

LEARNING FROM OTHERS

For the first time ever, the subject of our “Re-Emerging U.S. Stone Industry” feature is not technically a member of the stone industry. In fact, the company — Counter Intelligence of Silver Spring, MD — is strictly a fabricator of Silestone quartz surfacing, and they produce a staggering 35 kitchens per day (page 36).



Now, before you stone “purists” out there begin writing us the requisite hate mail, I think it’s important to understand why this type of article is important at this day and age, and why we made the trip to their facilities outside of Washington, DC. First of all, quartz surfacing — whether it is Silestone, Zodiaq, CaesarStone or otherwise — has made such inroads in our industry that it would be foolhardy to ignore the fact that it exists. Many fabricators who have been working with natural stone for decades now also fabricate quartz surfacing to fulfill the requests of their customers.

Conversely, many fabricators who had historically specialized in laminates or solid surfaces have eventually moved into quartz surfacing and ultimately into natural stone. One example of this can be found in our feature of East Coast Associates (page 110), which we visited in Virginia. This company made the move into natural stone less than a year ago, and they entered the business with the professionalism they had learned over the years working with homeowners. And many other fabricators that are included in the “Fabricator Case Studies” section of this issue also fabricate both natural stone and quartz surfacing.

The simple fact is that there is significant crossover between natural stone and quartz surfacing, including fabricating techniques, machinery, tooling, templating and so forth. But there are also practical lessons to be learned in terms of simply operating a countertop production facility. This is particularly important for newer fabricators who know the ins and outs of stone fabrication, but have not necessarily had to face some of the customer service issues and follow-up that is part of running your own business.

As I toured Counter Intelligence’s operation, I was quite impressed by the level of sophistication it maintains. From beginning to end, a project is carefully tracked by customer service representatives by computer, and it is cross-checked at each stage — all with an eye on making sure that things are done right, that communication between all parties is clear, and that the customer will ultimately be satisfied. I suppose I shouldn’t have been all that surprised, because you need *some* system of organization if you’re doing 35 kitchens per day, but it was nevertheless impressive.

This is not, of course, to say that this level of customer service is absent from fabricators of natural stone. In fact, most fabricators also have a keen eye on customer satisfaction — probably more than most contractors that deal with homeowners (although I still shudder to include stone fabricators in the general category of “contractors”). It is just nice to see the bar for quality control raised so high. In a time when competition is perhaps more difficult than ever, and when there are more fabricators than ever in the marketplace, it is important that the level of quality for stone fabrication is never compromised — on any scale.

And there are many tools for quality control out there. In addition to sophisticated computer systems for templating, estimating, project tracking and inventory, there are resources for fabricators that require nothing more than the ability to operate a pencil. The Marble Institute of America is offering a package of forms that fabricators can use for each of their projects — from jobsite checklists to homeowner satisfaction forms — these documents were taken from fabricators around the country, and offer a comprehensive system for ensuring customer quality.

Like every industry, the stone business continues to change. Rather than bemoan these changes or long for “the good old days,” it is in the fabricators’ best interest to keep an eye on what is going on in the field and to maintain stone’s reputation as a premium building material.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Reis".

Michael Reis, Editor/Associate Publisher



Equipped to satisfy customer demand

Within several years, Counter Intelligence has dramatically increased the size of its business to capitalize on the growing market for Silestone Quartz Surfacing in the Washington, DC, area

by Jennifer Adams



Photos by Michael Reis

In the past six years, Counter Intelligence of Silver Spring, MD, has significantly increased production and invested in new fabricating equipment. The company currently operates six Intermac CNC machines from AGM of Pineville, NC.

John Murray of Counter Intelligence, Inc. of Silver Spring, MD, is modest when speaking about the tremendous growth his company has experienced in the past six years. The

owner, who first learned to fabricate countertops during a summer job when he was 15 years old, laughs that his business first began in the basement of his home. Since that time, Murray has

worked with granite, Corian and concrete, but his latest venture has led him to be an exclusive distributor of Silestone Quartz Surfacing by Cosentino. In recent years, Counter



The Intermac machines are instrumental in the company's production, which averages between 30 to 35 kitchens a day.



The 20,000-square-foot facility is also equipped with a bridge saw from Matrix Stone Products of Upland, CA.

Intelligence has added numerous machines, over 100 new employees and a sophisticated new software program for tracking jobs.

"I've been doing countertops for 32 years," said Murray. "I started in high school when I was 15. It was a summer job. That's when metal edges

and Formica countertops [were popular]." From there, he pursued a variety of avenues, before beginning the flourishing Silestone business he runs today.

Early on in his career, Murray had also been a carpenter. He explained that one day he had a few friends over to

work on his basement. "We tore all the walls out, and I looked around and said, 'This would be great for making countertops,'" he said, adding that he stayed there several years with about six workers.

As market demands changed over time and the fabricator shifted the direction of his business, he remained true to one philosophy — customer service. "Customer service is always important," said Murray. "It is a big buzzword, but it takes more to figure out how to make that part of your culture and always focus on it. Just giving the customers someone to talk to is important."

With this ideology in mind, Murray has taken great measures to improve Counter Intelligence's overall system for processing jobs. Currently, the company works with 110 independent kitchen and bath dealers within a 60-mile radius of the Washington, DC, area. Additionally, it works with 40 Home Depots and Expo Design Centers, which comprise a total of 25% of the company's business. "The market pushed us," said Dick Dechant, sales director of Counter Intelligence. "[Silestone] took on a life of its own."

Expanding the shop

Counter Intelligence has been in its current location for the past 12 years. "It is convenient to the [Washington, DC] Beltway and near our customer base," said Murray. To keep up with the rapidly growing business, Murray has been renovating the 20,000-square-foot facility to accommodate more machinery, and make production more efficient.

A Lexta 36 GMM bridge saw, which is now serviced by Salem Stone of Winston-Salem, NC, is also used for cutting.



Flow waterjets are used for difficult and complex cuts.

"I'm in the middle of changing the production flow," he said at the time of *Stone World's* visit. This will involve shifting the placement of machinery and installing a conveyor belt to make the fabrication process run even more smoothly. "I'm making all processes for cutting in one area," explained Murray.

The shop is equipped with six Intermac CNC machines, supplied by AGM of Pineville, NC; a Lexta 36 GMM bridge saw, which is now serviced by Salem Stone of Winston-Salem, NC; a Marmo Meccanica LCV 711M edge polisher for processing backsplashes; and a bridge saw from Matrix Stone Products of Upland, CA. Vacuum lifters from Wood's Powr-Grip of Laurel, MT, are used to help move slabs around the shop.

In addition, Murray recently purchased two double-table Flow waterjets, and reinstalled a single-table

Flow waterjet machine that had been previously purchased. "We are expecting to do 2,000 square feet a day," said Murray.

The fabricator explained that waterjets have proven invaluable when cutting L-shaped countertops. "We used to have to work the inside corner by hand," he said. "It wouldn't make sense to have one if you were just doing straight cutting." The waterjets are also practical when cutting a slab to conform to the shape of a wall that is crooked.

According to Murray, it took about six years for Counter Intelligence to expand to this capacity. "That's when we started with Silestone," he said. "We needed a lot more power [in the shop], so we had to add new electrical panels. That was a big job.

"Another challenge for us has been water use," Murray continued, adding that this challenge was met with

a system from Water Treatment Technologies of North Hampton, NH. Also, to address the amount of water used during the fabrication process, the company has installed controllers to regulate the flow of water to the CNC machines. "That has helped a lot," he said.

The shop runs two 8-hour shifts daily, according to Murray. In addition to the areas with the large fabricating machinery, Counter Intelligence also has a separate area for handwork. Each workstation is equipped with two hoses that hang down from the



To help conserve water in the fabricating facility, Counter Intelligence purchased a water treatment system from Water Treatment Technologies of North Hampton, NH, about a year ago.

Moraware of San Mateo, CA. "In order to get to this level, we had to get on line," he said. "We are now a paperless office. There is no way we could have grown without this technology. Before it, everything was in a file. It was horrible. We had to do something."

Murray explained that it took about two years to get the company functioning as a paperless office. The JobTracker software was purchased about a year ago from Moraware.

Users of the program have dual monitors at their desks, which allows each of Counter Intelligence's three phone operators to look at the company's complete measuring and installation schedule for the day as well as the specific customer's information. The program allows the templaters and installers to enter site-specific details, which will be helpful to each other when completing their part of the job. "We are trying to have better communication between departments," said Murray, adding that there are 15 installation crews with two to three workers in each.

Color-coding is also a very important feature of JobTracker. The company is able to assign each area such as Washington, DC, and Northern Virginia with a specific color, and make sure that the installation team assigned to the project makes the most sense from a geographical standpoint. "By using colors, we can visually move jobs around," said Murray. "There are also other visual clues." For example, jobs in green have been confirmed with the customer, ones in black have been scheduled but not confirmed, and jobs



Hand tools from GranQuartz of Tucker, GA, are used for finishing in a specially designated area of the shop.

ceiling — one for water and one for air. "This is so that there aren't any hoses all over the floor," said the owner. The majority of the hand tools and diamond tooling are from GranQuartz of Tucker, GA.

To keep jobs organized in the shop, each Silestone slab that has been selected for a kitchen is placed on a cart that is marked with the scheduled day for installation. This ensures that the

countertops are fabricated according to delivery dates. "I can tell if we are ahead or behind by looking at the flags," said Murray.

Creating a paperless office

At this time, Counter Intelligence completes between 30 to 35 kitchens a day. Murray largely credits this increased production rate to the JobTracker software program developed by



Once backsplash pieces are cut on the Lexta 36, the edges are polished on a Marmo Meccanica LCV 711M.

in blue signify that the measuring has been completed.

Additionally, the program provides other key features that help to produce better efficiency. These include a script page, which the phone operator uses to ask the customer specific questions that will be useful to the templater installer. Also, each templater has a tablet PC that allows the customer to choose the specific color of Silestone and the type of edge that they want for their countertops. Their selections are marked with a big red check mark so that there is no confusion in the choice that was made.

“The only information not on the computer is the job survey, which is filled out by the installer,” said Murray. “It is the way that we can communicate with our problems.”

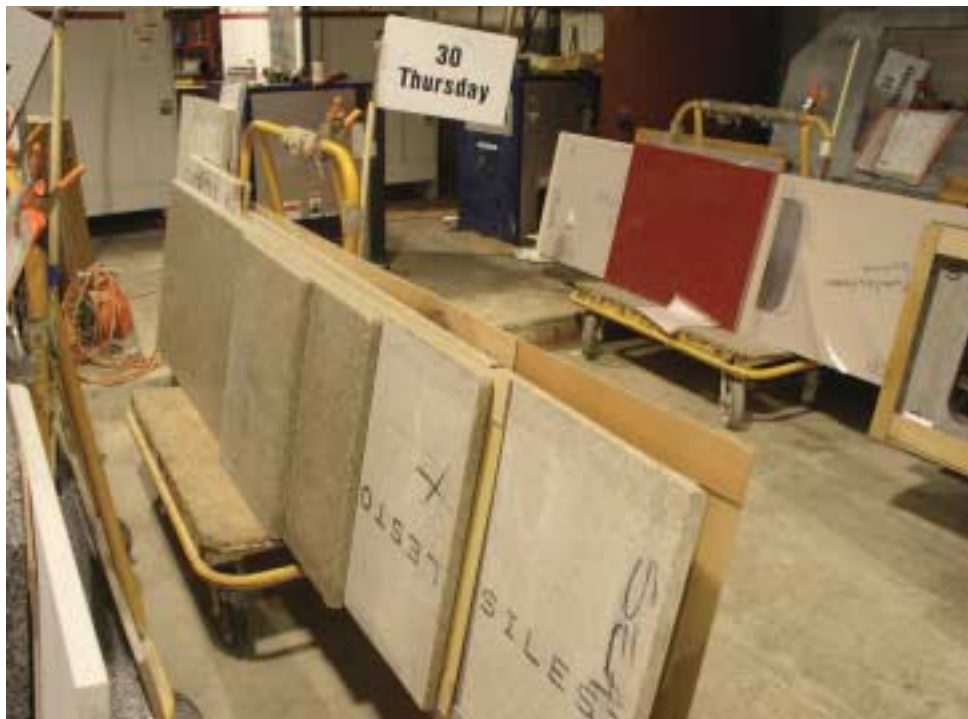
Digitizing templates

Further adding to the high-tech structure of the business are 10 Faro digital templaters. “This has really taken us over the top. Each measurer has one of these, a travel PC and a tripod,” Murray said, adding that templating had been done in a traditional manner in the past, with the templater taking measurements and then cutting a hard template from strips of plywood. “The templater had to go out [to the job] and measure, and he had to be somewhat of a carpenter.”

In using the Faro digital templaters, the “Faro Arm” is placed at a stationary position at the jobsite, and the arm is maneuvered as needed to collect all of the relevant data for a particular project. It works at an extremely high level of precision, and can record intricate details of a space.



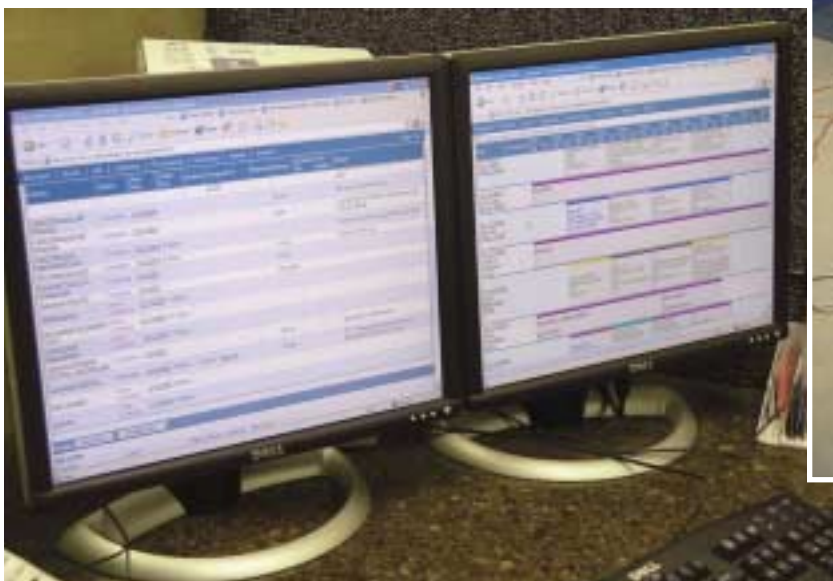
A Wood's Powr-Grip vacuum lifter is used to move the Silestone slabs around the shop.



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Further adding to the high-tech structure of the business are 10 Faro digital templaters. "This has really taken us over the top," said owner John Murray, explaining that the Faro has replaced plywood templates. "Each measurer has one of these, a travel PC and a tripod."



The JobTracker software program from Moraware of San Mateo, CA, has proven invaluable to Counter Intelligence. The system is complete with dual monitors, which allows each of the company's three phone operators to look at the complete measuring and installation schedule for the day as well as the specific customer's information.

Each measurer downloads his information for all projects at the end of the day, and the information is uploaded to Counter Intelligence's FTP site. The "Faro file" is then put into a CAD program. "There are 30 to 35 jobs waiting in the morning," said Murray. "One of the things that we have struggled with [in the past] was that customers didn't have a template to see. Now, we can draw lines and curves, and show them."

The final drawing is done at the

office where the sinks are put in. Once completed, the final drawing is sent to quality control for review.

According to the owner, the Faro digital templaters not only ensure precision, but this sophisticated equipment also saves time and increases production. "We went from [one person] measuring three jobs per day to measuring four jobs per day," said Murray, who added that this total is multiplied by the 10 templaters on staff, raising production even more. "It has

helped tremendously. There are other ways to do this, and we tried all of them. We don't have any physical templates any more."

Since Counter Intelligence fabricates jobs for other certified Silestone suppliers that still make hard templates, it keeps one Faro templater on the premises to record the data from these templates. After this step, the projects are processed the same way as projects templated directly by Counter Intelligence.



The company receives about 20 containers a month of Silestone slabs.

Restructuring

Counter Intelligence is comprised of 150 employees, of which 40 work in the shop. This differs drastically from the 20 workers that Murray employed only five years ago. With such a significant growth in staff, the owner is taking time to restructure various areas, which will ultimately improve production, customer service and employee satisfaction.

“One of the things that I have always focused on is production,” said Murray. “I am learning that I can streamline things and focus on processes rather than day-to-day functions.”

Murray explained that most of his employees were hired with little, if any, experience. It started with one person who brought someone in from his church, and then it grew from there. “Pretty much no one had experience — even the installers,” said Murray. “They were all very intelligent and trainable.”

To make sure that his business is reaching its potential, Murray recently hired a consultant to advise him on improving Counter Intelligence’s office structure. “I didn’t have an office

manager [before],” he said. “I didn’t have expertise in that area. [The consultant] has really helped out a lot.”

The consultant has suggested ideas such as dividing the company into smaller departments, and creating managerial positions. Also, she has stressed the importance of job guidelines for each position. “Letting people know how to advance and what skills they need [for a specific position] is a big help to give incentives,” said Murray.

Through the various programs and incentives now offered at Counter Intelligence, Murray demonstrates that he sees the value in investing in his staff as well as the technology. Improving upon the skills that his employees can provide will only strengthen the customer-service aspect of the business.

As a result, Counter Intelligence has begun offering English as a Second Language (ESL) classes to its employees on Saturday mornings. “They need to be able to communicate with customers in the field,” said Murray. “Everyone is signing up. It is nice to address problems in their community. It helps both of us.”

Marketing strategies

As the success being experienced by Counter Intelligence proves, the market demand for Silestone has shown significant growth in recent years. Cosentino, the product manufacturer, has heavily invested in marketing the material — including a commercial spot at the two-minute warning during this year’s Super Bowl. Ads promoting Silestone have also been placed on 600 buses in the Washington, DC, area. “We can’t really gauge yet [if it is working], but we hope that it is effective,” said Murray.

Counter Intelligence also markets Silestone to architects and designers at in-house training seminars, and it also conducts seminars at its Home Depot locations. This provides a great opportunity for the company, since Home Depot holds many seminars, and every six months there usually are new faces. The company also has plans to focus some attention on the commercial sector, and it recently hired a salesperson to concentrate on this area. □