

STRUCTURAL BUILDING COMPONENTS MAGAZINE

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Industry Veterans Speak

On the Past, Present & Future of the Components Industry: The Company with the Best People Wins by Melinda Caldwell

The structural building components industry has been a major source of innovative solutions in residential construction. Component manufacturers take the designs from architects and engineers and find the answers necessary to make them a reality. This merger is the point where art and science come together. The continuous stream of product improvements and additions introduced by our industry is evidence of this ingenuity at work.

Earlier this year, some of the founders of the structural building components industry reflected on the groups that gave this industry its innovative spark. Their responses were as varied as their businesses, but the common idea in the conversation was that a supplier helped each person establish his company and understand new technologies.

HOW WE GOT STARTED

As small companies that were just getting started more than 40 years ago, the individuals we spoke to were looking for ways to improve all areas of their business. However, the industry itself was new and the resources that are available today, such as WTCA, the Internet and fellow component manufacturers, were not available then. These start-up companies often resorted to using a sales call from a supplier as a chance to ask questions about their fledgling businesses. The suppliers' knowledge was invaluable. Roy Schiferl of Woodinville Lumber set the tone for this section of the discussion noting, "We learned a lot from suppliers early on. They would tell you all sorts of things that would really help [your business]."

The importance of plate suppliers in the education of companies that were just starting in the truss industry was restated throughout the conversation. "We got started in the business with Gang-Nail," noted Rip Rogers, recently retired from Trussway. "When most of us got started, had it not been for a [truss] plate company, we probably wouldn't be in business. It was an absolute necessity at that time."

Don Hershey of Imperial Group explained what his suppliers were able to bring to their meetings with him: "The sales people from the different plate companies were the best teachers for me in the industry. They brought their own concepts from their own companies, but I always looked at an interview with a salesman as an education and I always gave them time because I felt that I took more from the conversation than they took from me."

Abner Yoder of Stark Truss Company specifically remembered the help of one plate supplier that had suggestions for his company's products. "Our plate supplier at the time was very helpful and

we worked together as a team developing a lot of things.”

Other types of suppliers were equally responsible for the present success of the industry. Manufacturers were constantly looking for the next advance that would further automate what was then a very labor-intensive industry, and their technical suppliers were there to offer help. Yoder remembered the assistance given by his technical suppliers, “I believe [our current plate supplier] was the biggest player...in my success.”

Staton Douthit of Douthit Consulting Service remembered how the advances of Dan and Camilla Hurwitz, component manufacturers turned suppliers, changed business for his company. The Hurwitz’s started On-Line Data, a company that created a computer program that could design trusses. “When we first started doing business with them [OnLine]...We had it on a little terminal hooked up to a telephone. It didn't necessarily have graphics back then, but it printed out the information...they had a great impact. They were a small truss plant in Missouri; they had a dream of doing this and they made it come true.”

THE BIG IDEA

The smart thing that these suppliers did for their component industry customers was to share their knowledge and engineering ideas. Rogers summed this up as the ability to “keep your customers competitive.” It's through this sharing of information that a supplier will find a return on investment. The customer's business grows and in turn, the supplier's business grows.

Schiferl's view on the industry, from its beginnings to this point, focuses on the importance of this customer/vendor relationship. “With our plants becoming larger...It's allowing those people [suppliers] to advance. There would have been no way we could have, when we were small, bought an automated saw...Now you don't think about it as much because you're larger and you can afford those kinds of things. So that's helped them develop some of the equipment because they had a market for it.”

The component industry has progressed to a point where it is a leader in advancing and optimizing the engineering for the construction industry. Component manufacturers can share these engineering solutions with their customers to grow their own businesses and better serve their customers. In addition, the engineering and technical solutions that are provided by the suppliers to the component industry continue to offer direction and may potentially hold the next big idea. This opportunity is what keeps Yoder from retiring. “I'm excited about the future... I'm probably more excited today than I've been for a long time because there are so many new innovations and that has always intrigued me as a truss component builder because if there's a new way to do something, I enjoy it. That's why I'm still so active in the business.”

[SBC HOME PAGE](#)

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