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THE BEACON OF THE STONE INDUSTRY www.slipperyrockgazette.net

Castelli Marble: Experienced, Connected, Diversified and Positioned

When opening the doors of Castelli Marble in 1987, Luigi and Alessandro Castelli did so with two childhoods-worth of experience after working alongside master craftsmen at their father's quarry in Cassino, Italy. Their know-how harks back to a post-World War II era when machines were few, and hands were plenty. Little did they know at the time that this childhood introduction to stone would lead them and their children into meaningful lifetime careers

Experienced

At this point, you're probably thinking the brothers began with slab fabrication, right? Nope! It was simply marble tiles, recalled Luigi Castelli. "My cousin told

by Peter Marcucci

Photos Courtesy Castelli Marble

me he needed someone who could speak English rather well, because we are exhibiting at the stone fair in Carrara, Italy! This was in 1984. I said yes, and I was acting as a translator there, because I had learned English while attending college in America. I had no price sheet, no nothing, but there I was, talking to international clients that showed-up like they're going to a bar in Italy. It fascinated me, because we were going out to beautiful restaurants in the evening, being catered to, and treated like a king!"

So Luigi made a few bucks, went back

to America, but couldn't get this memorable experience out of his head. The wheels were spinning, and the numbers were coming up positive, he continued, "This was the beginning of 12 by 12 marble tiles, and while doing a little bit of market research, I saw that I could buy them from Italy at, say, a dollar fifty each, and then sell them in the US for four dollars each. As little as I knew about profit, I knew this was a good spread!"

Soon after, Luigi scored a job as a rep for two Italian tile companies, and continued getting the experience he needed to operate a tile import business. Before long, Luigi

convinced his brother, Alessandro, to partner with him. A 12,000 square foot warehouse was acquired in Cleveland, Ohio, and their first container arrived in 1987.

Connected

Within just two years, the brothers import business was thriving. Profits were good and getting better by the month. However, the wheels were still spinning in Luigi's head. "I have a weird way of seeing the future. I had a feeling that things were going to change, and it was time to look at something new. Granite slabs were gaining in popularity, so we got into the slab business, and we literally became the largest granite slab distributor in Ohio overnight! This was partly because of the Italian connections we now had. Being bilingual also helped." Remember, that at the time, the Port of Carrara was receiving the finest materials from around the world, and 90% of the granite and 80% of the marble was either distributed or fabricated in Italy.

Diversified

With a passion for stone and a fine eye for quality, the brothers saw continued success over the next decade. They were still importing stone from around the world, but the need for diversity to satisfy the opulent tastes of their growing high-end clientele, as well as staying ahead of their competition was clear, explained Luigi. "Our markets were getting saturated and shifting. We had 5 to 6,000 slabs at any one time, and the only way out was to cut our own material! So we took what we had learned in Cleveland, and created a small shop in Ciudad Lerdo, Durango, México, in the mid 90's."

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Castelli Marble is vertically integrated from the quarry to the client. The exclusion of an intermediary allows Castelli Marble to assure the highest quality of raw stone to finished product.



"Once sourced, all of our products are manufactured at our factory, located in Ciudad Lerdo, Mexico."

-The Castelli brothers, Luigi and Alessandro Castelli.



Above, a Nero St. Gabriel marble block is being prepared for cutting.

Castelli Marble

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“At first we were buyers, but we eventually bought a couple of old but very functional Gregori saws, and modified them to go forward, backward, neutral, up and down.”

The brothers outgrew this shop in just 4 months, and created a second shop, which they outgrew in 18 months, then decided to really dig in. Eight acres were purchased and a two-hundred thousand square foot building was built that would eventually house large, state-of-the-art saws that could cut blocks or slabs, little and medium saws that cut slabs for fabrication and mosaics, and a processing line for tile. However, they made the decision to not invest in robotics, explained Luigi. “I’ve stayed away from robotics, because I do not want to compete with China! In other words, my unique angle is that our products are made by artisans by hand, and you’ll see all the nuances of the hand. Years ago, I asked myself a simple question: Why should customers come to Castelli Marble?”



Handcrafted elegance meets international expertise. This marble vanity sink area exemplifies Castelli Marble’s commitment to the human touch—where skilled artisans transform stone into one-of-a-kind masterpieces. From quarry to client, every detail is tailored to perfection.

Timeless craftsmanship, handcrafted perfection— this marble vanity sink showcases the artistry of Castelli Marble.



A Calacatta marble solid stone vanity for an upscale residential customer.



A Statuary marble solid stone vanity.

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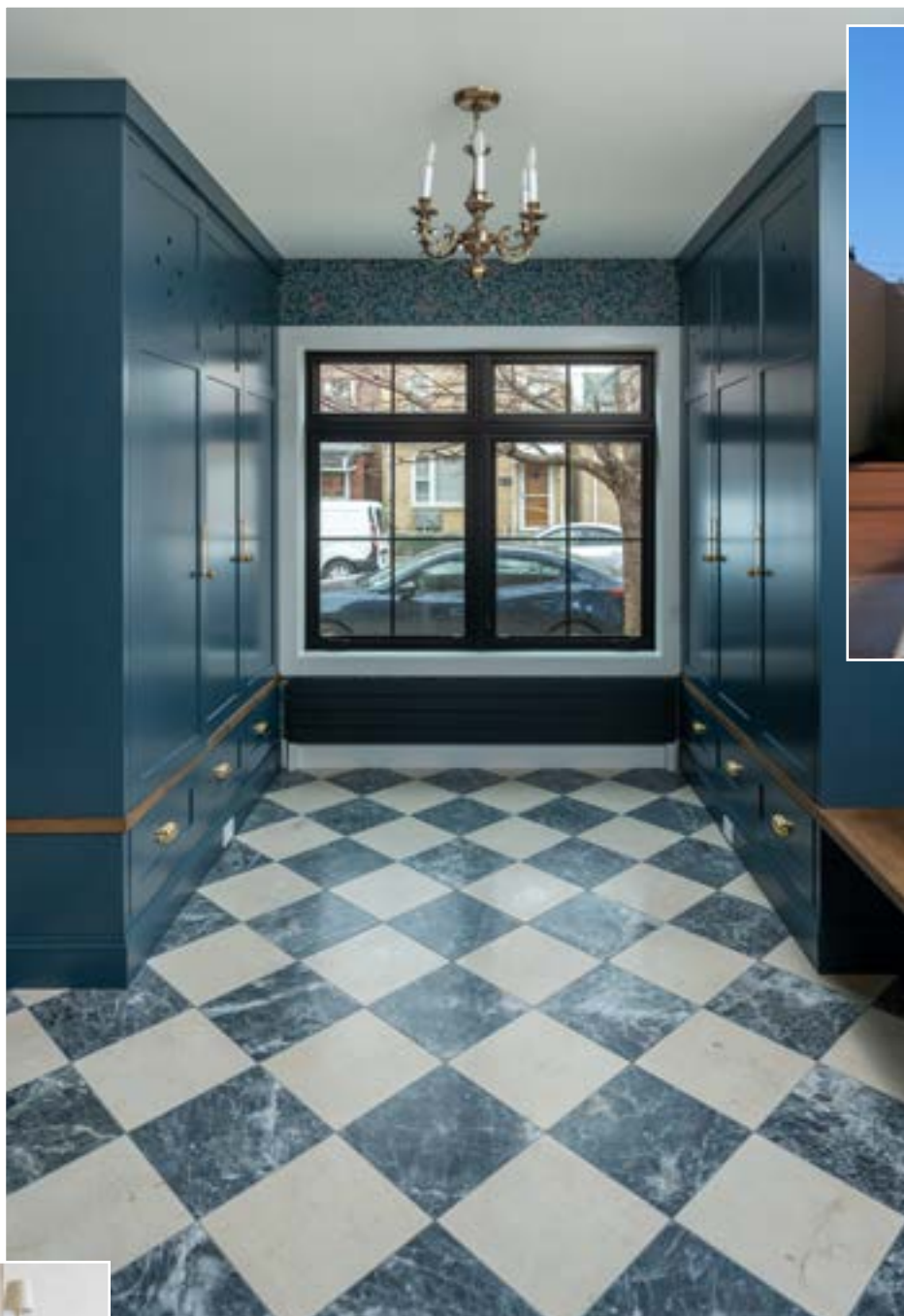
Castelli Marble

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“The simple answer was that if I cannot offer a unique product or a unique application, then I’m not doing what I should be doing. I truly believe this, and the reason why is this. When you think of CNCs these days, and that you can simply hit a button and do a Michelangelo-style work, all of a sudden it sort of cheapens the value of that product, especially natural stone, because now, obviously, anyone can put a block on a multi axis CNC, hit the button, have a cup of coffee, then come back the next morning and see a beautiful statue of David in whatever size you want to make it. In my opinion, to have a unique space, be it architectural or structural, in a home, a public building or a religious building, stone has to have the human touch, and that’s what we try to sell to our clients. I wanted a company that followed the old ways, with a human touch. You call here, and a human answers the phone, even on Saturday! This has been a big part of our success.”

Internationally Positioned

Currently serving a worldwide market, Castelli Marble’s main distribution market continues to be from New York to Illinois and from Ohio to Tennessee. The company also has a growing presence in the Canadian Provinces, the Bahamas, Colorado and California. Client ratios are 50% residential, with the remaining percentage being commercial, religious and hospitality markets.



Above: Courtyard fountain created for Archangel Michael Church, Broadview Heights, Ohio.

Castelli Marble client ratios are 50% residential, with the remaining percentage being commercial, religious and hospitality markets.

From quarry to client, the company is one-stop-shopping source for marble sinks, blocks, mosaics and basic or custom hand-carved fireplace surrounds. Countertops and flooring can also be color coordinated and tailored to the delight of the consumer, continued Luigi.

“We chose this location because of the logistics. Mexico is the only country in North America that allowed us to be where the stone is. Between 100 and 200 distinctive marbles, travertines and onyx are located within a 300 mile radius of our shop. If it can be done with stone, we have the capability to do it. We have the people, the machinery, the material and the relationships from all over the world that can give us their know-how, the machinery, or any kind of assistance. Relationships, especially in our industry, are everything! We’ve taken the time to develop these relationships, and this is what makes us unique.”

Another biggie that makes the company unique, it that it is family-operated. Luigi continues to share the helm with his brother and co-owner, Alessandro, while Luigi’s triplets Maya, Fernando and Giancarlo as well as wife, Maria, share the sales or administrative duties.



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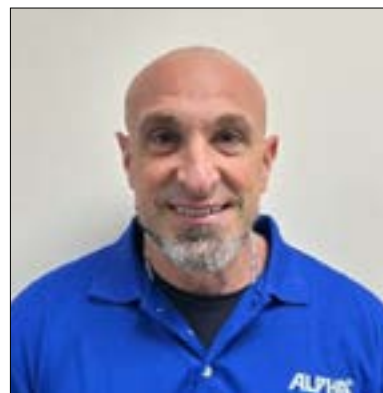
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Alpha Professional Tools Announces Eric Vicario Joins The Alpha® Team



Eric Vicario
National Technical Trainer

Alpha Professional Tools® is pleased to announce that we have hired Eric Vicario as our National Technical Trainer. He will work in a supportive role to our Sales Team for Training and Technical support for our Customers and Fabricator End users.

Eric has been in the Stone and Tile Industry for over 25+ years. The first 10 years in NJ started with Tile and Stone countertop installation, with him having his own business servicing Fabricators and Kitchen and Bath dealers. Next, he continued his experience in Florida working for Fabricators and then for Cosentino as a Dekton Technical Trainer for two years, followed by Florim Stone as a National Technical Trainer for the last 4 years, working with Distributors, Fabricators, Architects and Designs in the Large Format

Porcelain Slabs.

He resides in Florida with his wife Nicole, and children Vanessa and Jarred. He loves the Florida water and sunshine and looks forward to traveling in support of our sales team.

If you have any questions or need additional information, he can be reached at the following:

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About Alpha Professional Tools®

Alpha Professional Tools® was founded in 1986 and has become a leading manufacturer of quality tools for professionals in the natural/engineered stone, porcelain, ceramic, glass, construction, and hardscape industries. Alpha® provides the best products for cutting, drilling, shaping and polishing all types of materials. In addition to providing the best products in the industry, Alpha Professional Tools® offers a variety of services to support their products.

More information is available at www.alpha-tools.com.



Industry Calendar of Events

February 2025

KBIS 2025: Kitchen & Bath Industry Show

When: Tuesday February 25 to Thursday, February 27, 2025

Where: Las Vegas, Nevada

Visit kbis.com to register and for more information.

March 2025

NSI: Georgia Stone Summit

When: Thursday March 6, 8:30 a.m. –5p.m. ET

Where: MSI, 1501 Pine Barren Road, Pooler, GA 31322

Visit naturalstoneinstitute.org/events/calendar-listing for more information.

April 2025

NSI: Coverings 2025

When: Tuesday April 29 - May 1, 10:00 a.m. –5:30p.m. ET

Where: Orlando, FL

Visit naturalstoneinstitute.org/events/calendar-listing for more information.

See the NSI and ISFA Event Calendars for more online events in 2025



How Do You Compare?

Prove Your Quality & Safety Practices are Best in Class

Only the finest companies in the industry can meet all of the qualifications necessary to earn Natural Stone Institute Accreditation. Differentiate yourself from the competition. Prove to design teams and consumers that your fabrication and installation methods are best in class and that safety is a top priority.

Get started by watching our accreditation webinars.

naturalstoneinstitute.org/accreditation

Project completed by Carnevale & Lehr, Natural Stone Institute Accredited since 2014.

International Surface Fabricators Association Honors 2024 ISFA Award Recipients

“The ISFA Awards program is designed to create awareness and celebration around the wide array of surfacing materials used by our members and the unique applications in which they can be used” said Ted Sherritt, ISFA president. “We’re pleased to honor these exceptional fabricators and industry contributors and to showcase their amazing work within the industry.”

The International Surface Fabricators Association (ISFA) is pleased to announce the winners of the 2024 ISFA Awards. The annual program honors excellence in application design, fabrication and installation of projects using surfacing materials across five categories. Projects must exemplify excellence in all methods of the fabrication process, including safety, training and the use of technology. An independent panel of industry professionals selected the winners for the project-based awards. In addition to project awards, ISFA awarded a Fabricator of the Year award and inducted a new member into the ISFA Hall of Fame.

Winners were announced at the 2024 ISFA Annual Conference, which took place November 6-8, 2024, in Miami, FL. Here are the award recipients:

Excellence in Commercial Projects Under \$100K:



Gecko Solid Surface Solutions of San Antonio, TX RWE Project.

This winning project was created using Corian solid surface and thermoforming of the desk facades. This project required compound radii on all corners and a 180 degree wrap around one of the custom desks. Custom colors were created to match the quartz countertops. Gecko SSS noted that the compound radii was a challenge that required a lot of trial and error and provided a great learning opportunity for all involved in the project.

Excellence in Commercial Projects Over \$100K:



Ellis Page of Manassas, VA fabrication of the Tysons Trillium Project.

This senior living amenities project was comprised of multiple areas in the facility and required design refinement, fabrication, installation, and multi-trade coordination. A variety of materials were used to fully complete the project including several brands of quartz and totaling over 110 slabs used on amenity areas alone. Ellis Page shared that one challenge with the project occurred during installation. Keeping

safety top of mind for the entire team, the project required lifting and then securing them to the wall. The team used a variety of lift equipment to safely maneuver the parts and ensure all crew on sight were safe during the process and installation.

Excellence in Residential Projects Under \$20K:



Alpha Granite and Tile of Austin, TX fabricated a Geometric Fireplace.

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TRAINING & EDUCATION

The Hidden Talent Pool for Stone Sales You Probably Haven't Considered

Ah, the search for that ever-elusive salesperson who will grow your business. If you've been searching for salespeople, you know how hard it is these days. Few respond to your job postings, and the few applicants you do get often don't have the skills or experience to do the job.

It's frustrating for sure and can make you think there's nobody out there.

The problem isn't that there are no quality sellers out there, it's that they're not thinking about a career in stone sales.

So, where else can you look to find that next star seller? Real estate.

Stick with me here. There's an entire industry of talented professionals that are perfect for your team. They just don't know you're hiring.

There are big changes in real estate these days. If you have a realtor friend or family member, ask them about how their entire commission structure has been upended over the past year.

It's driven a lot of agents out of the business. Nationwide, more than 60,000 real estate agents left the business in the past six months. Commission changes, slowing housing market, reduction in inventory, and increased competition from online sellers have changed the model.

Sellers no longer have to pay the buyer's agent's commission. This created downward pressure on commission rates and made it harder for newer agents to establish themselves because of the lower commissions. Most real estate sales agents are seeing smaller take-home due to these changes despite rising home prices. At the same time the home selling market is slowing, and the home remodeling market is heating up. The Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University predicts an upswing in 2025, amounting to more than \$466 billion in spending by mid-year alone.

Why Real Estate Agents Are a Perfect Fit for Your Business

Why are realtors a good fit for your stone fabrication business? Let's count

Tim Saddoris
Grand Onyx

the ways.

- **They know kitchens are everything:** Whether they're listing a home or helping a buyer, Real estate agents already know that investing in the kitchen delivers the highest ROI. They can leverage that experience and knowledge to help customers understand the value of an upgrade.
- **Design expertise:** They've walked through hundreds (thousands?) of homes and spotted trends before they became mainstream. They know what works and can help buyers make better decisions.
- **Builder connections:** Many already work with builders and can bring those relationships with them. They may even know a few remodelers and tile guys who may also be looking for a career change.
- **Flexible schedules:** Agents are already used to working flexible hours like Saturdays and evenings when most of your retail sales happen. It's just another workday for them.
- **They hustle:** Real estate agents cannot afford to sit around and wait for the phone to ring or for a potential customer to walk through your door. They know how to build grassroots relationships and find buyers.
- **Commission-friendly:** Most real estate agents are used to getting 2% commissions — and may have to spend some of that on marketing. Realtors will jump at the chance for 5%-10%, especially if you are using digital marketing to send them leads! If you do base salary + commission, that's a big plus for a real estate agent who is used to working solely on commission and paying out of pocket for marketing.
- **Ready for In-Home Sales?** Realtors excel at this, seamlessly blending into their routine of visiting homes. By entering a customer's space, they create comfort, understand the

Real estate agents already know that investing in the kitchen delivers the highest ROI. They can leverage that experience and knowledge to help customers understand the value of an upgrade.

homeowner's style, and forge personal connections—making \$10,000+ orders a common success.

Honestly, real estate agents are a perfect fit for this job, and they have the people skills to create fast rapport and develop relationships that inspire trust.

So How Do You Find These Real Estate Agents Looking for a Change?

There's a pretty good chance many of your customers have been working with a real estate agent recently. New home buyers looking to upgrade or those looking to increase value by selling are good sources for referral. So, when people come into your shop, ask them if they've recently worked with a real estate agent. This also gives you a way to warm up your approach when you reach out.

You can also find real estate agents on Indeed, but often the best play here is Facebook. You can run a targeted ad that appeals specifically to real estate agents. Do this and you can bet you'll get applications — especially if you're hitting their pain points in your ad.

Oh, and you can throw this little tidbit at them: the average salary for a real estate agent nationwide in 2024 was \$59,012. The average comp for someone selling granite? \$79.9k per year.

A Job Description Cheat Code

If you're not sure exactly what to write in your ad or job description, here's a cheat code for you.

Go to the free version of ChatGPT and cut and paste this prompt:

"You are an expert in hiring for the stone fabrication business. Help me craft a job

description to attract realtors transitioning into sales roles. My business is {www.yourwebsite.com}. What info do you need from me to create something that stands out? While you're at it, give me an AD image to post on Facebook, too."

You'll get something that can help you write the ad and an image to go along with it. While you don't have to use it verbatim, you can tweak it as much as you want to get it right. But, it will save you a ton of time and make the whole process easier. You can also add a bit of information about your business to help customize it even further.

Your Next Top Performer Could Be a Former Real Estate Agent

With upheaval in the real estate sector right now, this is the perfect time to target experienced agents and offer them a pathway to a career change. You're giving them a way to utilize the skills they've developed over time, and you're getting a pro who already knows how to sell high-value home improvements.

The solution to your seller shortage might be hiding in plain sight and wearing a real estate agent name badge!

Like this tip and want someone to help you get it done? Get in touch with Grand Onyx today and sign up for our newsletter. Grand Onyx focuses on proven strategies to grow your stone fabrication business and optimize sales and profitability.

Tim Saddoris is the president of Grand Onyx, a firm dedicated to building world-class surface fabricators. Grand Onyx helps companies define operational processes and create road maps to achievements that enable more predictable revenue, stronger margins and foster legacy businesses that stand the test of time. To learn how Grand Onyx can help with hiring or automating your business, visit www.GrandOnyx.Pro.

"Resolve to perform what you ought. Perform without fail what you resolve."

— Benjamin Franklin

Honors 2024 ISFA Award Recipients

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Precision templating with consideration to existing conditions and careful fabrication were all a part of the unique work created, transported, and installed as a part of this award winning project. The customer design called for very sharp corners and unusual miter angles. Using Caesarstone porcelain aluminous 12mm, the Alpha Granite group was able to create the desired aesthetic. This required the development of new process and testing to ensure satisfaction for all involved.

Excellence in Residential Projects Over \$20K:



Surface Providers of Alpharetta, GA fabricate not your average countertops.

The project upon completion glows with light and illuminates the full height backsplash, mitered edges, and waterfall legs highlighting its selection as a 2024 award winner. Measured utilizing templating software and then matched with digital layout tools, this complex project was created using quartzite. Panels were custom fabricated and wired to switches which create the lighting effect seen throughout the end result. Access points were created to facilitate future maintenance on the lighting and safety was a top priority for the project at every step. Surface providers noted that the material was challenging due to density and best practices in working with quartzite.

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TRAINING & EDUCATION

Marketing and Sales Alignment: The Missing Link in Stone Fabrication Success

The disconnect between marketing and sales teams costs businesses millions in lost revenue. According to LinkedIn's research, 87% of sales and marketing leaders say collaboration between these teams enables business growth. For stone fabricators, this alignment becomes even more critical as modern customers research extensively online before setting foot in a showroom.

The stone industry faces unique challenges in bridging this gap. Marketing teams create photo galleries and social media content to attract leads, while sales teams handle material discussions and detailed quotes. Without proper alignment, valuable opportunities slip away. Research by HubSpot reveals that companies with strong sales and marketing alignment achieve 20% annual revenue growth on average.

Core Business Impact in Stone Fabrication

The relationship between marketing and sales transforms three key areas of stone fabrication businesses:

Marketing evolves from generating unspecified leads to delivering sales-ready opportunities that match specific buyer profiles. Sales teams transition from reactive quoting to proactive consulting with marketing insights into customer preferences. Production teams benefit from clearer customer expectations established during aligned marketing and sales processes.

Research-Backed Benefits

According to Salesforce's State of Marketing report, aligned organizations achieve 36% higher customer retention rates and 38% higher sales win rates. In the stone industry, this translates to more efficient operations and better customer relationships.

Customer Experience Excellence The impact of alignment is evident

Anthony Milia
Milia Marketing

in customer satisfaction. According to a study by MarketingProfs, companies with aligned sales and marketing generate 208% more revenue from marketing efforts. For fabricators, this translates to:

- **More accurate expectations about materials and timelines**
- **Consistent messaging from first contact through installation**
- **Better-qualified leads entering the sales pipeline**
- **Clearer communication about project specifications.**

Operational Efficiency

Industry observations from successful fabrication shops show that proper alignment has a transformative impact on overall operations. It leads to:

- **More efficient template scheduling**
- **Reduced material waste from better expectation setting**
- **Fewer installation reschedules**
- **Decreased customer change orders**
- **More accurate project timelines.**

Best Practices from Industry Leaders

Leading fabricators implement several key strategies that align with broader business research:

Technology Integration

Successful fabrication shops integrate systems to ensure seamless operations. They connect CRM systems to quote tools, link marketing automation to sales pipelines, utilize project management software for customer communication, integrate material inventory with quote generation processes, and tie installation scheduling to customer updates.

Communication Protocols

According to SiriusDecisions, regular communication between sales and marketing can result in 19% faster revenue

growth. Leading fabricators achieve this by holding weekly alignment meetings, using shared CRM systems, conducting regular performance metric reviews, organizing joint customer feedback sessions, and employing unified project tracking tools.

Action Steps for Implementation

Start your alignment journey with these proven steps:

1. Audit the current state

Examine your processes to identify gaps between marketing and sales functions. This process includes documenting lead flow patterns, analyzing communication systems, identifying points of disconnect, recognizing technology gaps, and evaluating average response times.

2. Create shared definitions

Build agreement on key terms and processes. This includes defining qualified lead criteria, setting standard response times, establishing quote follow-up procedures, developing customer communication protocols, and outlining project milestone definitions.

3. Implement Tracking Systems

Put measurement tools in place that follow industry best practices. These tools include lead tracking systems, quote follow-up metrics, customer interaction records, project timeline monitoring systems, and revenue attribution tracking mechanisms.

Conclusion

Marketing and sales alignment isn't theoretical—it's a proven path to higher profits. While stone industry-specific data is limited, broader business research consistently highlights the value of alignment. According to Forrester Research, aligned organizations achieve an average of 32% annual revenue growth.

Success in today's competitive market demands more than quality craftsmanship. It requires marketing and sales teams to function as a unified force to attract, serve, and retain customers.

Ready to align your marketing and sales teams for maximum results? Contact [Milia Marketing](#) for a comprehensive assessment of your current processes and a custom alignment strategy for your fabrication business.

TRAINING & EDUCATION

Understanding AI and ChatGPT for Your Countertop Shop

ChatGPT and generative AI often seem like magic. You put in a prompt, and presto! You have an email, an outline, an illustration, or almost anything you can think of! But sometimes, when you look closely, these results aren't very... good. The thing is, you can't think of AI like a magic wand that you wave and immediately get amazing results. Instead, you need to think of it like a toolbox. If you're building a house, you don't just throw nails at wood and expect it to frame itself. You make decisions, you guide, you use the tools you have. That's what AI is: a series of tools. And today, we're going to talk about how you can use this toolbox to build your shop. Let's take a look at how AI and chatbots can benefit your countertop shop, helping you save time and money while enhancing customer satisfaction.

The Value of Chatbots for Customer Support

The first place you should consider using AI is for basic customer support. Customer service is a cornerstone of any successful business. However, providing prompt and efficient support can be challenging, especially outside of regular business hours. This is where chatbots come into play.

24/7 Availability

Chatbots can assist customers at any time of day or night. Whether someone has a question about countertop materials at midnight or needs help scheduling an appointment early in the morning, a chatbot is there to provide immediate responses. This constant availability enhances customer satisfaction and can lead to increased sales. Customers appreciate businesses that are accessible and responsive. Chatbots ensure that your countertop shop remains engaged with customers, even when your physical location is closed. And customers are getting used to chatbot responsiveness; they have come to expect quick answers. Chatbots provide immediate responses to inquiries, reducing the likelihood that a potential customer will look elsewhere due to slow communication.

Stephen Alberts
Countertop Marketing Co.

Use AI and chatbots to improve customer service, streamline tasks, and boost marketing for your countertop shop.

Enhancing Employee Experiences

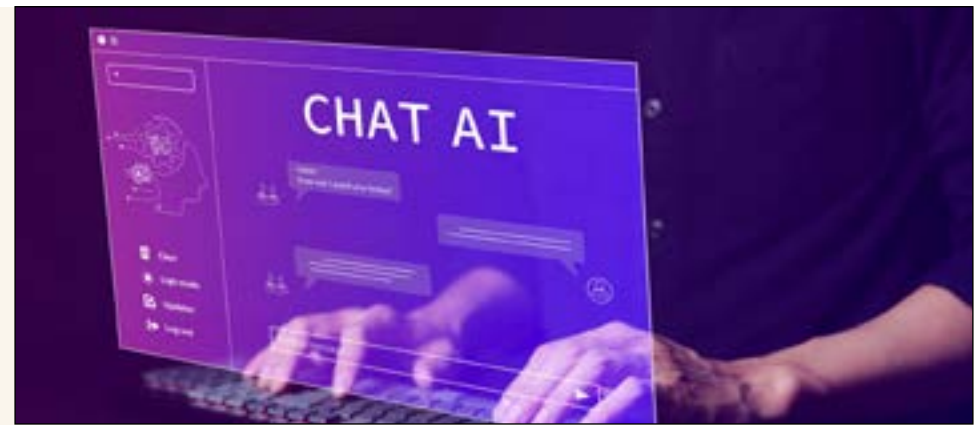
Another great use of chatbots is to take the boring tasks away from your employees. Your employees are valuable assets, and their time is best spent on tasks that require human expertise. Chatbots can take over repetitive tasks, allowing your team to focus on more important duties. And when chatbots handle simple customer interactions, your employees are free to engage in more meaningful conversations. This could include in-depth consultations, personalized design advice, or resolving complex issues that require a human touch.

Consider that many customer questions are routine queries about pricing, materials, or service areas. Chatbots can handle these frequently asked questions with ease, freeing up your employees to focus on more complex tasks that require a human touch. This improves efficiency and ensures that your staff is utilized where they are most needed.

Boosting Business

There are lots of other things AI chatbots can do for your business. A chatbot can lead to significant cost savings. By automating customer service for common inquiries, you reduce the need for additional staff to handle these tasks. Over time, this can result in substantial savings that can be reinvested into other areas of your business, like employee raises and better equipment!

Chatbots can assist with scheduling appointments and design consultations. By automating this process, you minimize



the chances of double-booking or missed appointments. This efficiency benefits both your staff and your customers. They can also gather valuable data about customer preferences and common inquiries. This information can help your team understand customer needs better and tailor services accordingly.

Advanced chatbots can offer personalized recommendations based on customer inputs. This level of engagement can enhance the customer experience and increase the chances of conversion. And if these conversations happen outside of business hours, chatbots can capture leads that might otherwise be lost. They don't just answer questions—they can serve a key role in making sure that a search turns into a greater opportunity. For example, a customer browsing your website in the evening can get their questions answered about material and schedule a consultation for the next day.

Utilizing ChatGPT for SEO and Local Lead Generation

Beyond customer service, AI tools like ChatGPT can assist with your marketing efforts, particularly in generating content and ideas for content.

Generating SEO-Friendly Content

ChatGPT can help you create blog posts, website copy, and social media content optimized for search engines. I would recommend that you use this as a base for blog material because AI generated content will probably not help search results all that much as Google can detect AI content.

Local SEO Strategies

For a countertop shop, attracting local customers is essential. ChatGPT can assist in creating content that targets local search

terms, such as “best granite countertops in [Your City].” This localized content can help you rank higher in search results for your area. Again use it as a base! Take some of the ideas and then rewrite the content yourself.

Content Ideas and Planning

Struggling to come up with new topics for your blog or social media? ChatGPT can generate ideas based on industry trends and customer interests. Regularly updating your content keeps your audience engaged.

The Future of AI in Countertop Shops

AI is here, and it's not likely to go away any time soon. You just need to know how to use it. Embracing AI technologies positions your countertop shop at the forefront of industry innovation. As more businesses adopt AI, staying current with these technologies ensures you remain competitive. Artificial intelligence and chatbots like ChatGPT offer valuable opportunities for your countertop shop to enhance customer service, improve efficiency, and boost marketing efforts. But they can't make decisions or perfectly analyze your business's needs and customers. AI can help, but it can't run your business or implement your marketing strategy.

Stephen Alberts is the owner of the Countertop Marketing Co. and STONE ENGAGE. They specialize in helping countertop companies grow the retail side of their business outside of word-of-mouth and referrals. They also offer software to help you engage more with customers and close more countertop projects. To learn more, visit countertopmarketingco.com or stonengage.com. You can also email Stephen at steve@countertopmarketingco.com.

Castelli Marble

Continued from page 3

Additionally, longtime employee Greg Franz heads up the company's super successful regional sales program. Team members at the Cleveland location, where only mosaics, mock-ups and repairs are done, total 12, while the shop in Mexico employs between 80 and 95 highly skilled craftsman and assistants.

Between the two locations, Castelli Marble handles an average of 2,320 metric tons per year, and keeps an average of 125 blocks in stock to expedite client service, said Luigi. "Our unique vertical integration allows us to give our clients exceptional service. For example: let's say on the first of the month you present us with a project such as a sink or a fireplace, and then on the sixth we agree on everything. Chances are you'll have this project at your jobsite four weeks later. We are one of the few companies that can do this, because we stock material from 15 to 20 different countries around the world and America, as well as our local quarries in Mexico, and then fabricate it in our shop. It is then sent to us in Cleveland where it is inspected, photographed, palletized or crated, and then sent to your jobsite. Coordinated flooring, walls and countertops are also expedited due to our quarry to client ability."

Luigi's Final Thoughts on the Industry

"The coming tariffs don't help us or the client, because at the end of the day, tariffs are never paid by the seller. They are paid by the buyer. We all know that. Many distributors in North America have front-run their purchases, so if you're a distributor from Europe or Asia, you're going to see a heck of a slowdown in the next 5 months. Everybody has bought more than they needed to front-run these tariffs, and they will definitely impede the market in 2025. That said, we have seen our sales go up by 40% this year, because of cross marketing and social marketing. I also see that more and more high-end retail work will be the key for us to continue to excel, and the fact that we can do the entire project from A to Z, as well as customize it in a reasonable time frame. We have also invested in more machinery in the last 6 months to make more sinks, fireplaces and dimensional work.



Statuary marble 3 x 6 inch tile with a basketweave mosaic on the floor.

"What's really going to be interesting, though, is if clients are going to go with synthetic or manmade products, such as quartz, porcelain or Dekton, and turn away from natural products. I see this as the biggest threat to our industry, more than tariffs or anything else, because I've seen enough of what quartz has done to natural stone. Additionally, this new generation of kids, let's say they are 20 years old now. They seem to be in favor of non-natural products and leaving nature alone. By 2030, if society says we don't want a natural product and want to leave the mountains alone, this could be a big problem, because the stone industry runs on mass sales, and if there are not enough sales, machine makers won't develop new technology and new quarries won't be exploited."

For more information about Castelli Marble's products and business model visit www.castellimarbleinc.com.



TRAINING & EDUCATION

Using Customer Data to Maximize Sales

At a time when competition in the stone fabrication industry is intensifying, businesses must delve deeper into customer behaviors and motivations to uncover why clients select their services over competitors. With this knowledge, stone fabricators can create targeted strategies that drive conversions, enhance customer satisfaction, and significantly boost sales.

Learning Customer Behaviors That Drive Decision-Making

Understanding customer behavior is essential for building a sales strategy that resonates with your target audience. Behavioral data helps identify:

- **Pain Points:** Are customers most concerned with pricing, quality, turn-around times, or design assistance?
- **Preferred Touchpoints:** Do your customers gravitate toward digital communication, in-person consultations, or phone support?
- **Purchase Triggers:** Is there a seasonal demand for your services, or do customers tend to make decisions after seeing samples?

These insights allow you to anticipate customer needs and fine-tune your approach. For example, if data shows that most of your customers are attracted by your rapid project completion times, you can highlight this in your promotional campaigns to differentiate yourself from competitors.

Behavioral data also sheds light on what frustrates customers during the decision-making process, enabling you to remove barriers to conversion. If customers frequently delay decisions because they struggle to visualize how a countertop will look in their kitchen, investing in cutting-edge visualization software could directly address their hesitation and improve closing rates.

Why Customers Choose Your Business Over Competitors

Data is also key to uncovering the reasons behind customer loyalty and preference. Why do clients choose your stone fabrication business over the one down the street?

Darlene Compagna
Direct Opinions

The answers to this question are often tied to factors like:

- **Quality of Materials and Craftsmanship:** Customers may prioritize access to premium materials and expert craftsmanship.
- **Exceptional Customer Service:** Friendly, knowledgeable support can sway a potential client to work with you.
- **Reputation and Reviews:** Word-of-mouth and online reviews often carry significant weight in decision-making. When your data shows patterns—like an uptick in positive reviews related to customer service or consistent praise for the durability of your materials—you gain valuable feedback to amplify these strengths in your marketing.

When your data shows patterns—like an uptick in positive reviews related to customer service or consistent praise for the durability of your materials—you gain valuable feedback to amplify these strengths in your marketing.

Conversely, data can identify areas where you lag behind competitors. If prospects mention that a competitor offers more transparent pricing or better scheduling flexibility, use this insight to make improvements that will position your business as the preferred choice.

Meeting 2025 Growth Goals Through Customer-Centric Strategies

To achieve ambitious sales targets for 2025, stone fabricators must shift from broad approaches to strategies informed by data and tailored to customer preferences. Here's how understanding what matters to your customers can drive growth:

1. **Enhanced Resource Allocation:** Data-driven insights ensure that marketing budgets are directed toward high-performing lead sources, reducing wasted expenditure.



2. **Improved Customer Relationships:** By addressing customer pain points and emphasizing your business's unique strengths, you can deepen trust and encourage repeat business.
3. **Targeted Marketing Campaigns:** Promote what matters most to your customers. If speed and quality drive decision-making, build campaigns showcasing how your business delivers both effectively.
4. **Competitive Differentiation:** Highlighting features or services that distinguish you from competitors can turn casual leads into loyal customers.
5. **Long-Term Partnerships:** Whether it's contractors, designers, or past clients, nurturing relationships with top referral sources can ensure a steady pipeline of high-quality leads.

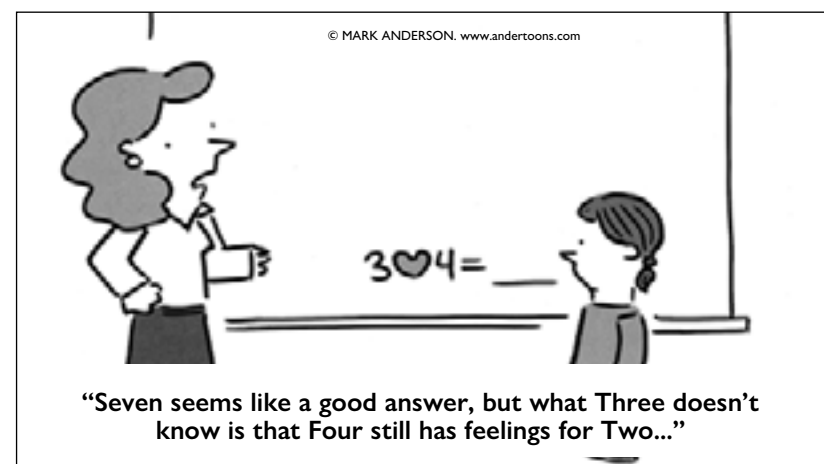
Data is a powerful tool that helps stone fabricators understand the deeper customer behaviors that drive purchasing

decisions. By learning why customers choose your business and focusing on what matters most to them, you can refine your processes and optimize lead-generation strategies for maximum impact.

In the journey to meet 2025 growth goals, embracing a customer-centric approach informed by data ensures that every decision—from marketing to operations—delivers tangible results. Stone fabricators who prioritize understanding and meeting customer expectations are poised not only to achieve their targets but also to thrive in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

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, please reach out to Darlene Compagna at dcampagna@directopinions.com or call 216-867-1165.



2025 Stone of the Year Crystallo Rare Quartzite



RSG Stones has sponsored the 2025 Natural Stone Institute Stone of the Year. Crystallo Rare is an extraordinary quartzite, renowned for its striking beauty and exceptional rarity.

Sourced from a small, exclusive reserve in Rajasthan, India, this stone stands out for its unique appearance—a delicate interplay of deep grey veins scattered across a pure white background. The veins, which range from sparse to concentrated, create a sophisticated contrast, giving Crystallo Rare its distinctive look. The name “Rare” is a fitting tribute to the stone’s exceptional nature, as this specific form of Crystallo is quarried in only one small location worldwide, with a very small production of around 5000 square feet in 3 cm, and the whole world to cater to.

Its rarity and elegance make Crystallo Rare a sought-after choice for luxury designers and architects aiming to create timeless, sophisticated spaces.

To learn more about Crystallo Rare quartzite, and the NSI Stone of the Year program, visit www.naturalstoneinstitute.org/stoneoftheyear.

About Natural Stone Institute

The Natural Stone Institute is a trade association representing every aspect of the natural stone industry. The current membership exceeds 2,000 members in over 50 nations. The association offers a wide array of technical and training resources, professional development opportunities, regulatory advocacy, and networking events. Two prominent publications—the Dimension Stone Design Manual and Building Stone Magazine—raise awareness within the natural stone industry and in the design community for best practices and uses of natural stone. Learn more at www.naturalstoneinstitute.org.

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TRAINING & EDUCATION

The Importance of Understanding Product Margin: Part Two

In Part One of this article that appeared in the January *Slippery Rock*, I showed how your fabricating shop's contribution margin can be used to build financial guard rails to maintain your business profitability as it grows. If you haven't read Part One, read it now before proceeding.

In Part Two I will show you that while the margin is important, the velocity of that margin flowing through your shop is equally important. It is not just HOW MUCH your product margin is, but HOW FAST you can get it through your shop that matters.

To do this, I want to go back to the example in Part One where the shop owner stated "To be profitable in this business you need to have a margin of at least 62%." In that article I showed a set of circumstances where his business would make 10% Net Profit, and what would be required to get that Net Profit up to 15%.

I believe there is an implication in his statement "You need to have a margin of at least 62%," that a higher margin is both better and necessary. While a higher margin is definitely more desirable, it is not a necessary condition for a given level of profitability. In fact, there are ways you can lower your overall margin AND increase your profit at the same time.

In last month's example, the owner needed to increase his revenue by \$40,000 per month to move his net profit from 10% to 15%. We calculated this would require one additional job per day if the TVE% and Revenue of these jobs were similar to the existing business.

Let's look at a different scenario for increasing the profits of the shop. Suppose there existed jobs that could flow through the shop at a rate 50% faster than your current mix, but you would have to lower the contribution margin of these jobs from 62% to 42%. What would happen?

The first thing that would happen is your controller would tell you that you are crazy to even consider it. Be that as it may, keep reading!

First, let's clarify what "flow through your shop at a rate 50% faster" means. It means at the one production process step that limits the capacity of your shop, these

Rick Phelps
Synchronous Solutions



jobs go through 50% faster. It means the changes you make at your constraint will yield 1.5 of these jobs in the time it now takes to do just one of your typical jobs.

Using the exact same capacity found in Part One to process the extra \$40,000 in revenue of existing work, the shop can now process \$60,000 in revenue of this new work. Will we come out ahead or behind?

Producing an extra \$40,000 in revenue of the existing work with a contribution margin of 62% will yield an additional contribution of \$24,800 ($\$40,000 \times 0.62$). Producing \$60,000 in revenue of new low-contribution margin work yields an additional contribution of \$25,200 ($\$60,000 \times 0.42$), an increase of \$400 to the bottom line.

This new configuration of the business has an average contribution margin of just 59.3%, down from 62.0%, and yet is making more money!

Kinda breaks your brain, doesn't it?

The implication that a higher contribution margin is necessary to be profitable at a given level is not true. This must mean that contribution margin does not tell the whole story. What does?

Velocity.

The question isn't simply how MUCH contribution margin is flowing through your shop, but also how FAST that contribution margin is flowing at the one point that matters: your production bottleneck (Constraint).

There are shops with a very high contribution margin (> 70%) that are not making any money because it takes too long to produce each job, making the daily FLOW

RATE of money too low to cover operating expenses.

Conversely, there are shops with a low contribution margin that are making great money because they are so efficient in how they process jobs that their FLOW RATE of contribution margin at their Constraint is really high compared to the outflow rate of their operating expenses.

Once again, the importance of understanding your product margin isn't about comparing it against some benchmark or "ideal," it's about knowing what you must do in your shop to make the profit levels you want.

The financial guardrails discussed in Part One are what enable you to determine the velocity of flow through your shop to make the profits you need or desire.

Helping fabricating shops grow their

business from where they are to where they want to be is what Synchronous Solutions is all about. If you want help increase the flow of work and money through your business, we'd love to talk to you.

If this makes your brain hurt, but you realize it's important, visit (<https://synchronoussolutions.com/free-resources/>) to watch our video explaining in a little more detail how this all works.

Helping fabricating shops grow their business from where they are to where they want to be is what Synchronous Solutions is all about. If you want help working through these calculations in your business, contact us at www.synchronousolutions.com or give us a call at 216-533-1387.

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I'm Going Whole-Hog with Weather Gripes

MY grumpy meter ratchets up a notch this time of year. Happens whenever I glance at the calendar and notice February is nigh. A nanosecond later, two questions invariably flash through my skull:

1. What the heck gives some rodent, hundreds of miles away, the ability to forecast weather anywhere in the country?
2. Why the heck does every news outlet from Alaska to Florida feel obligated to report this astonishing prophecy?

I speak, of course, about a certain February 2nd ritual in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania.

You know the drill: Clad in a tuxedo and top hat, some politician or pillar of the community in Punxsu — *third grumpy question: can anybody outside of that dang city write it correctly without continual spellcheck consultations?* — taps on the door of a fake tree stump, reaches in and withdraws a groundhog named Phil, then holds it aloft with the same unbridled glee as the winning coach of the Super Bowl hoisting the Lombardi trophy.

If the sun happens to be shining at that moment, Phil sees his shadow (isn't science amazing?!) This scares him (what a wimp), and he wishes to return to his burrow.

The verdict? Six more weeks of winter weather.

Conversely, if skies are cloudy, Phil doesn't see his shadow and isn't frightened. Barney Fife would be proud.

The verdict? An early spring is nigh.

Panxsu-whatever Phil isn't the only "official" weather groundhog. Just the one with the best agent and promotions budget.

There are lesser-known celebrity groundhogs all over the map. *Readers Digest* recently identified nearly a dozen. One is even a fellow Pennsylvanian: Grover the Groundhog in Pine Grove, a town with the

Sam Venable

Department of Irony



decency to pronounce and spell its name easily.

Speaking of snowmen, why limit "Frosty" to Christmas?

Don't kids continue to build snowmen as long as there's even a hint of snow on the ground?

Some others, in no particular order, are: Dunkirk Dave and Staten Island Chuck in New York, Buckeye Chuck and Thistle the Whistlepig in Ohio, General Beauregard Lee in Georgia, Chuckles IX in Connecticut, Jimmy the Groundhog in Wisconsin, Sir Walter Wally in North Carolina, Chattanooga Chuck in You Know Where, and Pierre C. Shadeaux in Louisiana.

Jimmy and Pierre are my favorites.

In 2015, Jimmy took a chunk out of the mayor's ear when Hizzoner "listened closely" for the forecast. And Pierre isn't even a groundhog. He's a nutria from Cajun marshes.

Otherwise, bah! Forecast-schmorecast! Be gone!

No matter what any of these rodents predict, Sourpuss Sam says take this to the bank: Over the next six weeks, it will be hot, cold, warm, rainy, sunny, sleeting, humid, dreary, snowing, cloudy, muggy, hailing, balmy, frosty, windy and foggy. Sometime. Somewhere. In one form or another. And not necessarily in that order.

Sourpuss Sam has spoken. He now returns to the comfort of his den.

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.

"Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it."

— Mark Twain

ISFA Awards

Continued from page 7

Sustainable Project of the Year:



**The Countertop Factory-
Midwest of Addison, IL, Green Rose
Dispensary Project.**

Working directly with the client on their vision of both sustainability and dynamic design The Countertop Factory Midwest was able to craft multiple kiosk tables and a centerpiece transaction counter. Gilasi recycled glass custom-sized slabs were produced to minimize waste and reduce

material costs. The project contains intricate miter work and waterfall edges showcasing the unique, sophisticated look desired by the client. Sustainability was a cornerstone of consideration throughout the entirety of the project.

Fabricator of the Year:



**Nate Kolenski, Block Tops of
Sacramento and Anaheim, CA**

In the industry for over 30 years, Nate Kolenski and his team have built the business to now employ fabricators in two shops in California.

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In Memory of Bobby Grace Brakefield

This month (December, at the time of this writing) has been a very sad month for me and my family. We lost my only granddaughter, Bobby Grace Brakefield, to a horrible accident. She got a twisted intestine and passed away suddenly, within about 24 hours.

It was Sunday night December the 15th, when my wife Julie, my youngest daughter Taylor, and I were watching the television when we got the call. We immediately dropped what we were doing, walked out the door, and drove to Bowling Green, at about 90 mph the whole way. The entire 3.5 hour trip we were praying and hoping for a miracle, but when we arrived, she had already passed. It was the hardest day of my life. I couldn't bear it. I felt so bad for my daughter Logan, because I couldn't fix this for her. I have always been able to talk my way out of or fight my way out of problems, but this time, I just couldn't fix it. We were all helpless.

Even though she was only 2-1/2 years old, Bobby Grace was so full of life. She was in the 90+ percentile of her age group in size and intelligence. She was walking at 9 months old, and was speaking in full sentences by the time she was two. She went on hikes with her mom and dad routinely and was a beautiful soul who was so advanced, that she was scary smart.

She leaves behind her little brother Murrell, who is 14 months old. Logan is pregnant with another, expecting in July.

From my colleagues, customers, and friends, and even my wife Julie's (Knoxville Marble Polish) customers, everyone has been so kind and supportive. This industry has been and continues to be, very good to us. The support from friends and family both in Bowling Green, where the funeral service was held, to everyone who attended the graveside service here in Knoxville for her final resting place, was overwhelming.

My son-in-law Hendrix is a fine man, and I am so very thankful he, Logan, and Murrell have each other during this time. Hendrix wrote Bobby Grace's eulogy and I, and many others, thought this was appropriate for most anyone who will read it. I wanted to share it with my readers. Hold

Bob Murrell
M3 Technologies

Photos Courtesy Family of Bob Murrell



Bobby Grace in early December

on to what matters in life, as everything else is temporary.



Logan, Bobby Grace, and me at my Crossfit gym



2024 Christmas family photo L to R – Hendrix, Julie, Bobby Grace & Logan, me, Taylor & Murrell

My eulogy for our daughter

In this time of grief we have reminded ourselves of two things. That we don't have to understand why and we don't have to worry about what next. Before his final journey to his crucifixion and in full knowledge of what was to come, Jesus expressed his natural human desire to avoid pain and suffering by asking "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me." And we have been asking the same in these circumstances. But where I find peace is in what he said next, "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." I felt peace in this prayer arriving at the hospital with no knowledge of what was to come. I felt

peace in this prayer while we watched the medical team attempt to bring Bobby back from death. And I felt peace in this prayer when it was final and we didn't know what was next.

Earlier in his life Jesus preached "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" If the animals of the world do not work and toil yet are fed and sheltered and live, then I can have faith that we will be provided for if we do our best to live out our purpose every day. Even if it doesn't feel like it in the midst of turmoil. He then said "Do not worry about

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In Memory Of

[Continued from page 14](#)

tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” And yes we have enough trouble to worry about for today. But I don’t worry about what is next. Like Jesus in the garden, we may all go through things in our lives that we do not want to or that we do not choose, and yet my faith assures me that God knows all, including why we must go through the things we do.

There is a Hebrew word, *Hebel*, that can be translated as vapor, breath, or mist. Something that may be visible or exist for a moment but that if we were to try and grab hold of would not support or sustain us. *Hebel* is used in different instances in the Bible to describe the transient nature of life and tangible things of this world. The concept that so many things we attach ourselves to are meaningless when we believe they will provide lasting fulfillment or happiness. Things that when we put our hope in or lean on will leave us wanting and unsupported. Money, power, possessions, achievements, knowledge, and even our opinions on the hands we are dealt in life. While easy to enjoy, comforting to have, and addictive to pursue, there comes a time when these things no longer provide value. Tragedy, death, setbacks, chaos. When these strike it’s inevitable that we’ll experience anger, fear, frustration, and despair if we are grasping towards the unsubstantial handholds this world encourages us to rely on. They can’t save us from heartache, or failure, or pain, or death. And if we have nothing more, then there is nothing more to expect. Yet not all is *Hebel*: Love, compassion, relationships, community. Wisdom, righteous principles, Loving your neighbor as yourself, and faith in something greater than ourselves. Recognizing and leaning into our gifts and challenging ourselves to be better every day. There are far less things that are lasting than temporary, but they are worth striving after as they will be there when we need them.

What happened to Bobby is objectively tragic. And yet there is no way for me to know where it ranks. What does our opinion mean to the universe or to those across the globe who it means nothing to? Who are we as mere mortals to determine where on the spectrum of positive and negative

individual instances fall? The stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote “It is not for you to judge what is good or bad, but rather to accept the natural order of things and act in harmony with it.” What perspective do I have to understand the wider purpose and plan? A wildfire or flood are rightfully viewed negatively by the humans who are impacted, yet to the forest and river valley it is necessary and good and brings forth positive things that we notice but may take for granted or fail to recognize the relationship.

I do not want Bobby to be gone but there is so much good that came from her life and I believe will come after her passing. We will be stronger people, better parents, and more empathetic members of humanity. I feel more connected to my family, friends, and community and I am reminded not to take the good things for granted, and to seek out the good when I can’t or don’t want to. I want to believe this experience will instill the same sentiment in all of us here. I will be a better person for this. A better husband, father, professional, friend, and supporter to other people in pain. This is reflected in the Bible when Paul reminds the struggling people of Corinth to “Praise God who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.” I know in the future we will be better able to serve others with the experience we have encountered this week. And I will forever carry our memories with Bobby, which are made of nothing other than glorious bright warm light, into the future and through future darkness.

Bobby Grace’s physical experience is over, it too was *Hebel*, including our ability to see her, hold her, talk to her. I expect over time I’ll forget many specific memories which are all *Hebel* as well. But there is so much I won’t lose and that I will be able to grasp and hold onto. The love we shared with her and that she shared with the world. The wisdom we were granted and will be granted going forward. The righteousness of a child’s life and what it teaches us to be in our own. And the power of our faith that we would not make it through without.

Jesus said “*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest...For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*” With God, the worst thing is not the last thing. There is hope and there is more.

Bobby Grace’s impact on us:

- To embrace rather than try and contain her abundant energy.
- To live with a gushing of life rather than a controlled expression.
- To have gratitude for every day and begin each one with eagerness and excitement
- To engage with strangers and show everyone love
- To build others up even when we are in a place of hurt.
- To overcome judgement by expressing ourselves completely and genuinely
- To create positivity by spreading positivity

Please continue to keep us in your prayers. I am looking forward to a blessed 2025 and helping to raise my grandson, Murrell, and the new grandchild when she or he gets here.

I’ll be back to the work-related articles for next month. I just wanted to share as I hope it helps with the healing.

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](mailto:publisher@slipperyrockgazette.net).

“God is too good to be unkind, and He is too wise to be mistaken. And when we cannot trace His hand, we must trust His heart.”

– Charles Spurgeon

The Stone Detective

A Day in the Life of the Stone Detective

Dr. Frederick M. Hueston, PhD

IT was one of those rare, chilly mornings in Florida, with temperatures dipping into the low 50s. I grabbed my jacket and fedora and headed out to the garage, where my trusty old Woody waited for me. With its polished wood panels and the faint smell of aged leather inside, the Woody was more than just a car—it was a part of me. The engine roared to life with a throaty rumble, and off I went, bound for my favorite greasy spoon.

As I pulled into the diner parking lot, the regulars were already there. Flo, the ever-cheerful waitress with a memory sharper than a diamond blade, was juggling coffee pots, while the Admiral, a retired Navy man with endless sea stories, held court in his usual corner booth. I slid into my spot at the counter, and Flo greeted me with a steaming cup of black coffee and a knowing smile.

Before I could even take a sip, my phone buzzed—a call from a frantic homeowner. She explained that mysterious dark spots were appearing on her marble countertop, and no matter what she tried, they wouldn’t go away. I assured her I’d be over within the hour, jotted down her address on a napkin, and polished off my eggs and toast.

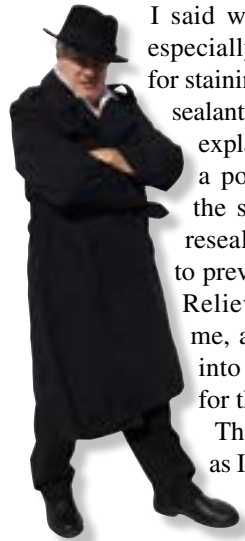
Hopping back into the Woody, I cruised down the scenic coastal road to her home. The Woody may not be the fastest car, but it’s got style, and there’s something about that smooth ride that makes you feel connected to the past. When I arrived, I was greeted by a frazzled woman who quickly ushered me into her kitchen. The marble countertop, once a gleaming showpiece, was now marred by dark, unsightly spots.

I put on my gloves and got to work. A few drops of water on the surface showed that the marble was sealed, but the stains absorbed the water, suggesting a compromised sealant. I asked her if anything had spilled recently, and she hesitated before mentioning a dinner party where red wine had flowed freely.

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The Stone Detective

Continued from page 15



“Well, there’s our culprit,” I said with a grin. “Wine, especially red, is notorious for staining marble when the sealant’s been breached.”

I explained how we’d use a poultice to draw out the stains, followed by resealing the countertop to prevent future damage. Relieved, she thanked me, and I climbed back into the Woody, ready for the next call.

The phone rang again as I drove off, this time from a commercial property manager. He was concerned



about a hazy film that had developed on the lobby’s granite floor after recent renovations. I pointed the Woody toward the towering glass-and-steel building downtown, its polished exterior a stark contrast to the hazy stone inside.

Walking into the lobby, I could immediately see the issue. The granite floor lacked its usual luster, dulled by a cloudy residue. A quick pH test on the surface confirmed my suspicion—improper cleaning agents, likely high in alkalinity, had left behind the

haze. I advised the manager to switch to a pH-neutral cleaner and scheduled a professional polishing to restore the granite’s natural shine.

By mid-afternoon, I received a call from a contractor restoring a historic building. They had uncovered an old stone wall with unusual white streaks and needed my expertise. After navigating the narrow streets leading to the site, I parked the Woody near the entrance and grabbed my tools.

The streaks were a classic case of efflorescence—salts migrating to the surface due to moisture trapped behind the stone. I explained how proper ventilation and a gentle cleaning regimen could mitigate the issue without damaging the historic stone. The contractor nodded, taking notes as I outlined the steps.

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, casting a golden glow over the coastline, I steered the Woody back to the diner for a well-earned slice of Flo’s famous pie. The neon sign buzzed to life just as I pulled into

the lot. Inside, Flo greeted me with a grin and slid a plate of warm apple pie across the counter.

“Busy day, Detective?” she asked, topping off my coffee.

“You could say that,” I replied, savoring the first bite. The mix of cinnamon and apples was the perfect end to the day.

As I sat there, the hum of the diner around me, I reflected on the cases I’d tackled. From mysterious stains to hazy granite floors, every problem had its own story. And just like the Woody, my work as the Stone Detective was all about uncovering the past and restoring what’s been lost.

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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Cobbed, Creamed, or Countertop?

This industry is fascinating. We are always looking for the next big thing. Natural stone, quartz, sintered stone, ultra-compact, etc. etc. and now it appears that the industry is homing in on a new, sustainable option for countertops: CORN.

Corn resin countertops, a relatively new product in the world of kitchen and bathroom surfaces, are gaining popularity due to their sustainable nature and innovative composition. Made primarily from corn-based materials, such as corn starch and other plant-derived components, these countertops are an eco-friendly alternative to traditional materials like solid surface and laminate. Eco by Cosentino and KlipTech are 2 companies experimenting with corn resin countertops. Cosentino is experimenting with a formula that includes up to 75% recycled materials such as broken glass and mirrors, and broken porcelain. KlipTech is trying out a formula that includes recycled paper and bamboo. Basically, corn oil resin is used to bind all the recycled material together and create countertops.

Before we all jump on the bandwagon for corn countertops, maybe we need to study them a bit. Below are some current pros and cons of corn countertops. As time goes on, these will probably get tweaked a bit, because it is still a relatively “new thing” on the horizon.

Known Pros of Corn Resin Countertops

1. Eco-Friendly and Sustainable

One of the biggest pros of corn resin countertops is their environmental friendliness. As these surfaces are made primarily from corn starch and other renewable plant-based materials, they are much more sustainable than other materials. Corn, a rapidly renewable resource, requires fewer resources to grow and may be a better option for those aiming to reduce their carbon footprint and make more sustainable choices in their home.

2. Biodegradable

Corn resin countertops are also biodegradable, which significantly reduces their environmental impact at the end of their lifecycle. Corn-based resin countertops break down naturally. This feature makes

Sharon Koehler

Stone Industry Consultant

them an attractive choice for eco-conscious consumers looking for sustainable products that do not contribute to long-term waste.

3. Non-Toxic and Safe

Corn resin countertops are typically free from harmful chemicals and compounds. They are non-toxic, making them a safer choice for families with young children or individuals with chemical sensitivities.

4. Durability

Despite being made from plant-based materials, corn resin countertops can be quite durable. While they are not as hard as granite or quartz, they are still resistant to everyday wear and tear, such as stains. Many corn resin countertops are infused with other natural substances to improve their durability and resistance to damage.

5. Unique Look

Corn resin countertops offer a distinct look that can complement many different design styles. The natural, matte finish often associated with corn resin can provide a more organic and earthy appearance.

6. Lightweight

Compared to traditional stone countertops, corn resin countertops are lighter in weight. This makes them easier to handle and install, lessening the risk of damage during the transport and installation process.

Known Cons of Corn Resin Countertops

1. Limited Availability

One of the main drawbacks of corn resin countertops is their limited availability. Since this material is still relatively new, it is not as widely distributed as more traditional options like granite, marble, or quartz. Finding manufacturers or suppliers who specialize in corn resin countertops can be challenging.

2. Susceptible to Heat Damage

Although corn resin countertops are durable, they are not as heat-resistant as stone such as granite. Exposing the surface to high temperatures, such as placing a hot pot or pan directly onto the countertop, may cause the resin to soften or discolor. Using trivets or heat pads is recommended to prevent damage.



3. Scratch Sensitivity

While corn resin countertops are resistant to some forms of scratching, they are not as scratch-resistant as materials like quartz or granite. Sharp objects, such as knives or tools, can cause visible damage to the surface. This can be a concern in high-use areas, particularly in kitchens where cutting and food preparation are common. Regular care and the use of cutting boards are necessary to keep the surface looking pristine.

4. Maintenance

While corn resin countertops are relatively durable, they may require more maintenance than stone or engineered surfaces. The material can show signs of wear over time, especially if exposed to abrasive cleaning products.

5. Long-Term Durability Concerns

Although corn resin countertops offer good durability in the short to medium term, their long-term performance is still an area of uncertainty. While they are resistant to many common kitchen and

bathroom accidents, it remains to be seen how the material will hold up over decades, especially in high-traffic areas. The lack of extensive real-world information on their lifespan compared to more traditional countertops such as granite, marble or quartz may make some homeowners hesitant to invest in them.

Years ago, natural stone became the best, new thing. (Even though it has been around for centuries and made some of the world's most beautiful, man-made projects.) Then, there was solid surface and after that, quartz became the next big thing. Then, sintered stone came along and put itself in the mix. Now there is corn. Will corn hit the mark as the next big thing? We will just have to wait and see.

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

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ISFA Awards

[Continued from page 13](#)

He has been dedicated to technology and safety while also being profitable and efficient. While the work of his shops is exemplary, his selection as Fabricator of the Year is also based upon his work as an advocate for the industry. He has invested time and resources to be THE voice of the surfaces fabrication industry in California. He has spent an unparalleled amount of time sharing why he loves the industry and has tirelessly worked with regulators and lawmakers to ensure that the industry is safe and can continue to thrive. His organization continues to be a shining example of the type of shop that ISFA members aspire to be, and his work as an advocate is unparalleled.

ISFA Hall of Fame Inductee:



Dr. Michael A. Banks

Dr. Michael A. Banks has had a distinguished, decades-long career in the decorative surfaces industry, contributing both broadly and deeply to its underpinning. In his 31 years with the DuPont Corian® business as a Senior Scientist and Global Codes and Regulatory Compliance Leader, he developed and disseminated a science-based understanding of solid surface products, collaborated on critical and foundational global standards, and operated within the highest ethical standards, serving as an exemplar for the broader industry.

These deep wells of knowledge did not remain siloed within DuPont but rather were entered into the industry through Mike's work on codes and standards, as well as patents in the public domain. He served as an ISFA solid surface manufacturer committee member and contributed most notably to the creation of ISFA 2-01 (2013) Classification and Standards for Solid Surfacing Material. He was a CMA (formerly ICPA) Solid Surface Standard Committee member and the DuPont representative within the Cast Polymer Association. To this day, Dr. Banks continues his support as an industry consultant though Surfacing Insights LLC.

BB Industries Releases 2025 Product Catalog



BB Industries has released a fabricator-dedicated catalog for 2025 with significant changes to its decades-old format. With an extensive selection of new tools and vendors, products and section headers are also given in Spanish, making BB Industries a user-friendly experience with the same complete, one-stop selection of products for countertop shops and stone and tile fabricators and installers.

BBi's theme for 2025 is "Year of the Viper," with a nod to BBI's exclusive brand of Viper blades and pads, industry favorites for over 30 years.

If you would like to receive a BB Industries Catalog, please call to request one, at 800-575-4401. You can also check out all of the newest offerings at www.bbindustriesllc.com.

Si te gustaría leer este artículo en español, visita www.slipperyrockgazette.net y busca la edición de febrero.

Since its beginning in 1994, BBI's philosophy has been to offer the best customer service in the industry and the best value stone fabrication products. We are right there for our customers through all phases of business with education, training, and support from CNCs to blades. Our vendors and customers are valued partners. For more info, visit BBIndustriesLLC.com, and BBIndustriesLLC on social media channels LinkedIn, Instagram, and [facebook.com/BBIndustriesLLC.USA](https://www.facebook.com/BBIndustriesLLC.USA).

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Classified Ads not meeting guidelines will not be published.

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Comandulli Speedy Edge Polishing Machine For Sale – Edge polishing machine for sale \$14K OBO - Must sell! Located in Los Angeles, CA, the machine is in excellent condition, low hours, Model Speedy System, Year 2006, Automatic Tool changer, Pneumatic turntable for piece loading, pre-set programs visualized on "touch-screen" control panel. Contact us at 310-328-8000 or email elizabeth@delorenzomarble.com.

Denver Slot Bridge Saw For Sale: Denver Slot, 230-240 volt, fixed table, rotating head, 15 hp motor, 18" max blade, power x, y & z axis, Manual head rotation, No longer under power. Price reduced: \$6,500. Contact: Jeff Kohmann: (330) 575-3871 Email: jeff@rock-solidcutstone.com.

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The Slippery Rock Classifieds

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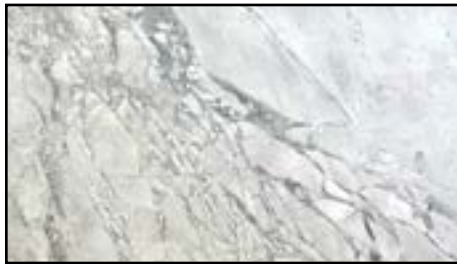
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“The virtues of men are of more consequence to society than their abilities; and for this reason, the heart should be cultivated with more assiduity than the head.”
—Noah Webster

Coming Full Circle with Super White



Type of Stone: Sandstone
Quarried from: Utah

Karin Kirk

Reprint Courtesy usenaturalstone.org

Photos Courtesy Mountain Valley Stone

Map and chart © Karin Kirk, 2024

cool greys arranged in a dynamic pattern reminiscent of a fractured ice floe. It was immediately obvious why the stone was a superstar, despite the nebulous problem with its identity.

The helpful salesperson gave me a sample and I went home to do some diagnostics. The stone didn't scratch glass, which ruled it out as a quartzite. I put a single drop of diluted hydrochloric acid on the stone, expecting a slight fizzing action and an etch mark. But nope, the stone didn't etch. That meant it wasn't a calcite-based marble. Next up, the test for dolomite: I roughed up an area of the stone with a nail, then put a drop of acid on the bits of powdered rock I'd scraped up. Bingo! It fizzed – the stone is made of dolomite.

Dolomite is similar to calcite but it contains some magnesium in addition to calcium. Compared to calcite, dolomite is slightly harder and it etches more slowly. That makes a dolomitic marble somewhat more durable than “regular” marbles that are made entirely of calcite, but the difference is subtle.

There's one more complicating factor with identifying Super White. The rock has fractures that are filled with quartz.

My involvement with the natural stone industry began in a distinct moment in 2012. In the midst of a kitchen remodel, I was browsing kitchen discussions on the Houzz website, learning about grout and cabinet hinges and numerous other topics that suddenly were of urgent importance.

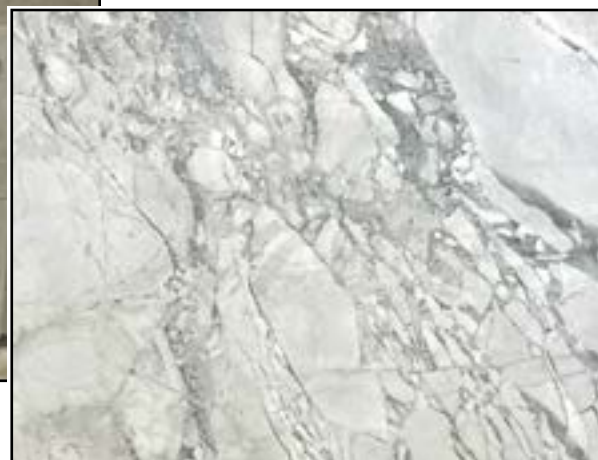
Then a fascinating thread scrolled into view, asking, Anyone ever cover their marble with saran wrap for a party? I eagerly clicked into the lively discussion about a Super White countertop that had been etching unexpectedly. Would covering it in plastic wrap be a good solution? The resounding answer was no, it would not.

At that time, Super White was still relatively new on the scene and often mislabeled as a quartzite, leading to disappointment when it didn't act like one. Hence, the urge to wrap it in plastic.

On my next visit to the slab yard, I spotted a slab of Super White. Swoon! That's one gorgeous stone – a blend of white and



Super White: A stunning blend of white and cool greys, like a fractured ice floe. Beauty undeniable, identity misunderstood.



All photos courtesy Mountain Valley Stone and Delta Stone Products



Super White vs Sea Ice

Super White marble or satellite image of sea ice? Nature's patterns are stunningly similar yet uniquely captivating.

This happens when the rock breaks underground – usually due to some sort of tectonic stress – and then mineral-rich groundwater fills in the broken parts. Geologists call this texture a “breccia” and it's what gives Super White its magnificent pattern of white marble fragments floating in a river of grey. These small areas of quartz may have led to the stone being mislabeled as a quartzite, but it's not a quartzite by any stretch. The rock's full scientific name is *brecciated dolomitic marble*.

Marble is a stone that's been beloved and useful through the ages, but it's one that warrants careful consideration. The potential for etching and scratching can be a dealbreaker for some, but no problem for others – but either way, people need to be able to make an informed decision. The more that sales reps, fabricators, designers, and homeowners can learn about the properties of stone they're considering, the happier everyone will be.

I wrote up my findings in a post on Houzz in a thread called The lowdown

on Super White, and woke up the next morning to find a half-dozen responses and questions. By the time I'd answered the follow up questions, several more appeared. Who knew that geologic descriptions of countertop stones would be such a hit? The thread soon reached its 150-post limit so I started another. It too quickly filled up so I started yet another, and another. I'd unexpectedly stumbled into a topic that seemed a good match for a geologist who happens to like kitchens.

Before too long I'd found the Marble Institute of America (now the Natural Stone Institute) and a happy collaboration was born. One of our first priorities was to delve into this very topic: The Definitive Guide to Quartzite. The popularity of marble and quartzite led to articles such as Telling White Stones Apart, that aimed to help people sort out the differences between similar-looking stones.

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From acid tests to scratch tests, uncovering the true nature of this stunning stone.

Coming Full Circle with Super White

Continued from page 22



Bringing my dream to life: Super White, the perfect blend of nature's elegance and personal vision.

in my mind that I'd end up with Super White. It also happened to be the only white stone that my husband liked. I was able to find a remnant piece with a brilliant pattern of fracturing that was gloriously similar to the satellite images of sea ice that I use in my science writing for NASA. I stood in front of the slab and ran my fingers over the leathered surface, appreciating the texture of the marble blocks floating within the icy quartz veins. I felt so very lucky that it was finally time for a piece of glorious white stone of my own.

Karin Kirk is a geologist and science educator with over 20 years of experience and brings a different perspective to the stone industry topics. Karin is a regular contributor to usenaturalstone.com, NASA, and the Slippery Rock Gazette. Contact her at karinkirk@gmail.com. This article is part of an ongoing series about American quarries.

But there was one more element of that original post that was prescient. I wrote, *"I swoon every darned time I pass by a slab of white marble. I just love it! But I will have to come up with another place to use it, like as a mantle or a countertop on a china cabinet."*

Fast-forward 12 years, and my dream built-in cabinet and bookcase was being installed, and I could finally carry out that vision. I still stop dead in my tracks every time I come face to face with a slab of white marble. It's an exquisite material, made all the better because it comes naturally from the Earth. At last, I was admiring these beauties as a customer, not a scientist.

I checked out many different slabs, but honestly, there was never a doubt

Mike O'Connor Named CEO of Coldspring, Succeeding Pat Alexander

Coldspring, a premier quarrier and fabricator of natural stone and bronze serving the commercial, memorial, residential, and industrial markets, is pleased to announce a new chapter in its leadership. Pat Alexander, who has served as the company's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) for the past forty-one years, is stepping down from his role and handing over the leadership to his son-in-law Mike O'Connor.

"I am incredibly proud of the work we have done over the years and excited for what is to come," said Pat Alexander. "It has been an honor to lead this company for more than four decades, continuing the legacy that my grandfather started and my father built upon, tirelessly focusing on fostering a culture of employee engagement and embracing the principles of servant leadership. I am confident that Mike will continue to uphold the values and vision that have been the foundation of Coldspring for generations, always putting people first. Mike is a natural leader, dedicated to empowering our team, and I know that the company is in great hands as we enter this next chapter."

Mike O'Connor, who joined Coldspring in 2019, has quickly become known for his thoughtful leadership, strong relationships with employees, and deep understanding of the company's core values. As CEO, he will continue to build on the legacy established by the Alexander family as he becomes the fourth generation of the family to lead the company.

"It's an honor to take on the role of CEO at Coldspring," said Mike O'Connor. "I have had the privilege of working alongside Pat and the entire Coldspring team and am excited to carry forward the vision and values that have made this company a leader in the natural stone and bronze industry. Coldspring's commitment to quality, integrity, and the people who make it all possible will remain at the heart of everything we do as we look to the future."

As part of this transition, Pat will remain actively involved in the company as Chairman of the Board, providing guidance and support to Mike and the rest of Coldspring's leadership team. In addition, Coldspring's dedication to its employees,



Coldspring CEO - Mike O'Connor

customers, and community remains unwavering as it remains true to its mission of being good stewards of all that God has entrusted to the company.

For more information about Coldspring and their natural stone and bronze offerings, please visit www.coldspringusa.com.

About Coldspring

Coldspring, a premier quarrier and fabricator of natural stone and bronze serving the commercial, memorial, residential and industrial markets with all types of natural stone, bronze, and diamond-tooling products, has been family owned and operated since 1898. With headquarters, a primary manufacturing facility and bronze foundry in Cold Spring, Minnesota, the company has 1100 employees at operations across the country, including 30 quarries and multiple fabrication facilities. Through a culture rooted in servant leadership that inspires collaboration and engagement at every level, the company is known for its high level of service while advancing innovative solutions and maintaining a steadfast commitment to corporate sustainability.

"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

– Mahatma Gandhi

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