

FOCUS ON LEADERSHIP

Eric Astrachan, executive director for the Tile Council of North America (TCNA), spent his early childhood in Oak Ridge, Tennessee and grew up in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. He made his first accidental foray into the tile industry through a part time job while a student at MIT. An advisor connected him with the school physical plant, where a gruff mason challenged Eric with a test of his work ethic—which he passed. The mason took Eric under his wing and taught him about much more than tile setting, as a master often does for an apprentice.



Eric Astrachan.

Eric earned a degree in chemical engineering at MIT and went to work first for Proctor & Gamble and then for Schlumberger, which took him around the world. While on vacation from his corporate job, he and his wife Brigid decided to strike out on their own, buying an oil services company they named Wellworks. After growing the business from 40 to 90 employees, they sold it and founded a new venture, manufacturing art tile at Artfind Tile in Wooster, Ohio in 1992. Eric connected with the TCNA and proposed the idea of a studio tile membership category, soon serving as its first director. Later he moved up to technical director, then deputy executive director, and beginning in 2004, executive director.

Q: The per capita usage of tile in the U.S. is far below what you see in the rest of the world. What can be done to change the consumer's perception of tile and get our numbers in line with everyone else?

A: While we believe consumers are well aware of the benefits of tile, they have flooring choices in the U.S. that are not as desirable in many other countries because of their higher indoor humidity levels, risk of moisture intrusion, wear and tear, and/or maintenance issues that minimally impact ceramic tiles but can greatly impact other flooring. Because buildings turn over more

quickly in America, we often are not considering the longer term impact of these factors and replacement costs. We hope that as awareness grows about the preferable environmental impact of ceramic tile over all other flooring choices, along with the preferable indoor air quality found in ceramic tile spaces, per capita tile consumption will increase.

Q: Other than the kitchen, bath, laundry room and entry hall, where else does tile belong in today's modern home?

A: Simply stated, everywhere! Once you experience ceramic tile with radiant heating, you realize tile can be used in every room and feels fabulous. And hotel rooms with ceramic tile feel cleaner and more hygienic than when carpeted wall to wall.

Q: TCNA is a trade association with a few members that dominate the category in marketshare. How have you structured your organization so that every member has an equal say in what the priorities are?

A: There are three factors that work together to ensure that TCNA acts to represent all its members. First, our board meetings are open to all of our members, not just board members.

Second, dues from our largest members are each less than 1% of our revenue. And third, TCNA staff works extremely hard to define issues where our efforts will bring the largest benefits to the most members. The synergy that comes from representing more than 95% of the manufacturers in the tile industry also allows us to be efficient in the work we do.

Q: What is so magical about the state of Tennessee when it comes to tile manufacturing?

A: I can only speak to the obvious, that Tennessee enjoys good highway access to the rest of the country, its central location means it is reasonably close to a large percentage of the population, and certain clays useful for porcelain production are available. I'm certain the business development people in Tennessee can extoll many more virtues, but I haven't had those conversations.

Q: As more and more production comes online here in the U.S., how does that change the dynamics of the industry?

A: We have always seen that domestic producers are understandably more connected with issues in the U.S. That covers everything from education and standards development to regulatory and safety issues to green building trends. As many of the facilities under foreign ownership, either already built or being planned, are global leaders in the tile industry, we can also expect new technology and new design capabilities in addition to their support of domestic projects.

Q: All of the flooring categories are struggling to ensure there are enough qualified installers to service the demand. What can be done to promote this career path?

A: I think the associations representing tile installers and contractors are already doing a good job in this respect, and certainly the joint support of the National Tile Contractors Association and the Tile Contractors Association of America for the Advanced Certification for Tile Installers is a good step forward. When I was first learning to install tile, I found the advice of other contractors immensely helpful, and I encourage people getting into the industry to attend Coverings with a plan to ask questions and meet as many people as possible.

Q: How have the services provided by the TCNA evolved in the time you've been at the helm? What percentage of your annual budget comes from membership fees versus other sources?

A: Dues when I came to TCNA were about 19% of our budget. Today, while individual dues have been reduced, more members have joined and revenue from dues has doubled. But member dues still only represents 12% of our annual budget, with the majority of our funding coming from our lab, Coverings and literature sales.

With the passage of NAFTA, we opened membership to companies in Mexico and Canada in 2005, and opened an office in Monterrey, Mexico. With the help of our members, good luck and our close proximity to Clemson University, we've been very fortunate to find exceptional staff, so that we've been able to grow income-generating services along with our not-for-profit standards development work.

Q: How has your education at MIT and your past experience helped you to prepare for the role you serve at the TCNA?

A: My degree is in chemical engineering, but that was unfortunately almost 40 years ago. While at MIT, I also learned how to install tile and stone in a part time job during the school year, and worked full time at that during breaks. Perhaps most importantly, I developed a great respect for the profession and the people in it. After college, I worked in R&D and later lived overseas, which has also been helpful at TCNA with our standards development efforts here in the US and internationally. Having started two of my own companies before coming to TCNA also gave me an appreciation for the issues of business owners, albeit on a much smaller scale.

Q: Name a few of the amazing innovations you've seen in the tile business that either are or will be game changers.

A: I would say that each innovation represents a step forward, and the tile industry has seen too many to list. A few of the highlights come from both tile itself and also from installation products. New mortars and grouts are changing how tiles are installed and improving the quality of the workmanship. New shower systems, pre-sloped bases, and square and linear drains are making construction easier and enhancing the quality and look of showers. For tiles, digital printing and larger and thinner formats are game-changers. And lastly, the ways we measure water absorption and coefficient of friction will be important quality and safety issues for consumers in upcoming years.

Q: Is it still possible for small manufacturing firms to enter this business and find their niche for success?

A: We think so, and we have seen smaller companies be very successful, as tile manufacturers or as manufacturers of innovative installation materials.

Q: There is never enough time in the day to get everything done. What system do you use to prioritize and organize your daily activities?

A: I use my own combination of a hyperlinked word file with projects, tasks and assignments on it, and a spreadsheet hyperlinked to the word file. Recently, I've started to use Smartsheet, basically a project management software with a database in the cloud, which does the same thing, but better and more easily. I also try to review my list in the evening and develop a plan for the next day.

Q: What do you do, on the rare occasion that you have free time, to unwind and decompress?

A: I'm happy just to get home back in Wooster and spend some time with my wife and our two four-legged children. They're standard wire-haired dachshunds. Watching them explore when we are out hiking is always entertaining.

Q: What advice do you have for the young professionals who are considering a career in the tile industry?

A: It's a great industry with a tremendous architectural heritage that will take you around the world. There's always more to see, and with the innovation that's taking place now, it's likely that the best is yet to come. ■