She had lunch catered and brought many treats for our hard-working employees including candy, cookies, t-shirts, fun decorations and more. I want to express both my appreciation and the employees' thanks for giving us one fantastic party, Beth and ICPA (see page 26).

I also want to encourage all ICPA members to participate in the SAFE Plant program. It doesn't matter how large or small your company is, you are subject to workplace acci-

dents, claims and visits from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. ICPA has put together a way to help us, and I would encourage anyone wondering what goes into this program to contact one of the other participants to learn how to put together a safety program our employees can easily follow. I personally invite you to talk to us here at Tower about our program and our experience.

The success of POLYCON Ohio 2022 makes me excited for our next ICPA event: the Buzz, which is April 28 and 29, 2023 at the Eaglewood Resort in Chicago. We visited that same resort for our POLYCON 2018 event, and the comments about the facility were so positive we decided it was a great choice for our major networking event. Those who attended last year's Buzz know how

valuable this event is with a format that's more relaxed than POLYCON and geared strictly towards building connections. Those connections are invaluable to the cast polymer industry because they make it easy to reach out when we need help solving problems and instituting best practices.

Hope to see every one of you at the Buzz as well as our 2023 POLYCON in Atlanta. ■

**Kerry Klodt**  
ICPA President  
General Manager, Tower Industries

THE SUCCESS OF  
POLYCON OHIO 2022  
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# AMI: Education and excellence are key ingredients

BY GENILEE SWOPE  
PARENTE

**American Marble Industries (AMI), Canton, OH, like many long-time**

**industry leaders, has been through a plethora of changes** over its 42 years of existence. The latest of these is that, like many companies who struggled through COVID and are facing the tough conditions of the last few years, the company has recognized and reacted by rethinking the way it does business.

For owner John Stoffer, who founded the company in 1980, the solution to today's challenges is education.

"We received a lot of feedback in recent times that dealers loved our product but weren't comfortable enough in their knowledge of it to sell it," Stoffer explains. "You can't sell what you do not know."

Because of this, a main focus for AMI has become ensuring dealers have the most up-to-date information and samples, restructuring communication to personalize the messages, encouraging showroom visits and updating showroom displays to give dealers more tools.

"But it cannot stop there," he adds. "It has to include educating the general public about the benefits of cast polymer and grout-free living."

The company now focuses heavily on making sure information is out there that will sway people toward cast polymer.

"We live in a society where people want information before they buy and they want it now," he points out. That translates to "finding ways to tailor specific information via all communication touchpoints that will draw consumers to cultured marble and AMI, then redirecting them to choose an AMI dealer in their area," he says.

## The founding father

These days, AMI owner John Stoffer visits the plant and

offices three to four days a week. However, the 30-plus people who are there every day will tell you that Stoffer's influence and what he's built at AMI permeate every aspect of the company.

"I think our greatest strength as a company is having our founder here," says Jennifer Twaddle, corporate secretary for AMI. "We don't 'allow' him to work the line the days he's here (because he's trying to retire). But he is the true leader of our motivated and driven team, who are eager to learn the ropes of cast polymer. John is passionate about sharing his knowledge of the business and industry."

"He's also a patient, humble man receptive to ideas and supportive of other people's passions and goals," she adds.

That willingness to listen and to change where change is needed is how the company has grown from a single individual making a few products while struggling with the economic challenges of the 1980s to a company selling many customized cast polymer products to dealers all over the state of Ohio and surrounding areas.

Stoffer started the business as an entrepreneurial effort during a time when he needed to move his family from Florida to Ohio, where John grew up.

"In Florida in the 1970s, I owned a window tinting business until my son developed some health issues from the environment in that state," he says.

He and his family decided to come back to Ohio in 1980, and John began the work of researching what opportunity might give them a fresh start.

He came across a company willing to sell equipment and molds that was also training individuals in cultured marble start-ups.

"Being a business owner at heart, the model for such a company intrigued me and I immediately began looking to rent manufacturing property," he says.

Next, he met an owner of a local marble shop who was about to move out of state and was willing to share knowledge and contacts in the industry. He introduced Stoffer to Gruber and assisted in teaching the specifics of what Stoffer needed to know. Stoffer spent a week learning how to make cultured marble then began looking for warehouse space. A friend who owned a machine shop in downtown Canton was willing to share his space, and John went to work in a 1,500-square-foot heated warehouse space with an additional small showroom and office space.

## **“We are fortunate to have team members employed with us for 15, 20 and up to 30 years.”**

Business was slow at first because he was facing a sagging economy and out-of-control inflation. But John gradually built up a business that began with a windowsill order and grew to include vanity tops and tub walls, then the tubs themselves.

“In the eighties, tubs were a popular addition to homes and requests for them led me to purchase my first tub mold.”

By that time, he had also hired his first employee and was looking for more space to create and fine-tune products.

“In 1985, we rented 10,000 square feet of manufacturing space in the same building that currently houses AMI,” he says.

He also began expanding staff including hiring his daughter Kristine to run the office and his son Steven, who was employed initially as a general worker during his high school years and who now serves as company president.

Stoffer bought the building he was renting in the 1990s and has since added onto the plant, giving the company a total of 31,000 square feet of manufacturing space. He also bought two nearby buildings when they became available so that 22,000 additional square feet could be used for a better office, a showroom and a solid surface/fabrication area.

The staff grew to about 50 at one point and the company’s product line continued to grow including contracting fabrication of solid surface kitchen countertops for 23 Lowe’s stores in Ohio and surrounding states (the company eventually decided the stress of working with a big box store was not worth the profit).

Then COVID-19 presented a walloping blow to all manufacturing in that state.

“The regulations implemented because of the pandemic forced many of us in this state to restructure our businesses. At AMI, half our staff took unemployment,” Stoffer explains.

Meanwhile, one of the company’s closest competitors went out of business leaving AMI in the position many in



Lead-in photo: (from left) Alejandro Olmeda and Bryce Da’Re on the line. Photo above (left to right): Nathan Allender, Nate McKittrick and Chase Pandera cast marble samples for AMI customers.



Chase Pandera uses the mixing pot in the casting department.



Left to right: Christopher James, finishing foreman, and Gilbert “Buck” Miller inspect a threshold for quality control.



Steven Breegle, casting foreman, lends his skills in the spraying booth.

Ricky Frenz Jr. finishes an AMI vanity top before it goes to shipping.

the industry found themselves in the early days of the pandemic: with a surplus of business. Orders doubled at the same time the staff was halved.

“Our lead times pre-COVID were two to three weeks, which increased to more than 18 weeks for a time. It was clear we needed to restructure to keep up with demand,” Stoffer explains.

Stoffer credits the success of what happened to get them through the crisis as well as how the company’s been able to address the subsequent supply shortages to “a wonderful, dedicated customer base. Our dealers have remained patient and understanding throughout the COVID delays, changes in personnel and the restructuring of our company policies and procedures,” he says.

## Today’s business

AMI’s current business is mostly based in customized residential homes for which AMI manufactures cast polymer bath and kitchen surfaces, including countertops, shower bases and walls, bathtubs, windowsills and more. The company also fabricates national brands of solid surface and laminate and is one of a few exclusive manufacturers and dealers of Tyvarian in the area.

Its products are sold through kitchen and bath showrooms, plumbing wholesalers, and building and remodeling wholesalers throughout the state, and it also fills orders for both residential and commercial projects in lower Michigan, eastern Indiana and Pennsylvania.

“We sell customization,” Stoffer explains. “When a customer wants to keep their layout, we can manufacture a shower base or kitchen countertop based on existing dimensions,” which can be a huge selling point in today’s price-conscious, quality-demanding consumer base.

“Not having to move cabinets, plumbing, flooring helps both the customers’ budgets and the contractors who install

AMI’s product,” he explains.

The company can provide all this largely because it has been able to retain the skilled employees so many manufacturers today are desperately seeking.

“We are fortunate to have team members employed with us for 15, 20 and up to 30 years,” he says. “That kind of loyalty and dedication is unheard of today. This is not an easy industry to work in and the work our team performs daily is sometimes not for the faint of heart,” Stoffer says.

He says he is personally “proud and grateful” that team members have stuck with AMI through all the highs and lows of the business since 1980.

As far as finding new talent, Stoffer says there is a large difference between “hiring people and hiring the *right* people.”

In the cast polymer industry, two types of hires are necessary, he adds: finding the Monday-to-Friday workers who want to clock in and collect a paycheck and finding people “smarter than you” who have an elevated level of business knowledge and can bring new skills to the table. Both are critical to a good operation, he says.

An example of the latter includes new AMI recent hires of team member experts to assist with production efficiency, elevate customer service and ensure quality control.

No matter whether it’s the expert or the clock-puncher, AMI says it’s looking not for people to fill positions, but employees who fit into the company culture of making quality products in a timely manner.

“It’s vital to take this into account at all levels of hiring because it costs more to hire and train the wrong person than it takes to find just the right candidate,” he says.

As far as the company’s immediate plans, Stoffer says a main focus is on rebranding the company to take advantage of untapped opportunities that exist because people aren’t fully educated about the benefits of cast polymer.

Besides incorporating more ways to connect such as mass



Bryce Da'Re buffs a shower wall panel.

mailings and bolstering email and social media connections, the company has rebooted the website to make it more informative to the general public and is providing plant tours to dealers to explain the manufacturing process and answer technical questions in real time. It also is showcasing products through many of its dealers' showrooms throughout Ohio and surrounding states, providing valuable insight into "inside information" on what products are currently trending.

"In general, today's world is an impatient place," Stoffer explains. "If the information customers are looking for is not readily available, they will lose interest and move on."

To help with this endeavor requires "transparency, communication, and education. These are the most effective ways to maintain and grow your business today," Stoffer says. "An informed consumer is an easier sell and an informed dealer is the best tool we can use to reach them," he adds. Dealers also require a relationship of trust.

"We strive to be upfront and honest with our dealers and their customers when it comes to design, layouts, maintenance and storage of our product. Being proactive versus reactive is the best form of customer service," Stoffer says.

### A dream realized

For Stoffer personally, another success of AMI has been meeting his goal of creating a company that keeps its valuable employees happy, including family members. Today that includes son Steven Stoffer, as well as his former son-in-law Trevis Fouty; stepson Aaron Stallman; and a granddaughter and her husband, Justine and Steven Breegle.

"My dream of creating a successful, family-owned business is realized after 42 years of hard work and determination on many people's part," he says. ■

**GENILEE SWOPE PARENTE** is executive editor of **Cast Polymer Connection**. She encourages readers to send her ideas on companies to profile in the magazine. Reach her at [gsparente@verizon.net](mailto:gsparente@verizon.net).

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General and special sessions took place all day Tuesday.



The room was crowded at the 2nd Women's Roundtable, sponsored by Women in the Composites Industry.

# POLYCON

## Cheers for the midwest, a special evening



Attendees snapped many photos to remember the Hall of Fame. Here are (from left) Daniel Mahlmeister, Paul Beach, Vicente Camarillo and Tim Price.



Enjoying the relaxed atmosphere at the Hall of Fame are (from left) Corey and ReBecca Erdmann, and Bonnie and John Webster.

Following the trend of recent years, POLYCON attendance was up for 2022. ICPA members gathered for the event at the Doubletree Hilton Downtown Canton, OH September 19-21. The ranks grew to more than 160 registrants this year, an increase of more than 10% over the previous year.

“COVID-19 still managed to keep a few registrants from attending, but most people made it and they were enthusiastic and excited about the chance to chat with fellow members face-to-face, to shake hands and swap information with the industry’s vendors and to gather useful tips and tricks on how to operate their businesses,” said ICPA Executive Director Jennifer Towner.

“Seeing the facilities of two Ohio manufacturer members (host companies) was a highlight of this year according to the comments we’ve received, and the NFL Hall of Fame was

a topper of epic proportions,” she added.

The NFL Hall of Fame was where the association’s annual gala was held. Members got a private tour of the museum, then honored stars of their own industry with awards and accolades. The host companies for the event were American Marble Industries (AMI), Canton, OH and Tower Industries, Massillon, OH.

### The “meat” of the meeting

Although attendees raved about the enjoyment and entertainment of the three-day event, they also praised the value they received from the general sessions, the PolyTech training sessions, the roundtables and the many chances they had in between sessions and events to swap ideas with fellow members and with suppliers.





PolyTECH sessions were held at the two host companies' facilities.



AMI's staff gathers onstage to receive an appreciation award.

# Ohio 2022:

## celebrating football and a great industry conference



Jonathan Taylor (middle), host of the Cast Polymer Radio podcast, shares laughs with (left, then right) Kay Rehberg and board member Chris Hurleston, both from ACS.



Many of Tower Industries' employees were there at the Hall of Fame when the company received its SAFE Plant of the Year Award.

"POLYCON gets better every year," was the most common comment by attendees who answered a survey on the event. In particular, they had praise for how "well planned and organized" everything was, how well-coordinated efforts were from the parties who made the event a success (including the staff of both AMI and Tower) and how valuable the educational content of sessions was.

"It's interesting to see how the large shops operate, and no one left without finding a new tip, trick, technique or resource," one commenter said.

"I found the business seminar sessions most valuable because I can use the information I gained toward my everyday life at work. I can also take this knowledge and apply it to other areas of my busy life," another person said.

"Even though the veining technique I saw is not what

our plant uses, I saw many interesting items that made me reassess our processes," another commenter said.

The second Women's Roundtable received much praise for providing a forum for women business leaders to exchange information and stories. The roundtable this year was sponsored by Women in the Composites Industry, a national network of women in the industry ([www.compositewomen.com](http://www.compositewomen.com)).

Also receiving a high number of favorable comments were sessions on the Entrepreneurial Operating System by two Tower employees (see page 18); Lisa Ryan's keynote address (see page 22); a regulatory update by John Schweitzer, American Composites Manufacturers Association and Kelly Debusk, Composites Compliance and a session by Luke Haas, Elite Marble on how his company is growing its employees, a



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ICPA Treasurer Matt Pullium holds his president's award.



Jack Simmons, a long-time leader in the industry, won ICPA's top award—the Royce E. Newsom Pioneer Award.

vital issue given today's staffing challenges.

Haas told his audience, "To allow your own staff to flourish requires taking many steps in bits—not all at once. It has to be a daily thing; it needs to be part of the routine; you have to have patience and humility and you have to be intentional in your actions, not just wing it," he said. It also requires recognizing the technology available today to help companies communicate, he added.

## Honoring the best

After attendees enjoyed a tailgate-type feast at the NFL Hall of Fame, they took part of the gala evening to honor those that raise the level of the industry and association.

Jack Simmons was honored with the Royce E. Newsom Pioneer Award. Simmons is a 30-year veteran of the industry and has worn many hats over his long career. Those hats include selling raw materials for Dow Chemical, serving as a distributor, then vice president of sales and marketing for Silmar resins; selling filler for R.J. Marshall and ACS International; and serving as COO and vice president of sales for cast polymer companies. He also served on the boards of ICPA and the Cultured Marble Institute and has been relied upon many times for his expertise for solving technical and operational problems facing ICPA members.

Simmons also has a reputation for helping "mom and

pop" shops get started and grow.

"Jack is truly a pioneer in our industry, with a soft spot for the small, up-and-coming companies. He has a vast background in chemistry and just loves composites," says Bonnie Webster, co-owner of Monroe Industries, Avon, NY.

Another award given that night was the president's award, which the current ICPA leader presents to someone within ICPA who has given much time and attention to association events in recent years. President Kerry Klodt gave her award to Matt Pulliam, current ICPA treasurer.

"We are honoring Matt for his many years of service as a valuable manufacturer member, board member and as treasurer the last several years. On top of all that, Matt heads up the SAFE Plant committee and led the campaign to write the ICPA reserve policy that ensures ICPA assets and invest-

## Thank you sponsors!

Without the generosity of sponsors for POLYCON, the event would not have been the success it was.

ICPA expresses appreciation to:





Larry Branan and his wife Rita enjoyed the gala at the NFL Hall of fame dinner where he was honored for his service.



Todd Werstler and his father and partner Bob Werstler welcomed ICPA to Tower Industries.

ments are secure for many years to come. His forward thinking is an invaluable asset to our organization,” Klodt said.

Awards of appreciation also went out to several people and companies. Larry Brannon was recognized for seven years of running the technical sessions at POLYCON. He was instrumental in creating the PolyTech form for those sessions. As one event commenter said, “We are going to miss Larry’s expertise.”

The staff of both Tower Industries and AMI were recognized for going above and beyond in serving as hosts for the 2022 POLYCON event. In addition, Tower leaders returned to the podium when Tower Industries was named SAFE Plant of the Year for 2022. The award is given to the company whose safety program shines. ■

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THINKING OF TOMORROW

# DIGITAL MARKETING:

## Website updates that work



BY LINDA LULLIE

When the internet was new, just having a website gave a company credi-

bility. However, in today's fast-moving, highly competitive world of digital marketing, your website needs to keep up with the times in terms of both looks and functionality to be competitive.

If it's been a year or more since you've done much of anything to your website, it's time to dust it off.

Here are some simple suggestions for taking a look at your site with fresh eyes.

### Is it time?

So how do companies determine when it's time to update their websites? Since most owners and company leaders are busy running a business, they don't have time to follow technology news and are not necessarily up on design trends. But, there are specific aspects of a website that can be considered.

For example:

**Is the site itself responsive?** That means, does it display correctly on all screen sizes (phones, tablets, laptops and desktop monitors)? This should be one of the very first checkpoints to see if the site is up to date. If it isn't mobile responsive, then it's time for a new face.

**Is the site secure?** A secure socket certificate or SSL (HTTPS:) is critical today regardless of whether a site deals with sensitive data. Google will not index sites without these credentials, and the Chrome browser will present a warning to visitors about dealing with an unregistered site that will likely scare visitors away. If your site still shows only HTTP:

in the browser, contact your hosting company.

**Can you update it without calling a developer?** Companies that are paying a third party to do simple things such as changing seasonal hours are wasting money. You should have a site that allows you to change a product, adjust your privacy policy, or add a blog post, press release, or gallery photos without needing special software or training.

**Do the structure and content work together, and are they updated?** In today's fast-paced world, everyone is busy, so web surfers expect to find information fast and as easily as possible. You should be looking at whether your site is easy to get around; if it makes logical sense as far as how it's navigated. Visitors need to know where they are on your site and how to find what they need. Sites should be checked regularly for dead or broken links. The information there needs to be timely: take a look at the copyright date at the bottom of a page, the date of the last news article or blog post, and the age of the project photos. Are they recent enough to hold interest?

**Do pages look fresh and modern?** Proper use of white space and a design layout based on the message you want to get across are vital to getting and keeping attention. Once visitors are on your site, a call to action becomes critical. Most of today's websites use larger and more varied fonts, lots of large, professional graphics, and more integrated functionality. Take a look around the web and see what's out there today.

**Have you reviewed your website analytics recently?** Analytics provide a wealth of data as to where to look to make the website perform better. Here are a few you need to check:

- Bounce rate—the percentage of people who see a single page of your website and then close the tab.
- Page load speed—the time it takes from the moment a searcher clicks on your link to when they see the entire page with all text and images. If your website takes too long to load (the hourglass is spinning!), you're losing potential customers.
- Onsite time—the amount of time users spend on your site tells you how valuable your design and content are.

## How often and what to change?

Companies that fail to update their websites will eventually drop down in search engine rankings. This is because search engines regard websites with the most recent content as the most relevant to web users. The content of a site might be golden as is but if it's the same content as it was five years ago, then search engine crawlers might not think the site data is relevant.

Web standards are changing radically and rapidly. At Inspired 2 Design, we recommend you review/update content every few months, and evaluate the design and functionality every two to three years with a goal to please visitors first, and search bots second.

Technology is always changing and a number of technologies and platforms are available today to help build a better site. Most websites today are constructed with a content managed solution (CMS) such as WordPress or Joomla. An alternative would be a proprietary option such as Weebly or Wix. Just be sure to do your research before deciding on one solution over another.

A CMS platform is critical today. Such sites are inherently responsive and mobile friendly. Google officially began requiring responsive sites in 2015. More recently, Google has been giving strong preference to mobile responsive sites—purposely downgrading sites that are not responsive. If you want your website found on Google, you must have mobile responsiveness.

Google is doing this for a couple of reasons:

1. According to Statista, in 2021, over half of all website traffic (54.4%) was mobile generated.
2. A mobile-responsive website contributes to a more positive user experience. Websites that cater to mobile users have higher retention rates and convert more visitors.

Here's a bonus: a CMS site is easy to maintain. Content managers write what they want using a WYSIWYG editor (What You See Is What You Get), similar to a word-processing program. This allows you to add to or switch most of your content without calling a developer, using special software

or having a lot of training.

An up-to-date CMS platform is also more secure and less likely to be hacked. Security flaws affecting older websites are much more likely because such sites rely on older, less secure coding and technology.

Web users today also expect more interactivity such as access to a blog, contact or support forms, social media links, and in many cases shopping functionality. WordPress and Joomla developers have built countless plugins that make it simple to add customized functionality to a website for free or for a very low cost.

Your website's structure will determine whether a person and a search engine can understand what the site is about, but it's also important for another reason. Because Google Robots or Spiders (the programs that automatically discover and scan websites) crawl by following links, it's critical to create a logical hierarchy.

**“People get lost and frustrated by a disorganized site so the goal should be to help visitors find what they're looking for in as few clicks as possible.”**

People get lost and frustrated by a disorganized site so the goal should be to help visitors find what they're looking for in as few clicks as possible. Regardless of how pages are structured in the hierarchy, each page should be specific and targeted—the page should have a main focus keyword or phrase that describes what the page is about.

Every website should have a minimum of five pages, but ultimately, an 8–10 page site has been deemed more effective.

Remember, in creating your structure, the first impression of your website is the overall layout, but the reader is visiting your website because they are looking for useful information. Content is the “meat and potatoes” of all your online marketing including your website, blog, social media and outgoing communications such as email.

As I've emphasized, search engines rank frequently updated sites higher. At the same time, however, regularly updated poor content can be your downfall, both with visitors and with search engines. For example, Google lowers the rankings of websites in search results for keyword stuffing (overloading text with keywords) and for repeated content.

A key to remember is that all content should offer Value. It should educate, entertain, enlighten, express a position, thought or opinion, or encourage action. Your content should provide authentic information that goes beyond self-

promotion. (In our industry common useful data can include articles on subjects such as bathroom cleaning, design trends, water-saving tips). You need to appear trustworthy and have relevant expertise. Your content should be significantly unique and stand apart from similar sites. Don't ever be tempted to plagiarize from sites you admire, and check the accuracy of spelling grammar, dates, current phone numbers, addresses and company information. The more unique/original, relevant and current your content is, the higher quality your traffic will be.

Site value and organization are critical not just for users but the ease of crawling for the search engine. After Google crawls your site, it indexes it. This is where Google analyzes and tries to understand all the content (including images) on the page before storing it in its database.

Make reading a page easier for people, and make indexing easier for Google by:

- Using a consistent formula for page names; keep them under 90 characters.
- Using headlines and subheads to make scanning content faster.
- Using captions and ALT Text (a snippet of text that describes the content of an image or video since Robots cannot read images).
- Including a call to action on every page so visitors know what you want them to do next.
- Including a phone number and/or address (with map/directions link) on every page so if visitors decide to take the next step, they can easily find critical information.

Most importantly, all pages should be aesthetically pleas-

ing and easily scannable by people so they get the main idea of the page without having to read every word.

## A last word about search engines

Google has monopolized the search market; that's why I've focused here on satisfying Google's demands. No one knows the entire recipe for the "secret sauce" Google uses—the algorithm considers more than 200 factors.

In addition, the way people search and how they search has changed dramatically over the last few years, even truer with the explosion of smart phone devices and "Hey Siri!" Today, chatting with a Bot almost feels indistinguishable from chatting with customer service. Artificial intelligence has crept into web design and can be used to enhance the user experience, make searches and recommendations more precise, and offer voice search optimization.

You may think that's future tech, but it isn't. Remember just a few years back, when QR Codes looked like they wouldn't take hold? Restaurants began putting touch-free menus online and accessible via scanning a QR code (which has only been enhanced through COVID-19 events). Smart phones integrated readers directly into the built-in cameras, causing the popularity of these quick link images to soar, and now they're used in countless applications to speed up access to web pages, videos, downloads, and more.

It may be time for you to step into your client's shoes and review your website from their eyes, then pick up the dust rag and get to work. ■

LINDA LULLIE is co-owner of **Inspired 2 Design, LLC**. She encourages readers to send her questions or comments. Reach her at [linda@inspired2design.com](mailto:linda@inspired2design.com).

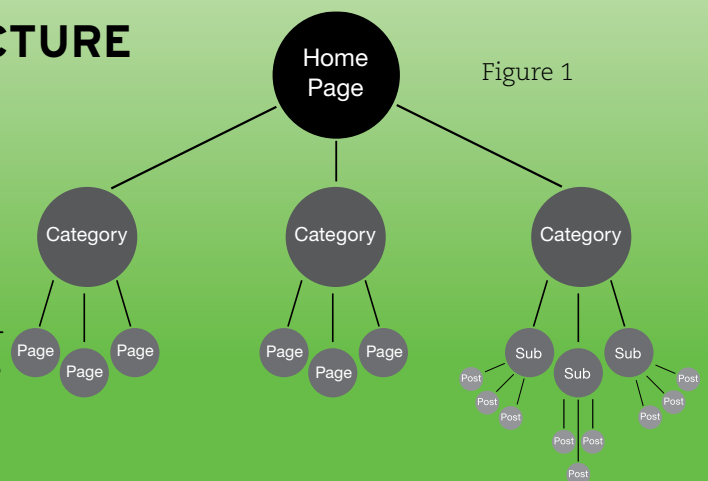
## MORE ABOUT WEBSITE STRUCTURE

Websites should be designed to help visitors find what they're looking for in as few clicks as possible. The home page is the most significant page with three main goals:

- To clearly state who you are and what you do;
- To capture and hold attention;
- To instruct what to do next (call to action).

The home page typically links to other pages via a menu (presented consistently on every page). The hierarchy can include Categories (like Products, Samples, Shop etc.) with Subcategories (see Figure 1), or it may link pages from the home page. Your "Products" category might include the subcategories:

Vanity Tops, Shower Pans & Walls, Tub Surrounds, etc; or you could categorize by type of surface (Cultured Marble, Solid Surface, etc.). Either way, the goal is to plan ahead and think logically as long as every page of the website targets one main focus keyword or phrase that describes what the page is about. List out all the possible pages your site could have and decide what the main idea or keyword is for that page bearing in mind that each page/keyword should be unique from the others.

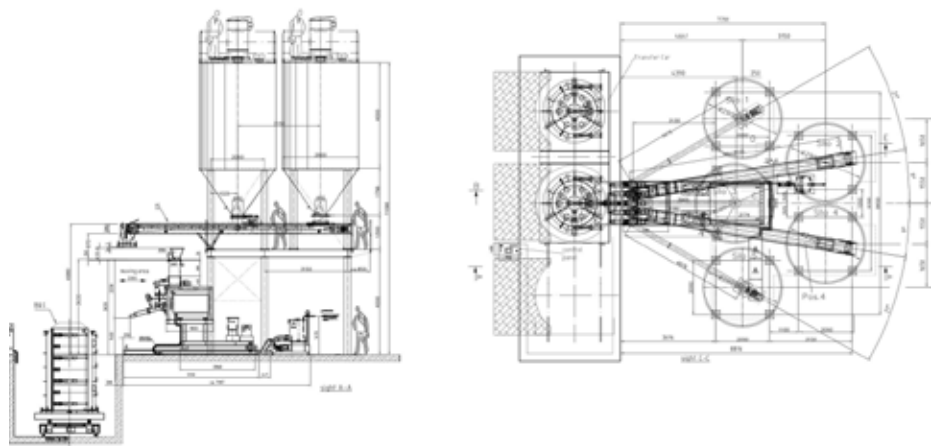




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# EOS:



## Growing smart means identifying and building on strengths

BY GENILEE SWOPE  
PARENTE

Many ICPA members started out small ... one or two people with an idea and the drive to make it happen. Success brings constant change and challenges, and at some point, the founders of the company realize it's time to take a hard look at the foundations of the company so they can build a viable future.

Such was the case at Tower Industries, Massillon, OH, a company that has grown from a father/son partnership into a business whose products have reached into every state. Tower's "hard look" has come via a tool that owner Todd Werstler discovered in 2018: the Entrepreneurial Operating System (EOS). Werstler and Tower's controller Ron Reolfi shared with recent POLYCON attendees how and why the program was developed.

### Why EOS

The EOS way of thinking is a way of stripping a company's vision back to its core competencies, then building a healthy pathway to growth based on the strengths that are already there. Werstler first learned of it when he read "Traction: Get a Grip on Your Business" by EOS creator Gino Wickman.

"Tower Industries began as a business plan idea I convinced my father to support and then help me to expand," Werstler explains. The thought in the early days was: "let's make it to tomorrow, then to the next day and the next," he jokes.

"Over the years, it has become a very neat place to work and grow," he adds. "However, as we were getting bigger, I allowed events to occur that were not good for us, such as hiring a salesperson who was great at sales, but not kind to the rest of our employees."

What he read in that book and others and a group he joined consisting of founders of companies bonding over shared business experiences convinced him that what Tower needed was an overall company cultural change.

"We needed to find a way to help us take what began as a one-story structure to the skyscraper it could be," he explained.

EOS is a way to build a foundation that can support the weight of success instead of building in a way that threatens the whole structure.

"It uses many of the tools large companies have used to grow but brings the steps down to the entrepreneurial level," he said.

Werstler admits that it comes with pain because some people won't get on board or don't want to be held accountable for their actions.

However, "after implementing the system, we immediately became a better company," he says. The process is "not inexpensive, but not expensive and probably put a million dollars in our pocket in the last year alone," Werstler explained.

**"After implementing the system, we immediately became a better company..."**

### How Tower proceeded

The company began the process by asking supervisors to identify their very best employees, then pinpoint why they were so good.

The traits identified among the best-of-the-best in such a process become “the commonalities of why a company is a success,” Werstler explains.

From those commonalities, the company has developed a list of six core values that it lives by in day-to-day operations. Product development, company operating systems, hiring and firing and customer relations now run according to those core values. At Tower, those core values are: “We are kind; we take initiative; we get it done; we make it right; we are humble; and we are enthusiastic,” Werstler explained.

Reolfi explained to a POLYCON breakout session the specifics of why EOS works and how Tower implemented it.

“Sometimes the stresses of our everyday workday force us off track or lead us in the wrong direction,” he explained. “For example, many of the employees at Tower respected and appreciated Todd and his father and what they accomplished, but no one knew what was in their heads.”

As a result, “Some people were rowing in different directions,” he explained.

## Getting control

EOS gave the company a tool for organizing how it does business on a regular basis. Reolfi explained that the process addresses five key areas of frustration for growing companies:

**Control:** in the hectic pace of everyday operations, company managers deal with a myriad of issues from weather to the market to consumer demand. Too often, those issues absorb time, which keeps the boat rocking and threatens the direction of the company.

**Profit:** This factor may not be why people get into business in the first place, but it’s vital to staying in business so it affects daily activity.

**People:** The employees of the company often can’t or don’t see what management sees while vendors can’t hope to know all the pressures and challenges of the company.

**Hitting the ceiling:** At some point, all people in life bump up against factors that don’t allow them to reach the next level of success.

**The feeling that nothing’s working:** Management often tries different strategies, then throws out those that don’t work. This creates a lack of cohesion as well as recalcitrant employees, Reolfi explained.

“EOS is a way to empower owners to take control and build confidence among employees,” he said. It’s also a way to organize all the human energy that goes into the company into a system designed to solve problems, communicate among parties and create a viable daily structure.

Identifying Tower’s six core values was only the first step in the process. The next step was to find a rhythm that allowed the values to roll along and created the traction necessary to get specific things done.

At Tower, a key part of that rhythm is meetings including weekly meetings among departments as well as general



Ron Reolfi, Tower Industries, shares the EOS system with POLYCON 2022 attendees.

planning meetings including 1) the whole company meets onsite quarterly to review progress and goals; 2) meetings of managers offsite quarterly to review where the company is in terms of specific one-, three- and ten-year goals and 3) two-day meetings each year among key decision makers for revising old goals and setting new ones.

Traction and rhythm are also provided by a company accountability chart and a company scorecard used for the meetings.

The accountability chart isn’t the same thing as an organizational chart, Reolfi explained. “It’s an outline of how we are going to get to where we are aiming,” including who will do what. It also includes what Werstler and Reolfi described as “rocks,” which are 90-day to-do lists that guide processes—tasks that may not be part of the daily routine of priorities, but that are part of the overall goals that get reviewed every quarter.

The company also has a company scorecard, which is populated with measurable results and specific goals.

At the weekly meetings, the agenda is broken into five general parts: 1) Segway (which is good news, both professionally and personally for the company); 2) a review of the scorecard; 3) a review of rocks; 4) customer and employee headlines (news both good and bad for individual employees and for customers); and 5) a review of the last meeting’s to-do list.

Anything on the scorecard that did not make its goals or that is off track goes to what the company calls the **IDS** level:

STORY CONTINUES ON PAGE 24

# Climate impact:

## What customers may want to know

BY JOHN SCHWEITZER

**Do you sell products for construction projects funded by federal grants or loans,** for buildings that will be LEED-certified [Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design] or do you sell directly to federal or state governments?

If the answer is “yes” for any of these scenarios, you should be aware you might soon be asked to provide an Environmental Product Declaration (EPD) for your products.

### What’s an EPD and how is it done?

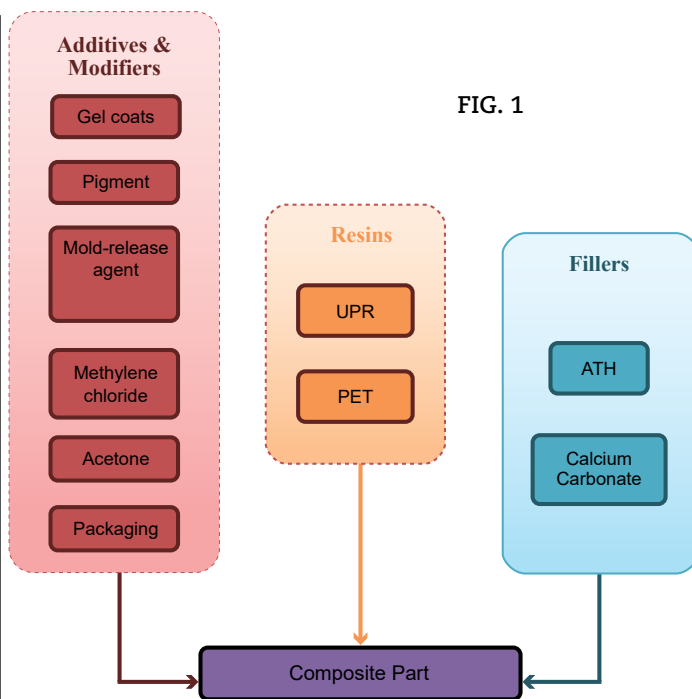
An EPD provides an independently verified estimate of the climate impacts associated with the manufacture of a product as well as the raw materials that go into the product. EPDs are supposed to help architects select products and materials based—at least in part—on a comparison of climate impacts.

Manufacturers of comparable products using similar raw materials and processes often collaborate to produce an industry EPD that provides estimates based on averages across participating companies. Industry EPDs are widely accepted and can represent a significant cost savings compared to independent preparation of EPDs by individual companies.

Preparing an industry EPD starts with a life cycle analysis (LCA) based on data provided by the companies participating in a project. For cast polymer operations using unsaturated polyester resin, ACMA has already completed this step. We collected data from resin suppliers and cast polymer companies, and used available data on climate impacts associated with producing fillers and other materials. Then we published a life cycle inventory (LCI) report providing estimates of energy use and environmental impacts for production of 1,000 pounds of cast polymer product.

In addition to emission of climate warming gases (called GHG for greenhouse gas), the LCI provides estimates of the energy use, water use and solid waste generation for producing cast polymer products. These are referred to as cradle-to-gate estimates because they include extraction of materials from the environment, processing and transportation of raw materials, and cast polymer operations. They do not include the impacts that may occur after a product leaves the plant.

Figures 1 and 2 are from ACMA’s LCI for cast polymer



production (called open mold casting in the report). Figure 1 shows the material inputs for which energy use, water use, solid waste generation and GHG emissions data were collected and analyzed. Based on an average across the companies that contributed data, Figure 2 provides estimates of the relative climate warming impacts across resin manufacture, production of other raw materials, transportation of raw materials and polymer casting operations.

According to this analysis, the major sources of GHG emissions from cast polymer product production are associated with resin manufacturing and the energy used in the cast polymer production process. The formulation of unsaturated polyester resin (UPR) itself is not highly energy intensive. However, as Figure 3 shows, the manufacture of the intermediates used to produce resin are associated with high temperatures and generation of significant quantities of GHG. A significant reduction in these emissions would contribute to the “decarbonization” of cast polymer products, which eventually may be needed to compete in some markets. But that’s a discussion for another day.

Following LCA completion, the next step on the path to an industry EPD is developing a product category rule (PCR).

A PCR is a consensus standard representing an agreement among participating cast polymer manufacturers, suppliers and end-users on data to be presented in an EPD. It also outlines the requirements for transparency and verification for developing that data. A PCR is promulgated with the assistance of a PCR program operator who

guides the PCR committee through the consensus process (in compliance with applicable ISO standards).

The final steps for an EPD are 1) an LCA practitioner takes the data from the LCI and develops the EPD according to the PCR, and 2) the process is subjected to independent verification. Any cast polymer manufacturer that contributed to the EPD development can use the industry EPD to provide climate impact estimates to architects and other end-users.

I indicated earlier that EPDs are “supposed to” help architects make decisions about materials and products under consideration for a project. The reason I phrased it that

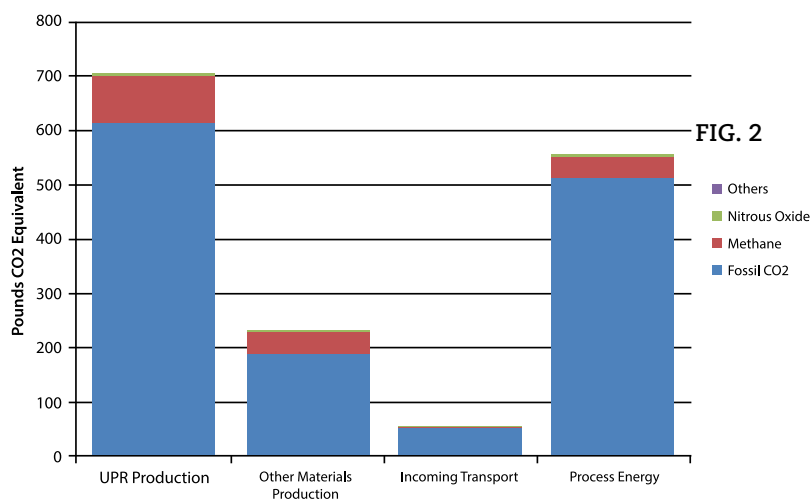


FIG. 2

way is that, while there is a significant push to get architects and building owners to consider EPDs, in truth, there’s much uncertainty about how EPDs can be properly used. Developing an LCA is a complicated process that can involve a lot of educated guesswork to fill in missing data. Two different LCA practitioners can properly follow the appropriate ISO

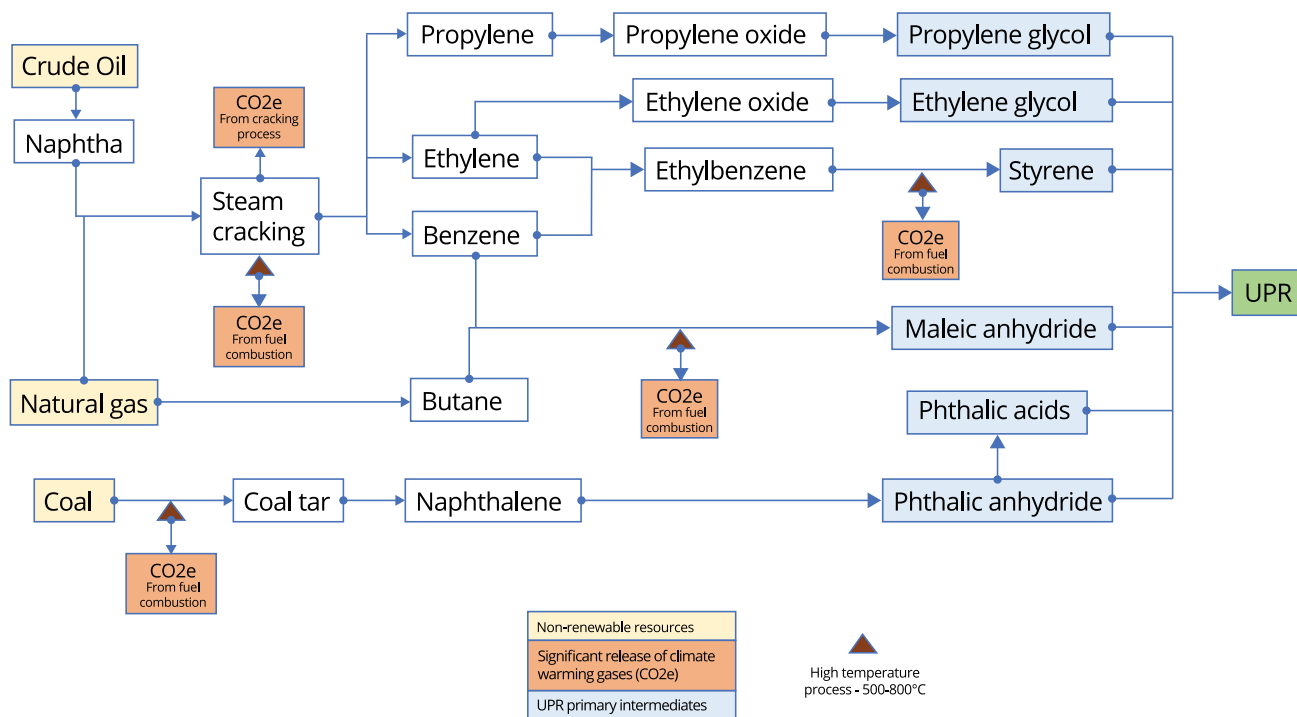
procedures but still develop very different estimates of the climate impacts associated with the same product.

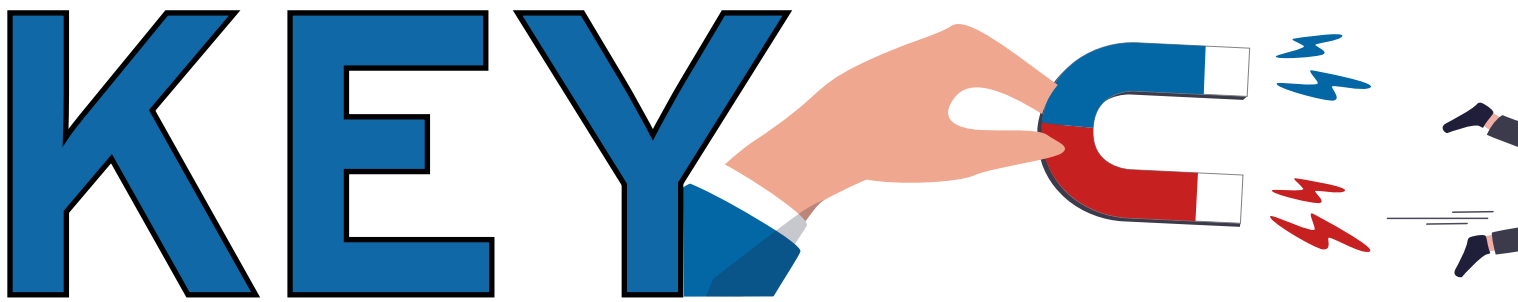
Nevertheless, the issue is important because EPDs are becoming necessary for many products sold for construction and infrastructure.

ACMA is helping other composites industry segments develop LCAs and EPDs. If you’re interested in finding out more about this whole process, please send me a note. ■

**JOHN SCHWEITZER** is vice president for EH&S and Sustainability with the American Composites Manufacturers Association. He can be reached at [jschweitzer@acmanet.org](mailto:jschweitzer@acmanet.org).

FIG. 3 Significant sources of GHG associated with the production of unsaturated polyester resin (simplified)





# Post-pandemic strategies to keep top talent

BY LISA RYAN, CSP

**For the last several years, it's been widely reported that 87% of employees are open to exploring new job opportunities.** Most conversations center around “quiet quitting” and “quiet firing.” But what's the difference?

Quiet quitting is an informal term describing when the work an employee commits to a job is minimized because of factors such as employees don't complete tasks not specifically listed in the job description. Such employees cease going above and beyond and only do the work they are paid to do. In most cases, the employees don't share this information with their managers so it's up to those managers to detect changes in staff behavior and see what can be done to rectify the situation.

One reality that has contributed to this situation is that employees are burned out. The pandemic caused a lot of business disruption, leading to staff cutbacks needed to help companies survive financially. Staff members left behind to pick up the slack were willing to do so because they believed it would be a temporary situation. However, as business leaders saw they could get by with fewer employees, they've been slow to bring people back. As a result, burnout is rising exponentially, and employees are unwilling to take it any longer.

On the other hand is quiet firing, which is when managers avoid firing employees outright. Instead, they use a variety of passive-aggressive tactics that have the same impact. Examples of this include: routinely giving employees their least favorite duties, not including them in certain email threads and excluding them from specific gatherings. Sometimes these actions are the result of a desire not to overburden someone with tasks that cause burnout.

Both quiet quitting and quiet firing wreak havoc on employee culture. Employees who don't feel connected to their job or the people they work with will leave their positions. In many cases, employees aren't quitting their positions;

they're quitting the culture of the company that's their employer. Companies that manage to get the culture right can turn things around.

Because people are the number one resource for every organization, engaging with them is critical. When company leaders pay attention to “little things” that affect how their own employees see the company, the business maintains a higher retention rate, and productivity is improved. A business that increases engagement has a huge advantage over organizations ignoring the niceties that can create a positive culture.

But while most of us today agree that a culture of engagement is vital, how do we accomplish this? Here are three ways to create a connected culture and keep top talent from becoming someone else's top talent.

## An attitude of accessibility

Trust is the foundation on which a company builds its culture. If there is no trust between leadership and employees, nothing else matters. The company's culture took a long time



Lisa Ryan was the keynote speaker at POLYCON Ohio in September 2022.



to get to where it is right now, and it will not change overnight. However, by committing to a positive culture, and sticking

with that commitment, a company will create the right atmosphere.

When leaders get to know their team members individually, show empathy for their challenges, share information openly and honestly, and let their employees get to know them, the employees are more likely to feel connected to the organization.

A great strategy to improve accessibility is the “stay interview.” To do this, leaders set up times to meet with people one-on-one. They then ask staff members what they like about their jobs, what would cause them to leave, what resources they need to succeed in their jobs, and what they would change if they were the top management themselves. Companies should go into these conversations with a “thank you for sharing” attitude, act on the suggestions made, and give credit where credit is due.

### Level up the learning

Helping a team become better tomorrow than they are today means providing continuing education and professional development opportunities. Companies can be creative in their programming, and they don’t always have to spend a bunch of money. But they need to begin by ensuring they get feedback on what the employees think would be most beneficial.

This last point is crucial: when investing in personal and professional development, company leaders need to include input from staff. Most people today are looking for ways to grow and improve, yet they don’t necessarily take time out of their busy schedules to do this work on their own. Successful leaders make it easy for employees to take advantage of company offerings. Any company that invests in those that work for them through opportunities to develop skills creates a more dedicated, well-rounded team. These team leaders will take better care of the company if the company takes care of them.

Some leaders think, “Why should we spend money to

train our employees? They’re just going to take what they learn and leave anyway. While that may be true in a few cases, here is food for thought. What if employers don’t train staff, and they stay on board? What does that accomplish? Those businesses that invest in employees see many benefits, not the least of which is that staff works harder because they feel valued. They feel contributions are recognized when the company invests time and resources in their careers and personal development.

### Rock your recognition

Companies that catch their teams in the act of doing things well benefit. By finding ways to acknowledge, appreciate and applaud the efforts of team members, businesses build a connection with them. Mother Teresa once said, “We are more starved for appreciation than bread.” Showing appreciation is just as valid at work as it is at home.

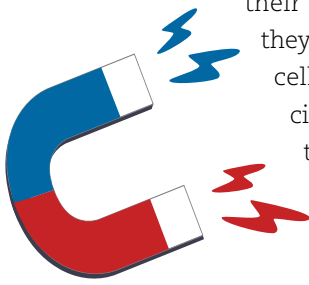
**“By finding ways to acknowledge, appreciate and applaud the efforts of team members, businesses build a connection with them.”**

Research by Marcial Losada finds that high-performing teams work with a 6-to-1 positivity ratio. This statistic means that for every single negative comment that employees hear, they hear at least six positive reactions. These opinions do not necessarily mean attitudes such as: “Yay! Everything that you do is perfect”; but rather, “That’s a good start on an idea; let’s see how we can build it from here.” It’s called *respectful communication*.

An average-performing team has a 3-to-1 positivity ratio. At this point, employees are doing just enough work so they do not get fired, and the company is probably paying them just enough so they do not quit (see quiet quitting above). It’s an even balance.

A low-performing team has a .3-to-1 positivity ratio. People on a low-performing team hear three times more negative remarks than positive comments. This simply doesn’t work. These team members may be the victims of the aforementioned quiet firing tactics.

My advice to all employers is this: Stop always trying to fix what’s broken and acknowledge what’s working instead. What gets recognized gets repeated, so if companies want



their people to behave productively, they need to let them know their excellent work is noticed and appreciated. Chances are, staff will like the positive feedback and look for ways to get more of it.

On the other hand, when giving positive feedback, leaders should not just say, "Great job!" They need to be specific, so the employees know those leaders are paying attention. Management needs to look for ways to recognize employees in the ways they like to be acknowledged. For example, some love public applause, while others hate it. Maybe for those more reserved employees, a manager should set up a one-to-one conversation. Written notes, while certainly rare in today's electronic world, are a terrific way to connect. When leaders tell employees they are appreciated, a wonderful memory is created. When that apprecia-

tion is written down, a treasure is created for the employees. They are presented tangible evidence of a job well done.

## Final thought

To get started with all of this, top leaders should sit down with their leadership team and determine the type of culture the company wants to create. Leaders should not focus on what "should" be done but on the unique characteristics that make their workplace a great place. Then they should work backward from there. In other words, what steps will cause this new and improved culture to happen?

Once a plan to change the culture is created, leaders should choose one or two of the top ideas they will commit to over the long term. After that: they need to just do it. ■

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**LISA RYAN**, CSP, helps organizations who want to keep their top talent from becoming someone else's. She is the Founder of Grategy and is an award-winning speaker and best-selling author of eleven books, including "Manufacturing Engagement: 98 Proven Strategies to Attract and Retain Your Industry's Top Talent". Learn more at [www.LisaRyanSpeaks.com](http://www.LisaRyanSpeaks.com).



Todd Werstler gave his POLYCON presentation in the break room at Tower, where the company's principles are part of the room's decor.

## EOS, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19

identify the issue, discuss every idea and create possible solutions through the to-do lists.

Such tools are designed not just to create a way for employees to track where they are, but to allow constant motion within the company.

Meanwhile, the accountability chart and the list of company values help Tower with one of the key issues in plants today: how to hire the right people.

"This is one of the main goals of EOS," Reolfi explained. "There are three issues to avoid: having the right person in the wrong seat, having the right person but not having him or her in the right job and having the wrong person in the right seat," he said.

By having tools such as an accountability chart and a list of company values, "we're aiming for 100% of having the

right people in the right seats," he says.

Werstler adds that it also helps with making major company decisions as far as what new product lines to pursue or major directions to take because it allows constant monitoring of a company's successes as well as what that company can afford to do.

"The premise behind a system such as EOS is to provide a simple set of principles by which to run the company and then follow those principles to long-term success," he concluded. ■

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



## THE ICPA'S SPRING NETWORKING EVENT



### ICPA returns to Eaglewood for April Buzz

In 2018, POLYCON was held at the popular Eaglewood Resort, Itasca, IL, a place that offers attendees many amenities including an on-site bowling alley, a championship golf course, a golf simulator, a bocce court, stunning views and an onsite gourmet restaurant. The association returns to the resort on April 28 and 29, 2023 for The Buzz.

The Buzz was started in 2022 to provide people a second networking channel (beyond the annual POLYCON), a way to get together with friends and colleagues in a relaxed atmosphere. The first event, held in April 2022 in Atlanta, was heavily attended, and ICPA is expecting even more people in 2023. The Chicago area was chosen as a site because of its convenient travel location.

Eaglewood Resort is only about 20 minutes from Chicago's O'Hare airport. Registration will open in January 2023 at early bird rates. To register and for more information on schedules and programming, go to the ICPA website under the "programs" tab. For information on the resort, go to [www.eaglewoodresort.com](http://www.eaglewoodresort.com).

### Reserve September 18-20 for POLYCON 2023

Planners are busy creating what promises to be a monumental 2023 POLYCON. Atlanta will be the site of the September 18-20 event and attendees should expect to see some differences and enhancements in the schedule and agenda. The association will be celebrating its 50th anniversary and has already planned many ways to celebrate as well as ways to take advantage of the opportunities in the Atlanta area.

For example, several ICPA supplier and manufacturer members in the Atlanta area will be helping with and hosting various events during the event. Field trips will be planned to visit those companies, as well as to see the facilities and operations of the ICPA sponsor companies in the area.

The hotel and details on tours, general sessions, roundtables, discussions and technical sessions of PolyTECH are now being finalized. Registration opens May 1. Stay tuned to the ICPA website [www.theicpa.com](http://www.theicpa.com) for more information.

### Please take a look at the new strategic plan

In keeping with its association vision and mission statements, the ICPA board recently adopted a revised and updated new, two-year strategic plan for the association.

The strategic plan outlines the goals and objectives for membership growth and moving the association forward in the coming years. Objectives include education and information across a variety of platforms, safety, technical and regulatory assistance, and marketing growth and development for the cast polymer industry.

The plan can be viewed on the ICPA website [www.theicpa.com](http://www.theicpa.com) under "member resources."

### Improved website to launch in 2023

Visitors will soon see changes to the ICPA website. Major improvements and updates are planned for the website in 2023 to make resources more easily and readily accessible

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to members, improve registration forms to attend events, and help with making connections within the organization. Updates should be completed in the coming months. The site's address remains the same: [www.theicpa.com](http://www.theicpa.com).

**Celebrating new members and participants**

ICPA recently welcomed the following members to its ranks:

- AGEAN Marble in Cincinnati, OH; [www.agean.com/agean-bathrooms](http://www.agean.com/agean-bathrooms)
- Brandt Molded Marble in Menomonee Falls, WI; [www.brandtmarble.com](http://www.brandtmarble.com)
- Wolf Home Products – Carstin Division in Arthur IL; [www.wolfhomeproducts.com/vanity-tops](http://www.wolfhomeproducts.com/vanity-tops)

In addition, the association also continues to celebrate current members who have committed to the SAFE Plant program and to participating in Live Grout Free.

SAFE Plant is the program the association created following guidelines by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's Safe + Sound program that asks participants to commit to creating company safety programs to prevent workplace injuries and improve compliance with regulations. For information, go to [www.theicpa.com](http://www.theicpa.com), "programs."



At POLYCON this year, these companies joined the ranks of members committed to the program: Manstone; Omya, Inc.; Marble Masters of Middle Georgia, Inc.; Inpro; Monroe Industries; GMP; Agean Marble Manufacturing; Brandt Molded Marble; and Wolf Home Products: Carstin Division.

Live Grout Free is a movement to educate the public about the many benefits of kitchen and bath products that



don't have grout. It has its own website and offers participants many resources for helping

with the educational campaign. Added recently to the roster of featured manufacturers are: Lafayette Marble & Granite, Whitewater Tyvarian and American Marble Industries. To see all the cast polymer market information, visit the website [www.livegroutfree.com](http://www.livegroutfree.com). Companies interested in becoming a spotlight or featured manufacturer should contact Jennifer Towner at [Jennifer@TheICPA.com](mailto:Jennifer@TheICPA.com).

**Videos posted**

One enhancement for 2022 POLYCON Ohio is that many of the sessions were videotaped. Those videotapes have been

formatted to YouTube and attendees were emailed a link to access them. In January of 2023, the videotapes will become available to all ICPA members on the "members only" page of the website.

**SAFE Plant of the Year award**



ICPA membership director Beth Kubinec visited Tower Industries in October to present the staff with the SAFE Plant of the Year award and to throw a special party for the employees. The award is given to a company that has created an outstanding program (see also President's message, page 2).

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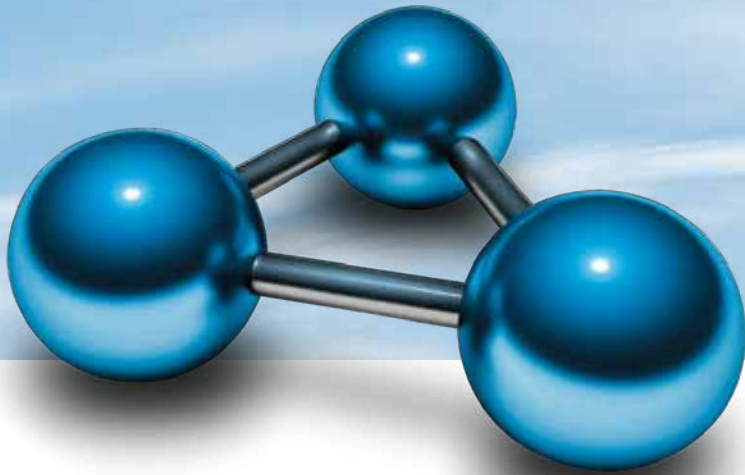
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