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Block Tops Inc. Rocks the Golden State

Beginning with the California Gold Rush of 1848, then on to the Golden Spike Ceremony in 1869, proclaiming the completion of the First Continental Railroad, California was well on its way to being a growth machine due to agriculture, oil, and shipping revenues. People from all walks of life saw the enormous opportunities from this growing economic powerhouse, and Horace Greeley's "Go West, Young Man" became the phrase of the day.

Now fast forward to the 1950s. Much of California had grown into a huge collection of cities and towns, linked together by freeways and mass transportation. Aerospace,

by Peter J. Marcucci

Photos Courtesy No-Lift Systems and Block Tops Inc.

electronics and Hollywood, to name a few, had positioned the Golden State as the most progressive state in the union.

By the 1970s, lifestyles had risen to the point where creature comforts such as great food, fancy clothing and upscale homes with classy furnishings were in high demand. While natural stone quarried both domestically and in Europe did satisfy most lifestyles, beautiful varieties of hardwoods logged in northern California, Oregon and Washington became vogue, especially in the

form of butcher block countertops, recalled Block Tops President Nate Kolenski.

"Seeing this demand in 1977, Block Tops Founder Damien Bates, who was probably the first craftsman in southern California to produce oak butcher block tops, built them for homes as well as restaurants. That was the company, and he added maple wood, later on. I'm not positive, but I think he bought a train car load of it!"

Kolenski joined the company in 1996, and currently shares the helm with CEO Vanessa Bates, the wife of now retired Damien Bates. This dynamic duo share the same business sense and ethics, and oversee the current facility (in its third iteration) in Anaheim, as

well as the second location in Sacramento, California. This expansion was partly due to adding engineered stone, solid surface and natural stone by year 2000, as well as the opportunity to increase its purchasing power and market reach. According to Kolenski, the two locations vary widely in market types.

"California is very, very big, and we do very well from Sacramento to the border and from Anaheim to the border, but we stay away from the central part of the state, because it is too difficult to get our guys there and back in one day, from either location."

When asked about the market potentials of both locations, Kolenski explained that they are both important, and very different. "That's a great question! The two markets are almost like two different states. The customers, the companies, the attitudes of the people, everything is different. Northern California is open, and close to the mountains and rivers, whereas southern California is very urban with beaches, higher incomes, higher home prices and a higher cost of living. One job can have a full slab island, then not too far away, there is somebody that's financing the best look that they can get for the price. So the customer base there is all over the place. Some purchases are based on what the interest rate is. Then, to others, it doesn't matter what the interest rate is. So the two are very, very different."

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A Block Tops installer team from the Anaheim office moves a full size island into place with their No-Lift Cart.



Block Tops, Anaheim install crews

Block Tops Inc.

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Because of the predominantly wholesale markets Block Tops serves, there is really not much use for extensive showrooms, said Kolenski. “We offer in-home design service, and our sales team would be doing that. Even if it’s a walk-in, we would suggest that we meet in the customer’s home where we can evaluate their needs.” Block Tops is tapped in to another lucrative niche, he said. “We also work with a few different cabinet re-facing companies. They sell the job, they do the re-facing and we supply the countertops. This is probably the second highest volume part of our business, behind big box.”

Go Wet, Young Man!

From the very beginning, Kolenski didn’t know about the silica issue, but knew he didn’t want all the dust, he recalled. “Some were saying that we needed a way to dry cut reinforcement rods or whatever, and we simply said no dry cutting or grinding at all! It has to be done wet. This one decision really helped us when the 2016 OSHA regulations came out. So we were ready, and when we started getting air testing, being a fully wet shop really helped, especially when the public health guys came into our shop for tours, saying it even smelled different in here! For us, being wet is not only



Above: Block Tops Anaheim, California office staff. The Anaheim office is the original and main branch, and is setting standards in terms of wet fabrication and dust control. Right: The Anaheim shop fabrication team in front of their BACA Sawjet.

healthier, it turns out it’s also the better, faster option. You just have to figure it out, and once you know, you know! BACA and Park Industries are our go-to equipment manufacturers. Parts are readily available, they are reliable, and both companies have done a really great job for us. They are good guys, too!”

According to Kolenski, company team members are always kept below 100, and all are considered family. “Some of them have been with us for 35 years, many for over twenty. A lot of our newer guys have

the most potential while learning the trade, and are very excited about it. We have a certain way of doing things, and very seldom do we bring anyone in from another company. So most of our shop guys are home-grown, and once they learn the craft, they feel like part of the team, because they were taught by their peers and successful because of their peers. Our plant manager came from Honduras 15 years ago not knowing anything about fabrication. He learned the language, learned the craft, and now runs our Sacramento location. He is

the most effective manager we have. He exudes Block Tops, and I would put him up against anyone in the industry. Products and machines you can buy, character you can’t teach. It is part of our people.”

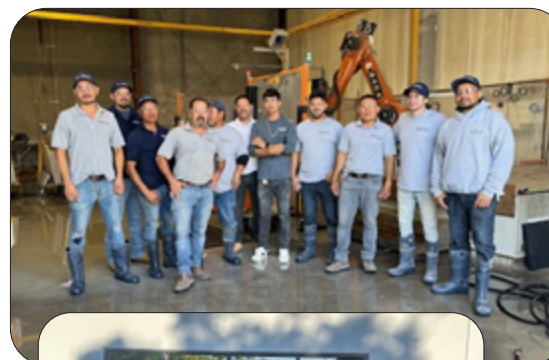
Big on Big Box

A major percentage of the company’s output is to multiple big box companies such as Home Depot, which is currently their biggest customer, and has been doing business with Block Tops since 1990. Approximately 90% wholesale, Block Tops also caters to other revenue sources such as kitchen and bath dealers as well as a wee bit of commercial and contractor work, explained Kolenski. “We try to keep our commercial work to jobs that get done quickly, because one of our priorities is a low level of debt. You actually have to pay us if we do a job, and some of the big commercial jobs just string-out the money too long! So we focus on the smaller, quick turn jobs.”

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NSI CEO Jim Hieb joined ISFA board president Ted Sherritt for a meeting of California public health officials hosted by Nate Kolenski at the Block Tops Anaheim facility, which is an NSI Accredited fabrication shop. The meeting helped officials understand what a silica-safe shop looks like, and showcased industry training resources available to stone companies.



Left: The Sacramento Block Tops fabrication crew. Both locations use BACA machines, and also Park Industries equipment.

Below: The Sacramento install crew, and a locked and loaded full-size slab ready for transport to a nearby jobsite.



Block Tops Inc.

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Taking Silicosis Prevention to the Next Level

If you've been listening to the news these days, you might have heard how the silicosis warnings in our industry are ramping up. New warnings are specifically aimed at the manufacturers and fabricators of quartz products, and echoing mostly through California's halls of justice, at least for the moment. Most fabricators understand that this is not a new problem, and clearly, this problem is not just going to go away. No Siree! If not dealt with from every angle, first by industry leaders, then by shops using stone products, it promises to fester and grow bigger by the year. Though not a simple fix, it is one of those situations, that if we do not take responsibility, someone else will, and the outcome will not be pretty, explained Kolenski in great detail.

"Engineered stone has eclipsed natural stone in just the last few years to become 65% percent of our sales. Prior to this, it had been approximately 50/50. I'm not sure if this trend will continue, due to all the silicosis stuff going on. L.A. County and Australia have focused on engineered stone as a silica issue, so I don't know.



The Block Tops Sacramento, California office staff.

"As it turns out, quartzites also have very high silica content, but they weren't even considered, at first. Now, though, it looks like the regulations and legislations are focused on treating all stone materials the same, and it's difficult to say with certainty what affect this will have on the consumers. So far, we've only had a handful of customers ask about the new silica concerns, but whatever happens with the regulations, it could certainly affect sales.

"That said, it really is difficult to predict what the next five years will bring. With the legislations that we are helping to work on, such as licensing fabricators before they can purchase materials, this will make a huge difference, because you can't control safety by enforcement, due to safety enforcement personnel being under staffed. We saw the 2016 OSHA rules that weren't being enforced, and the only way to stop that is to control who can get product. If that goes through, and it's a good law, companies like Block Tops will have a good opportunity to increase market share, because of the ones that can't or won't comply. That law in a good, clean bill will give the guys who care about safety and doing the right thing the advantage, and winnow out the bad actors and the guys who take dangerous short-cuts. Conversely, if they just keep putting regulations on guys like us who are trying to comply and don't do anything to the guys that aren't, it's going to choke our opportunities, and our costs are just going to keep going up. It can be expensive to do the right thing for the safety of your employees, and it's easier to not comply if there is no punishment. So the next five years will be very interesting."

The Bottom Line

In closing, if you're in fabrication for the long haul, you should think about joining the NSI and ISFA, because they spend a lot of time and money to fight for you. Also, think about taking the NSI silica and slab safety class that will deliver a whole lot of critical information, so you can be aware of the problem and not part of it. Then, get fully wet, if you're not already, and add air purification, if you haven't, and try to keep the air quality standard below the action level. If it does rise above the action level, immediately deal with it by making location, machine, or personnel changes. Continue to test your air and get your people tested regularly. Wash down the floors every night and wet down all pathways every morning.

Additionally, read current OSHA and state regulations, and when you're confident that you've done all you can, sign up for a voluntary OSHA consultation. There is no fine if any problems are corrected immediately, and it protects you for a year from any enforcement guys coming in. After this, it is time to pat yourself and your team on the back, and invite local public health officials and state legislators in



Top and Below: The Block Tops Sacramento, California install teams love their No-Lift Install system carts. Safety in all aspects of the job is important at Block Tops. The company has several No-Lift carts, and uses them in both locations.



for a tour. They have a lot of power, they are compassionate, and they really do care about worker's safety, but by and large, really don't know our industry. If we had done this a few years ago, we'd be in a better position to not be lumped together with non-compliant shops.

Block Tops Inc. is a member of the Natural Stone Institute and the Stone Fabricator's Alliance.

For more information, visit www.blocktops.com.

"We need to tell better stories of men and women who master a trade. We have to stop telling kids to blindly follow their passion and show them the opportunities that exist. That was the big, overarching message of 'Dirty Jobs.'"

– Mike Rowe



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2024 NTCA Five-Star Accredited Companies Announced



The National Tile Contractors Association (NTCA) is proud to announce the latest companies to achieve Five-Star Contractor status, a prestigious accreditation that recognizes the highest standards of excellence in the tile industry. For the first half of 2024, we welcome Fischer Tile & Marble as a new Five-Star accredited member in the commercial category. Additionally, Brekhuis Tile & Stone, Premier Tile & Stone, and Christian Brothers Flooring & Interiors, Inc. have received renewed Five-Star accreditation, with Premier Tile & Stone being the first company to achieve Large Commercial accreditation.

excellence in craftsmanship, customer service, and business practices. This includes adherence to industry standards, ongoing education and training, and a proven track record of successful, high-quality projects.

“We are thrilled to welcome Fischer Tile & Marble as a new Five-Star accredited member and to recognize Brekhuis Tile & Stone, Premier Tile & Stone, and Christian Brothers Flooring & Interiors, Inc. for their continued excellence,” said Bart Bettiga, Executive Director of NTCA. “The Five-Star accreditation is not just a recognition of past achievements, but a commitment to ongoing excellence and leadership in the tile industry.”

The NTCA Five-Star Contractor Program is designed to recognize and promote the highest caliber of tile and stone installation companies in the industry. To earn this esteemed accreditation, companies must demonstrate a commitment to

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APPLICATION:

- Building
- Furnishing
- Elevators
- Marine
- Backlight
- Pre-Fab Homes/ RV

Industry Calendar of Events

August 2024

BACA Systems: Digital Fabrication Seminar

When: Thursday, August 15 – 9:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. (ET)

Where: Accent Countertops, Murray, MA; More info TBA

NSI: Reducing Embodied Carbon with Natural Stone

When: Thursday, August 22 – 11:00 A.M. to 12:00 P.M. (ET)

Where: Online

Visit naturalstoneinstitute.org/calendar for more information.

NSI: Utah Study Tour – Know Your Business

When: Sunday, August 25 through Wed. August 28 9:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. (ET)

Where: Salt Lake City Area, TBA

Visit naturalstoneinstitute.org/calendar for more information.

NTCA: Tile Design Trends and Installation Regional Seminars

When: August 8, 3:00 P.M. to 5:00 P.M.

Where: Louisville Tile, 13200 10th Avenue N, Suite D, Minneapolis, MN 55441

When: August 15, 3:00 P.M. to 5:00 P.M.

Where: Louisville Tile, 650 Melrose Avenue, Nashville, TN 37203

Visit NTCAtraining.com to register and for more information.

September 2024

ISFA: 2-Day Fabricator Forum

When: Wednesday September 11. 8:00 A.M. to Thursday, Sept 12, 5:00 P.M. (CDT)

Where: St. Louis, Missouri

Visit isfanow.org/calendar for more information.

NSI: Ohio Stone Summit

When: Thursday September 19, 9a.m. –3p.m. ET

Where: MSI, 6399 Broughton Ave, Columbus, Ohio 43213

Visit naturalstoneinstitute.org/calendar for more information.

Marmomac 2024

When: Tuesday September 24 to Friday Sept. 27, 2024

Where: Verona, Italy; See www.marmomac.com for more information.

Website Versus Landing Page

Understanding the Difference and Strategic Uses

Understanding the difference between a landing page and a website can significantly benefit your business. Do you know the difference? If not, that's OK! After you read this, you will know it all!

The terms “website” and “landing page” are often used interchangeably. Kind of like granite and quartz.

However, they serve distinct purposes and impact your overall marketing strategy differently.

Website: Your website serves as the foundation of your online presence,

Alyssa McKenna
North Star Productions

providing comprehensive information and engaging content to build trust and credibility.

Landing page: A landing page is a targeted tool designed to **convert visitors into leads or customers** through focused content and clear calls to action.

By understanding the differences between websites and landing pages and strategically using each to their strengths, you can



How Do You Compare?

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enhance your digital marketing efforts, improve user experience, and achieve your business goals more effectively.

In this article we will talk about the differences between the two, when to use it and how landing pages convert more than websites.

Let's dig in!

What is a Website?

A website is a collection of interconnected web pages that exist under a single domain name. It is designed to provide comprehensive information about a business, organization, or individual, offering a wide range of content and resources.

Five Key Features of a Website

- 1. Multi-Page Structure:** Websites typically consist of multiple pages, including a homepage, about page, contact page, product or service pages, blog, and more.
- 2. Navigation Menu:** Websites have a navigation menu that allows users to move between different pages and sections easily.

3. Broad Content: Websites provide detailed information about various aspects of a business, from its history and mission to its products, services, and blog content.

4. SEO Optimization: Websites are often optimized for search engines to attract organic traffic. This includes on-page SEO, technical SEO, and content marketing strategies.

5. User Engagement: Websites may include features like user accounts, comment sections, forums, and social media integration to engage visitors.

Strategic Uses of a Website

• **Brand Establishment:** A website helps establish a brand's identity and credibility. It serves as the digital face of a business and provides a central hub for all online activities.

• **Information Hub:** It acts as a hub of information where potential customers can learn everything they need to know about your business.

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TRAINING & EDUCATION

Effective Sales Enablement Strategies for Countertop Fabricators

According to a study by HireDNA, 35% of top salespeople say closing deals is one of the most difficult parts of the sales process. Another survey by Mailshake revealed that 80% of sales are made by only 8% of sales representatives, indicating a significant disparity in performance within sales teams.

This means that a larger portion of sales reps struggle to meet their annual quotas. Now, closing deals becomes crucial to sustaining your business considering that the cost per lead for a countertop shop can be as high as \$85 to \$100.

One of the ways I have experienced successful businesses overcome this challenge is by using effective sales enablement strategies. What does this mean and how can you take advantage of it?

Imagine a marketing strategy that brings in 100 leads per month but due to a lack of sales enablement strategies, your sales team only closes five (5). At the rate of \$100 per lead, you would have wasted \$9,500 on those 95 unclosed deals.

Also, assuming your cost per project is \$5,000 and an average sales conversion rate of 30%, you would have lost \$125,000 worth of sales for 25 prospective customers. That's how much sales enablement strategies can grow your business.

What is Sales Enablement?

Sales enablement is the process of providing a sales team with the resources, training, and tools necessary to engage buyers effectively and close deals more efficiently. This includes delivering relevant content, knowledge, and information to support the sales process at every stage.

Sales enablement is about equipping your sales team with the tools, resources, and information they need to effectively sell your countertops. It ensures that your salespeople have everything they need to engage with potential homeowners and

Anthony Milia
Milia Marketing

contractors, address their needs, and close deals more efficiently.

What are the Benefits of Sales Enablement Strategies?

With an effective sales enablement strategy, you'll see that not only do your sales improve, but your team becomes more cohesive, responsive to market changes, and adept at leveraging data-driven insights to refine their approach and drive sustainable growth.

Below are some of the benefits you can expect from implementing a robust sales enablement strategy.

• Improved Sales Effectiveness:

By equipping your sales team with the right tools and information, sales enablement helps them excel in customer interactions, leading to higher conversion rates and increased orders for countertops.

• Enhanced Sales Productivity:

Streamlined processes and easy access to relevant content and training reduce time spent on administrative tasks, allowing your salespeople to focus more on showcasing the unique features and benefits of your countertops.

• Consistent Messaging:

Sales enablement ensures that all members of your sales team convey a unified message about the quality, durability, and design options of your countertops. This consistency builds trust with customers and strengthens your brand reputation.

• Better Alignment with Marketing:

By aligning your marketing efforts with your sales strategies, sales enablement helps attract high-quality leads interested in upgrading their countertops. This alignment maximizes your marketing ROI and enhances customer engagement.

With an effective sales enablement strategy, You'll see that not only do your sales improve, but your team becomes more cohesive...

• **Faster Onboarding of Sales Reps:** New sales team members can quickly grasp the intricacies of your countertop products and services with comprehensive onboarding materials and training. This accelerates their readiness to engage with customers and drive sales.

• **Data-Driven Insights:** Utilizing analytics and customer data, sales enablement provides valuable insights into consumer preferences, market trends, and sales performance. These insights empower you to refine your sales approach and make data-driven decisions.

• **Increased Customer Satisfaction:** Well-prepared sales teams deliver personalized solutions that meet the specific needs and preferences of customers looking to enhance their homes with stylish and functional countertops. This leads to satisfied customers who are more likely to recommend your business.

• **Adaptability and Scalability:** As your countertop business expands and market demands evolve, sales enablement strategies can adapt to new opportunities and challenges. This flexibility ensures that your sales efforts remain effective and scalable over time.

In essence, sales enablement equips countertop business owners and their teams with the tools, knowledge, and support needed to consistently deliver value, exceed customer expectations, and achieve sustainable business growth.

How can a Countertop Fabricator Implement an Effective Sales Enablement Strategy?

Implementing an effective sales enablement strategy for a countertop fabricator involves several key steps to ensure your sales team is equipped with the necessary tools, resources, and training to excel.

1. Assess Current Sales Processes and Needs

Start by evaluating your existing tools and resources to see what's currently being used by your sales team and how effective they are. Are these resources thorough? Do they enable better conversion?

Gather feedback directly from your sales team to understand their challenges, needs, and suggestions for improvement. Additionally, analyze the customer journey from the first point of contact to the final purchase to identify key touchpoints and areas where improvements can be made.

2. Define Clear Objectives and Goals

It's crucial to set measurable goals for your sales enablement strategy, such as increasing conversion rates, shortening sales cycles, or raising average order values.

These goals should align with the broader business objectives of your countertop fabrication company, ensuring that your sales enablement efforts contribute directly to your overall success.

3. Develop and Curate Relevant Content

Invest time in creating comprehensive product guides and catalogs that showcase your countertop materials, finishes, and customization options. Develop customer case studies that highlight successful projects and testimonials, building credibility and trust with potential clients. Equip your sales team with visually appealing presentations that effectively communicate the unique value and benefits of your countertops.

4. Implement Training Programs

Regularly train your sales team on the features, benefits, and technical specifications of your countertops to ensure they are well-versed in what they are selling.

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Sales Enablement Strategies

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Provide training on effective sales techniques, including how to handle objections and close deals.

Keep your team updated on industry trends, competitor offerings, and market dynamics to ensure they can position your products effectively.

5. Leverage Technology and Tools

Implement a customer relationship management (CRM) system to help manage customer interactions, track leads, and streamline sales processes. Use a dedicated sales enablement platform to centralize content, training materials, and sales tools, making it easy for your sales team to access what they need. Consider scheduling a demo with tools such as ActionFlow, Moraware, HubSpot, StoneApp, Measure Square amongst others to determine the platform that best fits your shop.

Utilize analytics tools to gain insights into sales performance, customer behavior, and market trends, allowing for data-driven decision-making.

6. Foster Collaboration Between Sales and Marketing

Hold regular meetings between your sales and marketing teams to ensure alignment and collaboration. Establish shared goals and metrics to measure the success of joint efforts, and create a feedback loop where the sales team can provide input on the effectiveness of marketing materials. This collaboration will help ensure that the leads generated by marketing are of high quality and aligned with what the sales team needs.

7. Provide Ongoing Support and Resources

Maintain a library of up-to-date sales resources, including brochures, pricing sheets, and installation guides, ensuring that your sales team always has access to the latest information.

Develop sales playbooks that outline best practices, sales scripts, and strategies for different customer scenarios. Offer support channels such as a help desk or dedicated support staff to assist your sales team with any issues they encounter.

8. Monitor and Measure Performance

Regularly track key performance indicators (KPIs) such as lead conversion rates, sales cycle length, and customer satisfaction to gauge the effectiveness of your sales enablement strategy.

Conduct performance reviews to assess what is working and what isn't, and use these insights to make data-driven adjustments. Continuously optimize your strategy to ensure it remains effective and aligned with your business goals.

This approach will help countertop business owners understand how to effectively implement a sales enablement strategy that empowers their sales team, enhances customer interactions, and drives business growth.

Useful Tools and Resources to Enhance Your Sales Enablement Strategy

As a countertop business owner, providing the right sales enablement tools and resources can significantly boost the effectiveness and productivity of your sales team. Here are some key tools and resources I have studied or used and implemented in my experience:

- **Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Systems:**

A robust CRM system, like Salesforce or HubSpot, helps manage customer interactions, track leads, and streamline the sales process.

- **Sales Enablement Platforms:**

Platforms like Seismic or Highspot centralize all sales content, training materials, and tools in one place, making it simpler to deliver consistent and effective messaging.

- **Product Information Management (PIM) Systems:**

PIM systems help manage detailed product information, including specifications, features, and benefits of different countertop materials.

- **Content Management Systems (CMS):**

A CMS allows for the creation and distribution of marketing and sales content. Tools like WordPress or Adobe Experience Manager enable sales teams to access up-to-date brochures, catalogs, and case studies.

- **Sales Playbooks:** Develop comprehensive sales playbooks that outline best practices, sales scripts, objection-handling techniques, and strategies for various customer scenarios.

- **Interactive Product Demos and Visualizers:** Tools like 3D product visualizers or augmented reality (AR) apps allow customers to see how different countertop options would look in their space.

- **Training and eLearning Platforms:**

Online training platforms like Udemy or LinkedIn Learning provide ongoing training and professional development opportunities. You can also partner with a sales/CX coach for more advanced training

- **Analytics and Reporting Tools:**

Tools like Google Analytics or Tableau provide insights into sales performance, customer behavior, and market trends

- **Mobile Sales Apps:**

Mobile apps, such as Showpad or RepZio, allow sales reps to access sales materials, customer data, and product information on the go. This is particularly useful for sales reps who spend a lot of time in the field or at customer locations.

- **Proposal and Quoting Software:**

Software like PandaDoc or QuoteWerks helps streamline the process of creating and sending quotes and proposals. These tools can integrate with CRM systems to pull in customer data.

- **Communication and Collaboration Tools:**

Tools like Slack or Microsoft

Teams facilitate easy communication and collaboration among sales team members. Slack is our personal favorite at Milia Marketing.

- **Marketing Automation Platforms:**

Tools like Mailchimp or Marketo help automate marketing campaigns, track engagement, and generate leads.

By providing these tools and resources, countertop business owners can empower their sales team to be more effective, efficient, and responsive to customer needs, ultimately driving better sales performance and business growth.

Conclusion

Implementing an effective sales enablement strategy is crucial for your countertop business if you're aiming to boost sales performance and achieve sustainable growth. By equipping your sales team with the right tools, resources, and training, you ensure they are well-prepared to engage customers effectively, provide consistent messaging, and close more deals.

Leveraging technology, fostering collaboration, and continually optimizing your strategy will empower your sales team to deliver exceptional value to customers and drive your business forward.

At Milia Marketing, we specialize in bringing qualified leads to your doorstep, setting the stage for your sales team to close more deals. Speak with us via <https://miliamarketing.com/discovery/> and we'll provide the leads for your empowered sales team to close.

“Give up money, give up fame, give up science, give the earth itself and all it contains rather than do an immoral act. And never suppose that in any possible situation, or under any circumstances, it is best for you to do a dishonorable thing, however slightly so it may appear to you.”

—Thomas Jefferson

TRAINING & EDUCATION

Customer Service Versus Customer Experience

Customer service or customer experience... It's all the same, right? Unfortunately, that's what many companies think. Customer service and customer experience are terms that often get used interchangeably. However, they have very different meanings. Learning the differences between customer service and customer experience can help you effectively drive customer acceleration® and growth for your company.

Although customer service and customer experience are different concepts, they work hand-in-hand when it comes to building brand loyalty. Customer service is just one part of the entire customer journey, while customer experience encompasses all the interactions between your company and a customer—good and bad.

The #1 goal of customer service is to provide the customer with the essential support to make their experience with the company as smooth and positive as possible. It is the support provided to customers before, during and after they make a purchase, typically helping solve a problem.

Customer experience is the sum of all

Darlene Compagna
Direct Opinions

the touchpoints that a customer has with a company. This begins with awareness of the company by marketing efforts, to interaction with various support teams through project completion and post-purchase. The goal of customer experience is to provide a seamless, positive, and convenient experience for the customer, and ensuring overall customer success.

Customer service is typically short term, with the primary goal of addressing immediate needs and concerns and resolving customer issues.

Customer experience involves maintaining a long-term relationship with the customer, prioritizing their needs and ensuring customer loyalty. It involves understanding and anticipating customer needs and providing tailored solutions that meet those needs.

Customer service is reactive, meaning it responds to the customer's needs or issues after they have arisen. On the other hand, customer experience is proactive, meaning it anticipates customer needs and provides

Know the difference and build and nurture long-lasting relationships with your customers to drive growth for your business.

solutions or improves processes before customers even have to ask.

Let's look a bit more closely at the significance of these differences...

Customer Service

Customer service is primarily the responsibility of a customer support team. These frontline employees are often responsible for answering customer queries, helping with products and services, and resolving any issues or complaints. Other team members may speak with customers, but the support team is typically accountable for delivering the help customers need at that time and ensuring their satisfaction.

Focusing solely on this siloed approach, however, can prevent organizations from delivering an overall seamless customer experience because it's managed by one segment of the organization and may not effectively incorporate other important departments such as sales, installation or billing.

Customer Experience

Customer experience, which is always ongoing, puts the customer at the center of the organization. It is a shared responsibility across the operation and is spread across many touchpoints. Everyone in the business—from marketing to sales to the installation team—is in charge of giving customers the best experience across all touchpoints.

While customer experience refers to the overall impression a customer has of a business based on their interactions with the brand, it can also be described as a feeling or emotion a customer has with a brand, based on their experiences. The manner in which you help customers when issues arise contributes to their level of satisfaction, and the faster you can help bring customers a resolution, the faster you can help them succeed and have a positive overall experience.

In an effort to ensure your team is providing

excellent customer service and delivering outstanding customer experiences, metrics can be used to track your teams' progress and success. Effective customer service metrics, for example, show how quickly you help customers resolve their issues. Using metrics such as "average response or resolution time" or a "first contact resolution" rate will help improve efficiency in your operation and deliver timely support.

For evaluation of the customer experience, Customer Satisfaction Score (CSAT), Customer Effort Score (CES) and/or Net Promoter Score® are popular experiential metrics to gauge overall sentiment and enable your team to focus on benchmarking and improvement.

By evaluating and tracking these metrics through all interactions and support teams you can identify which experiences are seamless and which ones cause friction or are high-effort interactions for your customers. Having this feedback will enable you to take steps to make it easier for customers to do business with you. Furthermore, identifying and solving industry roadblocks or pain points that exist for both you and your competitors will establish your company as an innovator and will differentiate your brand, elevating your business in the market.

Delivering outstanding experiences is focused on ensuring all interactions and touchpoints with your business are easy, enjoyable, and seamless, leaving customers with a positive lasting impression of your brand. Remember, your company has complete control over the service it provides to its customers. Fragmented or disjointed customer experiences can be a major downfall for any organization.

By knowing these differences, you can align your customer service team with your customer experience efforts and deliver seamless experiences across the customer journey to build and nurture long-lasting relationships with your customers that will drive growth for your business.

Consider these Customer Acceleration® tips that will help you make more money from your customers and make them happier in the process!

If you'd like some help to get started, please reach out to Darlene Compagna at dcampagna@directopinions.com or call 216-867-1165.

TRAINING & EDUCATION

Stone Forensics Announces 2025 Stone and Tile Troubleshooting Workshop in Las Vegas

Stone Forensics has announced that it will be conducting its popular Stone and Tile Troubleshooting training in January 2025, in Las Vegas. The program is designed to teach the basics of stone and tile installation failures. According to Fred Hueston, who will be conducting the training, "The amount of failures, poor installations and other issues with stone and tile flooring are on the rise. This seminar is perfect for restoration and installation contractors as well as architects, building engineers and maintenance

staff who have to deal with stone and tile installation and restoration.

Training will be held January 27-31, 2025. For those who wish to be certified inspectors this course will also offer certification.

The Stone and Tile Troubleshooting Workshop is a full 4 days of training with the certification test on the last day. There is a fifth-day option to go on a quarry tour to Vegas Rock. Class size is limited. The cost of the class is \$2,500 per person.

Please turn to page 9

Stone Forensics 2025 Workshop

Continued from page 8

The following topics will be covered in the comprehensive class:

- **The Geology of Stone**
- **Understanding the Structure of Different kinds of stone and materials**
- **Identification of stone and tile types**
- **Quarry techniques that affect the final product**
- **Production of tile and slabs**
- **Fabrication and installation requirements**
- **Physical and Chemical Testing**
- **Stone and Tile Forensic Investigation**
- **Crack Dynamics**
- **Diagnosis of Problems**
- **Stone and Tile Restoration**
- **Repair and replacement**
- **Stain Removal**
- **Troubleshooting**
- **Report writing**
- **Expert witness testimony**
- **Slip Resistance**
- **Laboratory testing**

One day will be spent in the field examining failures.

For further information and to register go to stoneforensics.com or contact Dr. Fred at 321-514-6845. Also check out the following video on the class at <https://youtu.be/oTOS3i7jco4>.

“They throw the ball,
I hit it. They hit the
ball, I catch it.”

– *Willie Mays,*
May 6, 1931 – June 18, 2024

TRAINING & EDUCATION

The Answer to All Problems

This story concerns a shop that was experiencing a severe drop-off in general productivity and income. Lead times had shot up. Rather than wait, retail and kitchen and bath customers were going elsewhere. Everyone was on edge and even the scheduler would not commit to the dates they were handing out.

Synchronous Solutions had been contacted in an act approaching desperation.

The initial testy attitude of the staff was in stark contrast with the location of the shop itself, which was nestled in one of the most beautiful places in the country.

The walkthrough, though not the worst shop I'd seen, showed a shop in near complete chaos. Completely full of work-in-progress, with job parts piled on job parts, the overflowing piles were all destined for the new CNC.

This was back in the day when the CNC router was sold as the solution to all fabrication problems. Because the program could be downloaded directly from the programmer in the front office, the quality issues that had plagued the shop now had nearly completely disappeared. But then, so had the flow through the shop.

As I stood looking back at the shop, I was reminded not so much of a production facility, but a sink with a clogged drain.

Back in the conference room, the conversation between the owner, production manager, and scheduler was tense. Ownership was frustrated. “I bought you the very best equipment and all hell broke loose!” The production manager was incensed. “Sure, we have new equipment, but you won't let me use it the way it's supposed to be used.” The scheduler, obviously the mouse between two angry elephants, clearly would have preferred to be somewhere else.

So, I started asking questions.

“When did you begin using the new CNC?”

“About four months ago,” was the answer. I was curious as to when the problems began to appear and was told that

Pete DuBruhle

Synchronous Solutions

they started about a month after the new machine came online (a result of draining off the products that had already been dimensioned in the shop). Finally, I asked what product they were running across the new machine. Well, you know where this is going... Essentially, everything that needed cutting, other than straight cuts which ran across the saw, now ran across the CNC.

When I questioned the loading of the machine, both the production manager and

**Clearly, the
limitation of
Throughput in
the shop was the
new machine.**

the scheduler became silent. The owner took a deep breath and angrily answered that since the folks on the floor seemed incapable of building a dimensionally accurate top, he had decided to get the new machine and reduce headcount. (Upon asking, I was told that 4 employees were let go or reassigned from the fabrication area.) As mentioned before, the programming of the new machine assured that the cuts would be per the templates. (Templating was still done with sticks.) All that was needed was assembly, edge detailing, polish and install. As far as he could see the quality problem had largely gone away, but now they couldn't get orders through the shop.

Some quick calculations showed that total

operational time on the CNC was about 65% of the shift and that was including recent improvements. Prior to that, it had been more on the order of 55%. Run time was calculated as a percentage of total time available on the shift including loading, breaks, and wait time. They ran a single shift.

Clearly, the limitation of throughput in the shop was the new machine. My suggestion that they schedule to run the CNC for 100% of the shift was met with strong cultural pushback. When I pointed out that if they did, it would mean an immediate 19% increase in time utilization and therefore that much increased throughput. Things got quiet. When I suggested offloading some of the simpler cutting operations to a manual approach, and reassigning some of the idling reassigned folks, I got a stone wall. Ownership was adamant that it would only mean a return to quality problems. My suggestion that they buy another CNC machine was met with a flat no. “Hell, they don't know how to use this one, why would I buy them another one?”

Three weeks after my visit, I got a call from the owner asking me to return. Apparently, they had tested keeping the machine running during lunch and breaks and the results spoke for themselves. They needed help and were prepared to consider and make the necessary changes.

If you would like to get your equipment working FOR you and maximize the return on your investments, Contact us at www.synchronoussolutions.com.

Peter DuBrule

– **Synchronous Solutions**

We help clients control the flow of information and materials through their system to increase profitability, decrease process times, and reduce chaos.” Contact us at www.synchronousolutions.com.

“Acceptance doesn't mean resignation;
it means understanding that something is what
it is and that there's got to be a way through it.”

– *Michael J. Fox*

TRAINING & EDUCATION

Navigating Growth Challenges in the Stone Industry

Hey folks, I've been chatting with a lot of you in the stone industry recently. And from these conversations, it's clear that a lot of you fit into one of two groups when it comes to driving growth in your business. Let's break it down.

Camp One:

The Post-Pandemic Struggle

First, there's the group that scaled up during the pandemic. When demand was sky-high, you invested in new equipment, expanded your production facilities, and brought more people on board. But now, things have cooled off. Sales have slowed, and I'm often seeing a 30% decline for shops, leaving you with extra capacity and overhead. The pressure is real, and you're feeling it. You've got the tools and the team, but the demand just isn't matching up like it used to. It's a tough spot to be in, and the stress of making ends meet with all that extra capacity can be overwhelming.

Camp Two:

The Growth Plateau

Then there's the second group. You're stable, busy, and smart with your money. You've avoided racking up debt and have been saving for a rainy day or strategic investment. But now, you've hit a ceiling. You're doing well, but pushing past your current level seems like an uphill battle without new strategies, systems, or skills. Growth feels just out of reach, and you're not sure what your next move should be.

Shared Challenges

No matter which camp you find yourself in, there are some common hurdles we all face:

- **Rising Costs:** Prices for materials and overhead keep going up, squeezing your margins tighter and tighter.
- **Skilled Labor Shortages:** Finding good, skilled workers is like finding a needle in a haystack these days.
- **Economic Uncertainty:** With the economy all over the place, it's hard

Justin Shaw

Stone Fabricator Elite

You don't have to face these challenges alone. By learning from others in the industry, sharing experiences and picking up new ideas, You can make a real difference in your business.

to predict what the next month, let alone the next year, will look like.

These issues are real, and they make an already tough job even tougher. But here's the thing: despite these pressures, there are ways to navigate through them and drive growth effectively.

Strategies for Success

Here's what you can do to tackle these challenges head-on:

1. **Maximizing Your Existing Resources:** Whether you've got extra capacity or are running at full tilt, make the most of what you have. This includes optimizing your production processes and leveraging your current team's strengths.
2. **Cost Management Strategies:** Learn how to manage rising costs without sacrificing quality. Dive into smart purchasing practices, negotiating with suppliers, and finding cost-effective solutions.
3. **Attracting and Retaining Skilled Labor:** Attract the right talent and keep them motivated. Create a workplace that skilled workers want to be a part of.
4. **Adapting to Economic Changes:** Stay flexible and responsive to economic shifts. Build a resilient and defensible business that can weather any storm.



5. Innovative Growth Strategies:

Whether you need to drive more sales or break through a growth plateau, explore new strategies and systems that can help you achieve your goals. This is our specialty, and here's an actionable guide you can leverage, regardless of which camp you fall into:

Step 1: Strategic Growth Game Plan

Start with a clear and detailed game plan. Identify your goals, constraints, the resources you have, and the steps you need to take to achieve growth. Be specific and realistic about what you can accomplish and set measurable milestones.

Step 2: Differentiate From Competitors

We are advocates of unlocking your competitive advantage and owning a specific percentage of the market. Determine what makes your business unique and how you can stand out from the competition. This differentiation will fuel your marketing efforts and help you carve out a distinct niche in the industry.

Step 3: Double Down on Marketing (But Shift Your Approach)

We believe that marketing is often done incorrectly. Many businesses target only the bottom of the funnel, ending up paying premium prices for leads and not getting the most out of their budget. Instead, shift your goal from simply lead generation to owning your position in the market and capturing the attention of the percentage of the market you want to dominate. When you set this up correctly you can pay far less per lead, while owning the mindshare of your market.

This is too technical to dive into fully here, but feel free to reach out if you have questions at justin@stonefabricatorelite.com.

Step 4: Dial-In Your Sales Process & Performance

Refine your sales process to ensure efficiency and effectiveness. Train your team to handle leads better and close deals faster. Measure performance regularly and continuously tweak your process to improve. Often, easy money is being left on the table. Improving conversion rates and addressing leaks and bottlenecks in the sales pipeline can provide a significant lift.

Stay in the Driver's Seat

You don't have to face these challenges alone. By learning from others in the industry, sharing experiences, and picking up new ideas, you can make a real difference in your business. It's about building a community where we help each other succeed. Take a strategic and intentional approach to this next phase so that the second half of the year looks dramatically different than the first.

Justin Shaw has been helping stone fabricators and countertop companies since 2017 to implement the systems, strategies, and playbooks to grow their businesses more easily. He is the Founder of the 90-Day Growth Engine Program and CEO of Stone Fabricator Elite. You can email him directly at justin@stonefabricatorelite.com or to learn more visit: justinshaw.com and stonefabricatorelite.com.

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Website Vs. Landing Page

Continued from page 5

- **SEO and Content Marketing:** A well-optimized website can attract organic traffic from search engines, helping to generate leads and increase visibility.
- **Customer Support:** Websites can offer features like FAQs, live chat, and support tickets.

What is a Landing Page?

A landing page, on the other hand, is a standalone web page created specifically for a marketing or advertising campaign. Its primary purpose is to convert visitors into leads or customers by encouraging them to take a specific action.

Having multiple offers on a single landing page can decrease conversions by up to 266%. It's better to focus on one clear offer per page to avoid confusing visitors.

– Source: [GrowthMarketingPro.com](https://www.growthmarketingpro.com)

Five Key Features of an Effective Landing Page

- 1. Single-Page Focus:** Landing pages are single-page sites that **focus on a single objective**, such as capturing leads or driving sales.
- 2. Targeted Content:** The content on a landing page is highly targeted to a specific audience or campaign, with a clear and concise message.
- 3. Call to Action (CTA):** Landing pages prominently feature a call to action, such as “Sign Up Now,” “Download the Guide,” or “Buy Now.”
- 4. Minimal Navigation:** To keep visitors focused on the desired action, landing pages usually have minimal or no navigation links that could lead visitors away.
- 5. Conversion Optimization:** Landing pages are optimized for conversions, employing strategies like A/B testing, persuasive copywriting, and user-friendly design.

Please turn to page 22

“Progress should mean that we are always changing the world to fit the vision, instead we are always changing the vision.”

— C.J. Chesterton

The Stone Detective

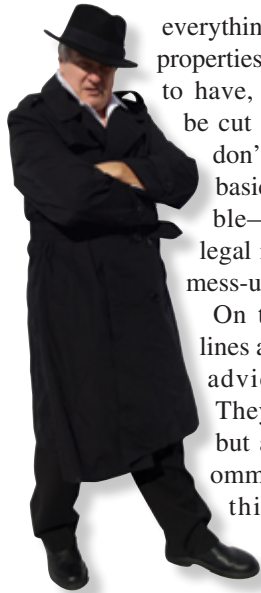
Dispenses Legal Advice

IT was one of those cold Florida mornings, chilling down to at least 50 degrees. Yes, folks, that's downright cold here in Florida. I woke up that morning freezing since my heat hadn't been turned on the night before. I managed to peel myself out of bed in a hurry to head over to the diner for a warm cup of joe to warm me up. I threw on my trench coat, grabbed my fedora, and headed out the door.

The Woody was difficult to start, but after a few tries, she finally kicked over. I parked right in front of the diner, shivering as I got out. I walked in and noticed a stranger sitting where the old Admiral usually sits. He was wearing a fancy three-piece suit and was reading what looked like a legal document. This guy had to be a lawyer. I sat next to him, said hello, and asked him if he was in court today. He smiled and said yes. I introduced myself and told him that I'd served as an expert witness in numerous cases across the U.S. involving stone and tile failures. He looked at me and said, "Maybe you can help me with something." He mentioned he would be cross-examining a construction expert and that this expert said there was a big difference in his industry between a standard and a guideline. He wanted to know how I would handle the difference in my industry. I took a slow sip of my coffee, cleared my throat, smiled, and told him that I was just involved in a case where this exact topic came up. I also told him I recently added an article on this very subject to my article page at www.stoneforensics.com. I told him I could give him a brief overview. So here is what I told him:

First off, there's a clear distinction between "standards" and "guidelines," which many people don't realize. Standards are like the hard rules in the industry, set by big organizations like ASTM or ANSI. They are the must-follows covering

Dr. Frederick M. Hueston, PhD



everything from what physical properties different stones need to have, to how they should be cut and installed. If you don't follow these, you're basically asking for trouble—think safety risks, legal issues, and structural mess-ups.

On the flip side, guidelines are more like friendly advice from experts. They're not mandatory but are packed with recommendations on everything from design aesthetics to maintenance. They help professionals make

informed decisions but also allow for creativity and flexibility depending on the project's needs.

I told him that this is how I understand the difference and that our industry has several trade associations that have manuals, and that these are generally not standards but guidelines. I told him I wasn't sure about other construction trades, and hoped that my perspective helped. He nodded and said, "Thanks— that does help quite a bit."

It would be interesting to know if he won his case or not. Now that I'm warm and fed, I'm ready to tackle some other projects today.

The Stone Detective is a fictional character created by Dr. Frederick M. Hueston, PhD, written to entertain and educate. Dr. Fred has written over 33 books on stone and tile installations, fabrication and restoration and also serves as an expert for many legal cases across the world. Send your comments to fhueston@stoneforensics.com.

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“You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life.”

– *Albert Camus*

NTCA Honored at the 2024 Graphic Awards by PIAS



The winning piece, *Little Hands Little Tiles*.

The National Tile Contractors Association (NTCA) has been honored with the Best of Category — Digital Printing for Promotional Piece award at the 2024 Graphic Awards presented by the Printing Industry Association of the South, Inc. (PIAS). This prestigious accolade was awarded during a special presentation at the PIAS 49th Annual Convention, held at the Hilton Sandestin Beach Resort in Destin, Florida.

The PIAS Graphic Awards competition is an esteemed annual event designed to recognize and honor the individuals and teams behind the creation, design, and production of top-quality printed materials. These materials are evaluated based on their impact, appeal, and effectiveness as sales, marketing, communications, or educational mediums.

Entries in the PIAS Graphic Awards Competition are meticulously judged by a panel of three experts, who use a point system to assess each piece. To receive an Award of Excellence, a printed piece must earn a certain number of points based on set criteria, which include the degree of difficulty, quality and technique of reproduction, and excellence in creativity, design, typography, and general layout.

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“Circumstance and distance, the ancient enemies of acquaintance... conspire to prevent it.”

— *Alan Dean Foster*



“Reaction to the news was mixed, largely because we asked more than one person.”

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2024 NTCA Five-Star Accredited Companies Announced



Five-Star company Fischer Tile and Marble project: Cache Creek Casino Resort Hotel expansion project used 80 different types of tile.



Fischer Tile and Marble project: Rolling Hill Casino Center renovation and expansion

[Continued from page 4](#)

Achieving Five-Star status is a mark of distinction that sets companies apart as leaders in the tile industry. It assures clients and partners of the contractor's dedication to superior workmanship and professional integrity. The accreditation also fosters a culture of continuous improvement, encouraging companies to stay current with the latest industry trends, technologies, and best practices. Visit [NTCA Five-Star program](#) for more information.

Established in 1947, the National Tile Contractors Association (NTCA) is a nonprofit trade association dedicated to the professional installation of ceramic tile and natural stone. It is widely recognized as the largest and most respected tile contractors' association in the world. For those seeking to improve their tile business, NTCA provides unparalleled educational experiences, supportive peer interaction, unique cost-savings programs, and a commitment to help develop the skills needed to improve your work, recruit, train, and manage your employees, and ultimately, make your business more profitable. Find out more at www.tile-assn.com.



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“We find our younger employees respond better to ‘try to beat your high score,’ than ‘we need to increase profits.’”

Stone Restoration and Maintenance Corner

Specialize, or Be a “Jack-of-All Hard Surfaces”?

I believe it was Elon (and you know who I mean) who said that we tend to try and optimize processes and procedures to a point where it actually has the opposite effect. In the natural stone, terrazzo, and decorative concrete restoration and maintenance industry, most of the basic processes and procedures have been around for thousands of years. These products and procedures have been and continue to be optimized. The big leap was back in the late 1960s with the introduction of the industrial diamond, which has widespread use today in our industry.

We take surfaces that need to be repaired and, through a smoothing and rubbing process, we refinish to like new, or better than new, in most cases. Stone, and for that matter many hard surfaces, are finished in multiple steps of honing (smoothing with abrasives) processes to the desired level of finish. Remember, we basically have 3 types of surface finishes for stone: polished, honed (this is a range of varying smoothness and shine), and textured (meaning rough or three-dimensional).

These procedures are virtually the same for marble, granite, quartz, quartzite, travertine, limestone, slate, terrazzo, decorative concrete, and most all natural stone. All of these materials are cut or cast and then finished to the desired level, whether that be a leathered or antiqued (textured) dimensional finish, honed (smooth with a matte to satin shine) finish, or a highly polished (smooth with high light reflectivity) finish.

As I previously stated, these materials are finished in much the same way. However, there are some differences in the tooling and procedure with various materials. In the stone restoration and related services, we typically use diamond abrasives (in both metal-bond & resin-bond), sometimes silicon carbide (sandpaper and bricks), aluminum oxide (in many polishing powders), tin oxide (a premium polishing abrasive used for granite and most all polishable stone), and a few others.

Now, most contractors usually keep in stock what tools they use the most often. If you're mostly, or even only, polishing marble countertops, you're probably going to have plenty of variable-speed hand

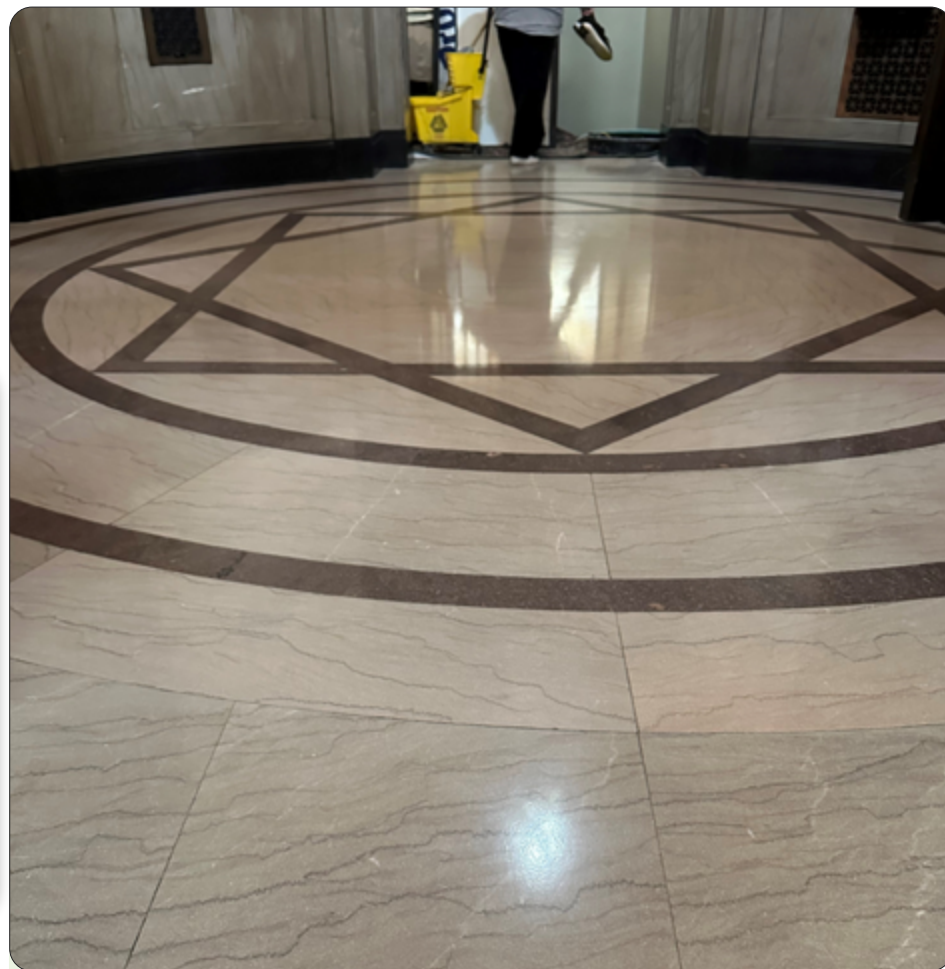
Bob Murrell
M3 Technologies
Photos by Bob Murrell



Residential terrazzo—Oh boy! Better be prepared to tackle layers of old carpet glue removal and more, before you can hone and polish terrazzo.



So, you want to do concrete, eh? You better stock up on heavy equipment and metal bond diamonds!



Commercial marble? No problemo!

polishers, 5 inch flexible resin diamonds, Majestic 5X Gold Marble Polishing Powder or Marble Polishing Compound, Tape & Drape, blue tape, red polyvinyl tape, Majestic Low Odor Solvent-Based Sealer, PLP diamond impregnated pads, and generally the tools necessary to hone and polish marble countertops, right?

If you're grinding, honing, and/or polishing concrete floors, you're probably going to have planetary floor machines and plenty of metal-bond discs like our popular Magnums (8 segment and 3 segment) series. You'll also need plenty of resin (either phenolic or epoxy type) to finish out the floor. If you're doing "surface prep" work, which is coatings removal, you'll want plenty of 3 segment Magnums for greater down pressure (psi) and a better scraping effect. You can use our Flexible Electroplate Metal-Bond and Premium Flexible Resin diamonds for doing the hand tool work on edges and where necessary, which is convenient as both can also be used on most all stone, terrazzo, and concrete.

The bottom line is this: the more different types of surfaces and markets you work in, the more types of tooling and consumables you will need, not to mention the different types of equipment needed for these surfaces and applications. If your niche is marble and limestone countertops, you will not necessarily have the equipment or tooling on hand to do surface prep on concrete floors.

In one of my recent articles, I discuss how hard it was to remove carpet adhesive, tile thinset, and other coatings from concrete floors in an apartment building high-rise. The clients wanted a semi-polished and stained floor. This surface prep project was no easy feat, and if I had not already had an HTC 500 machine and some tooling from years past, there is absolutely no way that project could have been completed efficiently, or for that matter, with a profit.

To go purchase that equipment and tooling new would have cost over \$15K, at least. This doesn't even take into account the experience needed to run this heavy grind and polish on such a battlefield — and trust me, it was a battle.

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Talk to the Decision Maker



Sharon Koehler Stone Industry Consultant

Recently I was in the grocery store, and I ran into an old friend. He was stuffing his cart with literally just ice cream, sweet treats, and snacks. I was going to tease him about having a “weak moment” until I saw the look on his face. He was obviously upset.

Being a good, caring friend, I asked what the problem was. He told me that he had spent weeks collaborating with a gentleman who wanted to surprise his wife for their 25th anniversary and give her a brand-new kitchen. They had picked out cabinets, tile, paint, flooring, countertops, appliances, electrical and plumbing fixtures. My friend had given quotes for all the labor as well, to install all these things. The plan was that on the date of their anniversary, the client

was going to bring his wife into the showroom and show her everything they had put together and surprise her.

My friend, not being particularly stupid, asked the client several times to bring his wife in to be part of the process, but each time the gentleman said that he knew his wife VERY well and knew what she wanted. Everything would be fine.

As you can probably guess, that was not the case. They had come in earlier that day and the wife had nixed EVERYTHING! He admitted that it was not done in a bad or mean way.



“I want to go in and I don’t.”

She started off with “Since the grandkids visit so often and I do messy baking, cooking, and craft things in the kitchen with them, white cabinets might not be the way to go. Let’s look at something in a maple or hickory.” He said that from there it all unraveled. He basically had to start over from scratch.

The lesson here is to always deal with the decision maker. The question is: How do you FIND the decision maker? Truthfully, it may take a little work on your part.

- **Ask direct questions:** From the outset, ask direct but respectful questions to find the decision maker. Questions like, “Who will be involved in making the final decision on this project?” Or, “Is there anyone else I should be addressing these details with?” The answers can provide clarity, and this approach ensures you are engaging with the right individuals from the beginning.

- **Try to get a feel for the family/group dynamic:** In many transactions, particularly those involving family homes and spaces, the decision maker may not be a single individual. Understanding the family dynamics is important. For instance, a couple might jointly make decisions, or one partner might defer to the other. In multi-generational households, decisions might involve input from parents or adult children.

- **Observe how the individuals in the family/group interact with each other:** During meetings, carefully observe the interactions among the people involved. Pay attention to who asks the most questions, who others defer to, and who seems to have the final say. These observations can give you valuable insights into who the decision maker is.

- **Use your network:** Use your social and professional networks to gather information. Friends, colleagues, or acquaintances who have dealt with the same individuals or families might offer useful insights into who the decision maker is.

Now that you have found the decision maker, take advantage of the benefits.

- **Clear communication:** When you deal directly with the decision maker, your messages are less likely to be distorted or misunderstood. Clear communication ensures that all parties are on the

same page, reducing the risk of costly misunderstandings.

- **Faster decisions:** The decision maker has the say-so to make prompt decisions without needing to consult others. This can significantly speed up the process of making and closing business deals.

- **Custom-made suggestions:** Understanding the specific needs, preferences, and priorities of the decision maker allows you to tailor your proposals accordingly. This insight enables you to present options and solutions that align closely with what the decision maker is looking for, increasing the chances of a successful transaction.

- **Trust:** Direct communication with the decision maker helps build trust and rapport. When the decision maker feels understood and valued, they are more likely to interact positively and move forward with the transaction.

- **Solving problems:** When you are in direct contact with the decision maker, it is easier to address and resolve any problems or issues quickly and effectively. The decision maker can provide immediate feedback and make necessary adjustments, ensuring the project stays on track.

Finding the decision maker may take a bit of work on your part, BUT in the end, it can save you time, money, aggravation, and possibly even the project. It’s wise to make the effort.

As to my friend, he asked me what he could have done differently to avoid all this. I had 2 suggestions, but he liked the first one the best...find out the budget for the project. Then, go to Word or go online and print a fancy certificate (NOT a gift certificate!) saying that she can design a project up to and including the budget amount. Put it in a card or wrap it up and let her husband watch her face light up when she opens and reads it. She can design and he can pay. Hearing this suggestion, he smacked his forehead in the middle of the ice cream aisle! Also, keep this story handy for the next well-meaning spouse, relative or friend who wants to do a good deed!

Please send your thoughts and comments on this article to Sharon Koehler at Sharonk.SRG@gmail.com.

Let's Not Be Fooled By the "Tranquil" Life of a Butterfly

Let's paraphrase that old, familiar warning about books (which, har-rumph, doesn't apply to the popular, humorous, informative, and inexpensive books written by Sam Venable, ideal for any shelf in your house.) Now, where was I? Oh yes, paraphrasing: "Never judge a butterfly by its color, nor its dainty demeanor."

I learned this lesson after paying close attention to butterflies in the wildflower beds around our place. Every summer, it's a joy to watch these angelic wisps, of various sizes and species, as they innocently flit about their tasks. How peaceful! How serene!

At least that's the way it was until my idyllic bubble was lanced by reality.

Things began unraveling one morning when I visually tracked a black swallowtail as it zigged and zagged through a rainbow of zinnias. After several minutes, I realized

Sam Venable
Department of Irony

this wasn't random behavior. Despite a wide selection of colors, it specialized in purple. Didn't matter if a red or yellow bloom was inches away. Soon as it left a purple one, it would flippity-flip around the garden until locating another purple bloom.

What's more, I discovered it had an attitude. If another butterfly entered the patch, it would immediately drop everything and chase the intruder away.

Well, yes, "chase" is a bit of a stretch. This looked more like a friendly game of tag. But the speed of the assault told me here was the butterfly version of opening a 64-ounce can of whup-ass.

I snapped a photo and sent it, along with some questions, to my friend Warren



Bielenberg, a retired National Park Service ranger. He's a knower of much stuff about birds and butterflies.

The first thing Warren did was correct my ID.

"That's not a Black Swallowtail," he said. "It's a Pipevine Swallowtail." Turns out, the caterpillar from whence it came had fed on acidic vegetation, rendering it distasteful to birds and other predators. Other species mimic the pipevine to avoid being eaten.

He agreed butterflies are able to identify colors and have their favorites.

"In my yard, they prefer purple butterfly

bush to other flowers," he said. "I don't have zinnias this year, but in the past, I've noticed different species tended to go to specific colors."

Warren also said butterflies can be quite territorial and aggressive. An exception to this hostility often occurs when they converge (the correct term is "puddling") at a source of moisture.

"I've seen four to six different species puddling together," he told me.

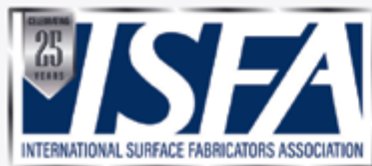
What's more, they'll belly up to the bar wherever it is and whatever's on tap.

Such as?

"Anything from moist gravel to human urine to fresh bear or coyote scat," he said.

Gross! Blech! Between that and the fistcuffs, I'll never again think of butterflies as "dainty."

Sam Venable is an author, comedic entertainer, and humor columnist for the Knoxville (TN) News Sentinel. His latest book is "The Joke's on YOU! (All I Did Was Clean Out My Files)." He may be reached at sam.venable@outlook.com.



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Stone Restoration Corner



Ah yes, refinishing residential marble countertops... The sweet life. LOL!

Continued from page 15

Many different scenarios can be similar to an easy and common marble hone and polish job (other than lippage removal). Terrazzo is a perfect example. It is basically marble with no lippage or at least very little, except for settling cracks with upheavals. Of course, travertine is another common calcium-based stone that needs restoration periodically. These materials usually involve cut and dried procedures. They are the bread and butter of most restoration professionals. And, depending on the complexity of the specific project, are an “easy” way to make a dollar.

However, if you want to start doing granite, slate, Crab Orchard sandstone, ceramic tile, decorative concrete, Corian, engineered stones like quartz, and others, you will have to invest in the equipment, tools, chemicals, and training or learning time necessary to complete these projects. I don't think any experienced restoration contractor should be intimidated by these surfaces. However, I also wouldn't recommend learning how to do Absolute Black granite on someone's countertop, either. Just sayin'...

So maybe you want to specialize in countertops, marble only, concrete, terrazzo. To do it all, you will need the right equipment, tooling, and experience to get it done, with as few problems as possible. Oh, and there will be problems, trust me. Some contractors prefer to do only residential projects and others prefer commercial. It's all good, just a little different.

I always recommend doing a test area on any project to confirm both the results and procedure. Also, the best way to help ensure success is by partnering with a good distributor, like BB Industries, that knows the business. They can help with technical support, product purchase decisions, logistics, and other pertinent project information.

Bob Murrell has worked in the natural stone industry for over 40 years and is well known for his expertise in natural stone, tile, and decorative concrete restoration and maintenance. He helped develop some of the main products and processes which revolutionized the industry, and is currently the Director of Operations for M3 Technologies. Send your comments and questions to Bob at attn:publisher@slipperyrockgazette.net.



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Far left: OK – even driveway sealing can be on the list, if you're prepared with the right equipment to do-it-all.

Left: If you're prepared to work on darker marble – know that it can be less forgiving, so your refinishing must be close to perfect!

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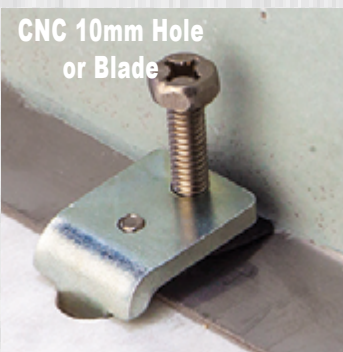


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Making Up for Lost Time



A pocket watch formerly belonging to Teddy Roosevelt has been found after going missing for over three decades. The silver pocket watch was a prized possession of Theodore Roosevelt, a keepsake given to him by his sister and her husband in 1898 before he became president that would travel with him around the world and end up at Sagamore Hill — his home on Long Island, New York, and now a national historic site.

But in 1987, it went from museum piece to pilfered prize when someone stole it from an unlocked case at the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural National Historic Site in Buffalo, New York, where it was on loan.

It was a mystery that endured 36 years until it turned up at a Florida auction house last year and was turned over to federal agents. In early July, it was returned to public display at Sagamore Hill as the National Park Service and the FBI triumphantly announced it was back home during a ceremony featuring Roosevelt's great-grandson, Tweed Roosevelt.

"This was feel-good news," Tweed Roosevelt, 82, said Friday in a phone interview. "For me, it kind of felt like almost as if a piece of TR's spirit being returned to Sagamore Hill, like a little bit of him was coming back. And so I felt that was really cool."

Growing up, he said he didn't know about the watch and only learned about it vaguely after it was stolen. He called it "unremarkable" in appearance, but priceless to his great grandfather.

"As it turns out, this isn't just any old pocket watch," he said. "It was a watch that TR placed great sentimental value on."

The mystery of the watch's disappearance, however, is not fully solved. It is still not clear who stole it and how. The Park Service and FBI only released details of its reappearance after an investigation.

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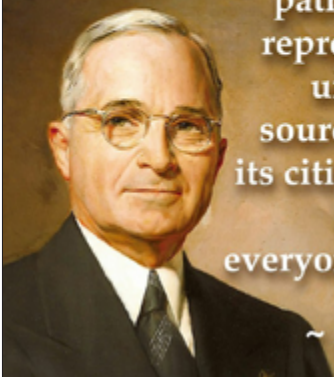
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Website Versus Landing Page

Continued from page 11

Strategic Uses of a Landing Page

- **Lead Generation:** Landing pages are ideal for capturing leads through forms/sign-ups.
- **Sales Campaigns:** They can drive sales by highlighting a specific product or offer with compelling CTAs.
- **Event Registrations:** Landing pages are effective for promoting events and capturing registrations.
- **Ad Campaigns:** When running Pay Per Click (PPC) or social media ads, landing pages provide a dedicated destination for ad traffic, increasing the chances of conversion.

Advantages of Landing Pages? Turn Leads Into Customers!

- **Focused Content:** — They are crafted around a specific

marketing goal, whether it's capturing leads, promoting a product, or driving sales.

— By eliminating unnecessary links and distractions, landing pages keep the visitor's attention on the desired action.

- **Minimal Distractions:**

— By minimizing navigation options and external links, landing pages keep the visitor's attention, reducing the chances of distraction and improving conversion rates.

- **Calls To Action**

— Designed to prompt the visitor to take a specific action.

Here are some calls to action:

- “Start Your Project Now”
- “Get a Custom Design Plan”

- “Find Your Perfect Countertop”
- “Request a Sample”
- “Get Your Free Quote Today!”

- **Visual and Interactive Elements**

— Incorporating visual elements such as videos and images can also enhance the effectiveness of a landing page.

— Videos, in particular, are highly engaging and can convey information quickly and effectively.

- **Reporting**

— Monitor performance and identify areas for improvement.

— Continuously test different versions of your landing page to see what works best.

- **Social Proof and Trust Signals**

— Monitor performance and identify areas for improvement.

— Continuously test different versions of your landing page to see what works best.

— “Including testimonials on a landing page can boost conversions by up to 34%.” — Source: www.VWO.com

Understanding the distinct roles and strategic uses of websites and landing pages is crucial for optimizing your digital marketing efforts. By leveraging each for their unique strengths, you can enhance user experience, increase engagement, and ultimately achieve your business goals more effectively. So, whether you're looking to build brand credibility or convert visitors into leads, knowing when and how to use these tools will set you on the path to success!

For 16 years, Alyssa and Steve McKenna owned and operated a stone countertop business. As North Star Productions, they are committed to providing actionable insights and effective marketing solutions. For more information visit www.northstarproductions.org.

Table 1 shows the information organized for easy comparison by aspect, between websites and landing pages:

Aspect	Website	Landing Page
Purpose	Provide comprehensive information about a business	Focus on a single marketing object (e.g. lead generation)
Structure	Multi-page	Single-page
Navigation	Full navigation menu	Minimal or no navigation
Content	Broad range of content	Targeted, campaign-specific content
SEO	Optimized for search engines, long-term SEO strategy	Not typically focused on SEO
User Engagement	Features like blogs, reviews, samples and social media integration	Limited to conversion-focused elements
Design	Comprehensive, user-friendly, accommodating various content categories	Simple, clean, with strong emphasis on CTA
Call to Action (CTA)	Varies across different pages and sections	Prominent and singular CTA
Strategic Uses	Brand establishment, information hub, customer support, SEO for market visibility	Lead generation, sales campaigns, event registrations, ad campaigns
Best For	Providing detailed business information, engaging customers, long-term growth	Capturing leads, driving sales, measuring campaign effectiveness, guiding single actions

Table 2 shows strategic uses of websites and landing pages, providing a clear reference for when to use each.

Scenario	Website	Landing Page
Detailed Information	When you need to provide detailed info about your business, products & services	When running a specific marketing or advertising campaign
Online Presence	To establish a strong market presence and build brand credibility	To capture leads or drive sales for a particular product or offer
Customer Engagement	To engage with customers through blogs, forums, videos & other interactive features	Limited to conversion-focused elements
SEO Focus	Focused on long-term SEO and organic traffic growth	To guide visitors toward a single, focused action without distractions

NTCA Receives Award for Little Hands–Little Tiles

Continued from page 13

NTCA Creative Director, Michelle Chapman designed and created the winning piece for *Little Hands Little Tiles*, an educational trade initiative by the NTCA. This initiative is designed to introduce children to the joy and creativity of working with tile through engaging and educational puzzles. These puzzles are distributed by industry members within their communities or given as gifts to inspire the next generation of tile artisans.

“Michelle’s work on the *Little Hands Little Tiles* initiative exemplifies the high standards and innovative spirit of the NTCA,” said Bart Bettiga, Executive Director at NTCA. “We are so excited about this well-deserved recognition for her work.”

PIAS represents more than 300 member companies across a seven-state region, including Arkansas, Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and West Virginia. The association plays a pivotal role in supporting and advancing the graphic arts industry within these states.

Visit the NTCA *Little Hands Little Tiles* page to learn how your organization can support this initiative and purchase the *Little Hands Little Tiles* puzzles.

Established in 1947, the National Tile Contractors Association (NTCA) is a



From left: Doug Hederman, CEO, President of Hederman Brothers, the printing company that submitted the award, with Bart Bettiga and Michelle Chapman of the NTCA.

nonprofit trade association dedicated to the professional installation of ceramic tile and natural stone. It is widely recognized as the largest and most respected tile contractors' association in the world. For those seeking to improve their tile business, NTCA provides unparalleled educational experiences, supportive peer interaction, unique cost-savings programs, to make your business more profitable. Find out more at www.tile-assn.com.

Silica Research Update

In January 2024 the Natural Stone Institute board of directors took a significant step to address the issue of silicosis impacting fabrication workers. Building on a legacy of utilizing science to better understand industry needs that began with the radon crisis, the board commissioned Yale Occupational and Environmental Medicine to serve as a consulting partner to assist in and/or conduct research, address questions on silica exposures and silicosis, and provide guidance on medical surveillance and compliance with government regulations.

NSI board president Katie Jensen commented: “The authoritative information we will receive from the collaboration with Yale will help the industry guide next steps to protect workers and position what steps are necessary to address best practices needed in the fabrication process.”

Shortly after engaging with Yale, the International Surface Fabricators Association (ISFA) partnered with NSI to

assist with strategy development and sharing costs needed to address this important issue. ISFA board president and NSI accredited fabricator Ted Sherritt shared: “This issue is significant and requires all stakeholders to be participating. As a member of both organizations, I’m proud to bring the resources of ISFA to join NSI in this effort.”

Initial research projects include:

1. Literature Review: Yale’s research team has searched, cataloged, and critically reviewed and analyzed the available literature relevant to the use of natural stone and other relevant alternatives (e.g. engineered quartz and other materials) to natural stone. They will provide a summary of relevant articles including the type of document, authors, study design, key findings, strengths, weaknesses, and relevance to NSI. This effort will help the industry both understand and be able to utilize available literature when

working with public health and regulatory agencies. We anticipate receiving a report of these findings in summer 2024.

2. Exposure Assessment: Yale is compiling existing air sampling data from industry companies as part of a broader effort to better characterize the nature and extent of workplace exposure to crystalline silica. They will also advise and offer guidance on additional air monitoring data which could help better understand and control workplace silica exposure in the industry. Over 250 countertop and/or cut-to-size fabrication companies participated in our initial survey this spring, and roughly 25% of those participating shared air sampling reports. We appreciate all who participated and look forward to sharing the results.

3. Fabricator Guidance for Workplace Silica Exposure Assessment: To meet the needs of a growing number of companies who may be conducting respirable crystalline silica sampling for the first time and/or want to enhance their past efforts, Yale has assembled a guidance document for stone

fabricators seeking air monitoring services. The document covers sourcing services, understanding reports, and working with a consultant. It is highly recommended that fabricators consult this document to gain insight into “best practices” for sampling/monitoring. These documents will be available on NSI’s silica page later this summer.

These efforts are proactively being shared with government officials in California, as well as at the federal level. Additional in-the-field studies are anticipated.

Jensen concluded: “It is vital that science and data be utilized to drive future decisions specific to exposure sampling, fabrication procedures, and what regulations are prudent. We are being proactive to bring industry together with public health officials to collaborate on this science.”

Members and industry partners are reminded to utilize NSI silica training courses and resources found online at www.naturalstoneinstitute.org/silica.

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