

“Refining Our Focus in a New Era” by Peter Nielsen

“Our industry is rapidly changing.” We have become so familiar with this phrase that we think we understand what it means and all that it implies. Unfortunately, understanding does not necessarily follow familiarity and, as a result, many of us go about our daily routines continuing to operate on a “worldview” that doesn’t match reality. The truth is, our industry has seen so many changes in the last thirty years that we’ve entered into a new era. Understanding the impact these changes have had on the roles of the manufacturer and distributor is essential if we are to attain our goal of developing the potential of the tile and stone market. Highlighting a few of the major changes that have ushered in the new era will help us to bring our prospective roles into focus as we work to achieve our goal.

The biggest change our industry has undergone in the last thirty years has been the shift from the traditional mud-set installation to the thin-set, or direct-bond, method of installation. For the most part, mud-set installations depended upon simple mortar technology and lots of skill on the part of the tile setter. Typically, the tile setter served a four-year apprenticeship to learn the craft. Not only did he have to know how to lay out the job and set and grout the tile, he had to have a complete command and working knowledge of floating mortar. In addition, it generally required many more years of on-the-job training before he became a true craftsman.

Until a few decades ago, simple mortar technology has been the *only* technology available to successfully install ceramic tile, and we have had thousands of years to perfect the technique. Notwithstanding, we had an infrastructure within the industry to properly train tile setters capable of executing this style of installation. In an industry structured this way, it was the tile setter who held the keys to the knowledge of installation; therefore, the role of the distributor was just that: a distributor or merchant of tiles. It was the tile setter who completed the sale by turning the shopping list of materials (tile, grout, mortar, etc.) into a finished product. Notably, successful tile installations, *technology being a constant*, were largely dependent upon the skill of the individual craftsman.

Today, the landscape has dramatically changed. In the late 1950s and early ‘60s, thin-set mortar and organic adhesives were introduced. The oil crisis of the ‘70s brought about the invention of the “monocottura”, or single-fire, process of making tile. The monocottura process gave us the ability to produce large-format tiles that were thinner, in addition to tiles that were highly vitrified — all attributes which require stable substrates and advanced adhesives to properly install.

Things really got complicated when we started to see major changes in building materials and techniques: post-tensioned and pre-stressed concrete, lightweight

suspended concrete slabs, cementitious backerboards, gypsum wallboard, gypsum-based radiant heated floors, plywood and particle-board underlayments, to name a few. In this new era where there is virtually no such thing as a “traditional” substrate or a “traditional” installation, successful tile installations, *the skill of the craftsman being a constant*, are product-dependent.

While these developments and advances in technology have created new opportunities (tile is being used in more places and in a larger diversity of applications than ever before), they have also created new installation problems. In addition, these developments have taken place in concert with the disappearance of the industry’s training facilities. At present, we lack the ability to properly train, not only the young tile setters who are coming up through the ranks who will be faced with the challenges these new technological advancements present, but the tile setters from the “old school” who need re-training or continuing education to keep up with the rapidly evolving technology.

With the plethora of highly sophisticated, alternative surfacing materials, our industry can ill-afford failed tile installations. We must remember that in our industry no sale is complete until the tile is successfully installed. Moreover, with no infrastructure in place to properly train tile setters, it is incumbent upon the distributor and manufacturer to provide information and training.

Because ceramic tiles constitute only part of a successfully installed ceramic covering, it is no longer possible for distributors to be *just* distributors or merchants of tile. They must see their primary role as marketers of a *finished* product and position their businesses as resource centers that can provide the end user with all the tools necessary to produce that product. As a resource center, the distributor must be able to identify tile installation problems before they occur and provide solutions at every juncture in the tile specification process. In addition, s/he will need sales people who possess a thorough and well-rounded education in new tile products and installation systems, and who reflect a genuine commitment to customer satisfaction.

Manufacturers, on the other hand, need to build training and education into their sales and marketing framework. This framework must include technical support, as well as people who are qualified to sell new tile products and installation systems to the trade. Moreover, manufacturers must develop close working relationships with those they rely on to promote and sell their products.

If we are to develop the full potential of the tile and stone market, it is vitally important that we understand how these changes have impacted our prospective roles. The biggest immediate threat to realizing that goal is not a takeover by competing products (not yet anyway!); it is continuing to operate on a “worldview” that doesn’t match reality. Successful distributors and manufacturers in the future will have a clear understanding of this.