

STRUCTURAL BUILDING COMPONENTS MAGAZINE

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Technology & the Structural Building Components Industry – a Supplier Perspective by Melinda Caldwell

A conversation on technology's impact on the structural building components industry and the state of the manufacturer/supplier relationship would not be complete without hearing from a few suppliers to our industry. To this end, a short questionnaire was sent to a number of suppliers. This article includes the thoughts of those who took the time to respond and share their insights with SBC readers, including Carl Schoening of Simpson Strong-Tie Co., Jim Oakley of Production Conveyor Systems and Tom Manenti of MiTek Industries, Inc.

SBC: What do you think have been the biggest advances in the industry in the last five years, and how do you see these advances being built on in the next five to ten years?

Schoening: The advancement of automated machinery and growing awareness of the need for better structural connections.

Oakley: Developments in design software and related software-driven inputs into manufacturing methods are probably the most impressive development in terms of expanding market potentials for product today and predicting more efficient manufacturing techniques in the future.

Manenti: The involvement of component manufacturers in local truss associations and dealing with issues that face our industry has been huge. All this, backed by a strong national organization (WTCA) has changed the complexion of our industry relative to the various regulatory agencies and governmental departments that are requiring more and more extensive involvement by component manufacturers. In short, we now have a voice that is being heard and recognized and it needs to continue.

SBC: What do you see as the biggest challenge facing the industry at this point in time?

Oakley: The biggest challenge facing our industry is the same challenge facing maturing industries in all parts of our economy. As a group, and as individuals, we need to be challenged to expect excellence. Obviously, given the nature of our specific interest in machine efficiencies versus more traditional manual methods, we have a bias to make innovation a priority. But, from our perspective, additional market share does exist if improved, consistent product standards can be established and output predictably provided to the ultimate end user. Automated machine manufacturing activities can help to predict consistent product throughput to benefit the end user in terms of quality and accurate scheduling. Manufacturing organizations should be challenged to create a step-by-step procedure that has real meaning at every employee stating precisely the goal for the level of the company's product and service excellence. Complacency in a growing industry invites missed opportunities.

Manenti: Restraints on free trade for raw materials for both components of our products, wood and steel (for connector plates). Also, for a long time I have felt that the biggest threat to our entire industry are fire issues and the much needed education to offset wrong perceptions that could preempt structural building components in some or many markets.

Schoening: Manufacturing capacity and manpower will continue to be the biggest challenge.

SBC: What do you need to know from structural building component manufacturers to serve them more effectively in the next five to ten years?

Manenti: We need to know what production-tool requirements they are lacking and what potential threats they feel they are facing so we can measure ways to help address them and protect the product (i.e. trusses) that is necessary for the rest of us to increase the sales of our products.

Schoening: We need to know what their largest challenges are and how to provide them a better profit opportunity.

Oakley: Our company strives to establish a "WE" relationship with prospective clients in an industry that is populated by strong, self-seeking individuals. It is our view that shared improvements in manufacturing techniques will benefit the industry as a whole by improving product quality, expanding the possible services that can be provided to the building industry, and raising the professional image of the individuals associated as a whole industry. We are constantly battling against the instincts of business owners who perceive their role in the industry of manufactured components as the solitary tree rather than a part of the forest.

SBC: Do you have any suggestions for improving the manufacturer/supplier relationship?

Schoening: Vendor relationships can be improved most significantly by truss manufacturers supporting vendors that actively support the truss industry. If vendors see value through membership in WTCA more will join. Once that field is leveled, vendors will have to compete by providing the highest value at the most competitive price.

Oakley: Keep selling the "WE" rather than the "ME."

Manenti: Open discussion forums at chapter summits would be a good start. In such a forum, we could each share the challenges that we respectively face so we can put our combined, limited resources to work where the biggest payoff can be realized.

SBC: What is your vision for the future of the structural building components industry?

Oakley: Demand for components in the field continues to grow in a vibrant housing market, and the available framing-type, skilled help continues to become more rare. A similar condition exists in manufacturing components, and as a result more mechanized methods will be needed to offset that eroding skill level of help, while growing businesses to meet the demand for

manufactured components.

Manenti: In the short-term, I feel we will continue to make small gains in the penetration of structural building components in residential and light commercial construction. In the long-term, there are greater opportunities as new tools are being developed to structurally model buildings in 3D instead of using the historical, conventional design methods.

Schoening: The component industry has continued to be the most sophisticated area in the construction industry. I see component technology being transferred to other areas of building material supply; and wall panels will become a larger part of the component manufacturers business.

Thank you to Carl, Tom and Jim for participating in this survey. If you are interested in sharing your thoughts or opinions on an issue raised in this or any issue of SBC, simply send a letter to the editor via fax at 608/274-3329 or email at editor@sbcmag.info. SBC Staff does reserve the right to edit submissions for length, grammar and clarity.

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