

Countertop business written in stone (and other solid surfaces)

Mike Langenderfer might be the only person around who regularly compares a slab of marble to a loaf of bread.

As president of the Countertop Shop in Monclova, though, he has the chops. His company's experience with stone installations drives the conversation he regularly has with customers. "I tell them that we want them to come in and put their hands on the slabs of granite in our warehouse," he says. "It really is like a loaf of bread with a hole in it, only in this case the hole is a vein of color in the stone. You go a few slabs further on and the vein isn't there."

Customers have been coming in and choosing their particular granite — as well as solid surface and laminate — since 2003.

Mike traces the road to today's 25,000-square-foot facility on Airport Highway, a journey going back several decades: "My wife Karen and I started 32 years ago, when we wanted to go into business for ourselves. Actually, it was the era of corporate downsizing and I told Karen that I didn't want to be in the position of having someone tell me they didn't need me anymore."

They began from scratch with a sign shop — "where the wind blew us that day!" he says with a laugh — then tried to acquire another business. "When that fell through, we got into commercial cabinetry, for hospitals and schools, and did that for 11 years. In 2001, we entered the residential countertop business, by buying a small shop and getting our foot in the market."

The market looked solid, Mike says, "and two years later we closed the cabinet business because we were doing far more in countertops."

How's the market today? "Out of control!" Mike says promptly. "We just had sales meeting this morning, and we grew over 20 percent last year. In fact, we've grown every year for the past 15 years. The only year we were flat was in 2008."

The company used to work with big-box store Lowes, but gave it up — and subsequently recouped the lost business. Now the Countertop Shop works mainly with builders, remodelers, kitchen and bath suppliers — and a good amount of walk-in retail.

Corporate reach includes all of northwest Ohio, and a portion of southeast Michigan. As Mike says, "People are building like mad now, and inventory needs to be larger to meet demand."

"It's a tough market to describe. Not a lot of commercial development is going on, but people want to come here — there's really a lot to do in Toledo."

The company has nearly 40 employees, who cover sales, fabrication and installation. All phases of production are done in-house, utilizing an electronic template system and computers that direct the precision cutting on the fabrication floor.

Mike notes a social responsibility that he feels toward his workers. "We want to make sure they're well compensated for the work they do."

“We set regular goals for each employee. Ask any one of them and they’ll tell you what they have to get done. They know if we all work together, then our success will mean a nice bonus at the end of the year.”

The company has five managers and weekly meetings to discuss goals, and each area’s progress. The managers then communicate the information to their teams. It’s a system in which Mike takes a good amount of pride: “I’m not a micromanager; I rely on the managers to do their jobs. It’s very satisfying to see them prosper, and earn the confidence I have in them. They hire and fire their own people, and they do very good work. Some of them only have a high school education, but they learned through experience and mentoring.”

He knows the value. “I rely a lot on mentors and friends,” says Mike, a longtime member of the International Surface Fabrication Association, with service on their board. “Mentors helped me, and now I’m in the position to do the same. I’m mentoring people in California, in Wisconsin and in Lansing, plus one in Mississippi we just started.”

Equally rewarding, he says, is being able to give back in other ways: “At Christmas, we gave \$19,000 away, to places like the food bank, Children’s Services, and a teen recovery program. We try to find worthy causes.”

One such cause is the Family Business Center: “I got involved because I want to help, to talk with other family businesses and offer my experiences, my expertise, and hear what they have to say as well.

“Last year I gave a presentation to a [UT] master’s class group. I loved it, I learned a lot. They tore my company apart, and a lot of the things they suggested we put in place. I get a lot out of the center.”

Like other companies, the Langenderfers are working on succession: “We’ve been talking about succession for a long time, and talking with other members of the center – it’s just not easy. How to turn over a multi-million-dollar business to someone who’s never run one? I’m 68; I can’t see myself being here forever, but I can’t see leaving immediately, either. I enjoy what I’m doing.”

Drawing on both enjoyment and experience, does he have brief words of wisdom for someone who wants to start a business? His answer is prompt: “Due diligence. I’m a registered SCORE mentor, and I see people with grandiose ideas that in practice just aren’t going to work. One guy came in who did Tiki lamps, and wanted to know how to get into Lowes. Well, you have to go to their headquarters in Charlotte and make a presentation. And you have to come up with 10,000 lamps to put on their shelves. He said, ‘Well, gee, I work out of my garage, I don’t think I can make that many.’”

And for potential customers, Mike offers not advice but an invitation: “Tours of our facility are free. Come in and take a look.”

