

What Lies Ahead

Find out what the former leaders of our organization see in WTCA's crystal ball.

WTCA Presidents Foresee Technology, Software in Industry's Future

by Emily Patterson & Libby Maurer

At times, industry advancements and innovations are so fast and furious that it's difficult to imagine what else lies on the horizon. *SBC* asked WTCA Past Presidents to share their perspectives on the industry, look into their crystal balls and tell us what they see in the future for the structural building components industry. Here, they share their insights on what's to come.

Technology

First and foremost, the past presidents surveyed pointed to technology as one of the industry's driving forces both today and looking into the future. "Technology is big, especially in equipment," said 1999 President Richard Brown (Truss Systems). 1991 President Bob Ward (Southern Components) noted technology's far-reaching impact on the industry and its potential to touch every facet of the business. "I think we have become a much more technically diverse industry and, as a result, more specialized in our companies. Technology is being applied to every part of the manufacturing operation, not just the office area," he said.

Looking at the breadth of recent developments in technology, 1996 President Merle Nett (Richco Structures) noted that advancements in production will continue to push the envelope of efficiency and productivity. "I see paperless processes, and the continuation of the computerized world in saws and material handling," he said. "I think we've only scratched the surface," Nett added.

One area where many past presidents saw potential for component manufacturers to lead their operations to greater heights was software. "People are a lot more aware of costs. Emerging trends in software are providing more feedback much more quickly," said 2001 President Mary Pat Keller (Gateway Building Components). Noting how far the industry has come from designing on paper to fully integrated computerized design and manufacturing operations, many see software advancements carrying over further throughout the truss plant. "Technology is taking a big step," said 1990 President John Herring (A-1 Building Components). "It started out in software—those changes in the industry have been phenomenal. Now we're seeing it in automation and fabrication," he said.

Labor

With so many technological advances on the horizon, Herring noted the influence technology will have on labor needs in the industry. "I think the next part [of technology] will further reduce labor and help us manage our businesses better," he said. Nett echoed Herring's sentiments regarding the role technology will play in responding to labor demands in the truss plant. "With labor and employees, as it becomes more difficult to hire, retain and

train, automation needs to have a major presence in our industry," he said.

Indeed, a number of past presidents said that finding the right balance between man and machine will be an important facet of how technology is implemented in the truss plant. "We'll need fewer people, but smarter people working in the plant," said Brown, implying that smarter technology requires more tech-savvy operators. "We need to continue to emphasize advances on the technology side, and we'll see even greater growth."

Codes

Along with advancements on the shop floor, past presidents also forecast an increased demand for roof trusses, floor trusses and wall panels. Herring pointed to changes in the building codes as an indicator that demand for structural building components will only increase in the future. "I think as codes become more homogenous, trusses will become more required—more of a culture and standard," he said. "Back when I was president, you really had to sell trusses versus stick framing. Now, it's in the codes. I think this will give trusses the opportunity to stand out and perform," he added.

Acknowledging that it can be laborious to interpret the various building codes, Herring stressed that getting to know the codes could be well worth the effort. "Dealing with all the regulations is tough, but it's also an opportunity," he said. That opportunity may also lie in providing input to the code community, according to Brown. "We can enhance our position and emphasize that area to take advantage of our knowledge. Every day, we see that governing bodies will come up with some odd ideas and go off the deep end without involving the agencies that will be affected by a change. Unless we take a strong hand in influencing agencies, this could negatively impact the industry," he said.

Testing

Looking into the future, past presidents expressed excitement over plans for WTCA's new research and testing facility, noting a multitude of benefits component manufacturer members will reap from an industry-run research program. "WTCA's new research and testing initiative should open new areas of marketing opportunities for our industry," said Ward.

Remarking how testing can impact every facet of the component business, from developing industry standards to helping to lower insurance premiums, 1992-1993 President Don Hershey (Alliance TruTrus) stressed the important role that testing will play in furthering the entire industry. "We need to get heavily involved in testing for the following reasons: to provide the membership the most cost effective methods for assembling our structural components; to provide the engineering community, building code bodies and building

inspectors uniform industry standards; and to promote our quality assurance and safety programs for our membership to reduce their insurance liability," he said.

Construction & Whole House Design

When past presidents looked at the health of the industry in years to come, they forecast a positive prognosis. "Looking back on 40 years of construction, I think the industry is primed to gain a larger portion of the construction industry overall. I don't see how it cannot," said 1994 President Lee Vulgaris (Reliable Truss). "I think the industry has matured and it can get nothing but stronger due to the need for manufactured products like roof trusses and other components. There's a definite lack of field labor and construction expertise, so engineered components are here to stay."

Past presidents also raised the issue of whole house design and how it will influence, and in some cases, may revolutionize the structural building components industry. "The technology has gotten to the point where whole house designing is as easy as designing one truss," said 2000 President Roger Gibbs (SpaceJoist TE). "Software is running the ship right now and influencing people to make decisions. It's getting to the point where you can have one whole component—roof, wall and floor truss—versus three individual components," he said.

Speaking about whole house design, Keller noted that indicators are evident that this design method is on the rise. "Software is moving in the direction where you can design full houses," she said. Discussing the implications of whole house design on component manufacturers, Keller predicted it will impact a manufacturer's responsibilities on a project. "I think we'll take on more responsibility in terms of construction on a project, as customers look to us to be their single source for components, sheathing, decking and more. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing, but I think we're moving in that direction," she commented.

Keller also highlighted the likelihood that whole house design will bring additional changes to the structural building components industry and possibly even change the way that trusses are produced. "I think the industry will become more complicated as materials within a structure become more innovative. We may also see new materials used," she said.

Component Framing IS the Future

Whatever the future holds, the structural building components industry has a solid foundation from which to face challenges and create successes, thanks in large part to the dedication of WTCA's past presidents. In sharing their expertise, they've shown how far the industry has come and the many opportunities that tomorrow holds for component manufacturers. Or, as 2005 President Kendall Hoyd (Idaho Truss & Component Co.) summed it up, "Component framing IS the future." *SBC*

at a glance

- Bob Ward feels we have become a much more technically diverse industry and, as a result, our companies have become more specialized.
- The next advances in technology will further reduce labor and help us manage our businesses better, in John Herring's opinion.
- Lee Vulgaris said there's a lack of field labor and construction expertise, so engineered components are here to stay.

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