

Contour business booming

Businessman lands on his feet after counterintuitive career jump

Glass, trees, now granite? A former Weyerhaeuser executive finds his niche in the quickly expanding countertop market.

BY BARBARA CLEMENTS
THE NEWS TRIBUNE

After working 12 years in the glass business and 11 years at Weyerhaeuser, Maiwurm had had enough of moving around at the behest of corporate America. When the Federal Way-based timber company was asking him to move his family one more time - after nine moves in 20 years, by his count - Maiwurm decided to look into other options.

At the time, in 2000, Seattle-based Contour Laminate was for sale. Maiwurm decided to take a chance on a new career. Since then, he's expanded operations to Tacoma and more recently opened a Portland shop. He now supplies all the laminate and stone countertops for local Quadrant homes as well as all the laminate tops for state's Home Depot and laminate and granite tops for the Lowe's in Western Washington. In six short years, Maiwurm has transformed the company from a smallish shop to one of the largest producers of custom countertops in the Northwest - and a company that regularly makes the "fastest growing" lists in the region.

Recently, The News Tribune talked



CONTOUR LAMINATE AND STONEWORKS

President: Chuck Maiwurm
Product: At three locations, Seattle, Tacoma and Portland, the company produces laminate, granite and quartz countertops for customers such as Quadrant, Lowe's and Home Depot.
Production: Last year, Maiwurm estimates that the company handled 16,500 jobs for laminate work and 2,000 orders for countertops.
Employees: A total of 86. There are 26 employees in Tacoma, which handles the granite work; 45 in Seattle; and 15 in Portland.
When Maiwurm purchased the company, 35 people worked at the Seattle location.
Total 2005 sales: In excess of \$10 million
Total 2000 sales: \$3.92 million

with Maiwurm about the laminate and granite business and its growing use in local homes.

When did you decide to get into the laminate and granite business?

About 2000, when I bought the Seattle factory.

What did you find when you moved into the Tacoma location?

I bought a big vacant building (on the Tideflats) and filled it with large rectangular pieces of stone. We moved here in 2002, and it's about 20,000 square feet. It was a bit of a "Field of Dreams" scenario. We were thinking, "We hope this works." It was mid-December and it was cold.

How much does each slab you cut weigh?

The granite is about 72 inches high and 120 inches long, while the quartz is about 55 inches high and about the same length. Each piece weighs between 800 to 900 pounds. That's why we have machines to both lift and grab the pieces.

The computer cuts the slabs according to a template. In a kitchen, for example, the computer cuts several pieces for one countertop. We have machines that polish and put in the curves, and then do the finish work by hand.

You started off in the glass business, then moved to Weyerhaeuser.

Why granite and laminate?

This company had a good reputation, and it (both) involved managing a commodity and manufacturing. I wanted to stay in this area and this is what I wanted to do.

When I entered the industry five years ago, it was a small company. There are lot of small operators in this industry; it's really very fragmented. Bigger retailers and builders needed a partner that would be able to produce high volume and high quality. You can't do this type of work out of a small shop, or out of a garage. Right now we are the largest producer of laminate in Pierce County and one of the top five in the state.

Have you seen the affects of the housing boom in your orders?

Yes. Last year we had 16,500 laminate jobs and 2,000 stonework jobs. We haven't really seen any impact of the interest bubble around here.

There was some slowdown (in the housing sector) at the end of the year. Did you notice a decline in orders?

Not really, there have been many orders for renovating homes and upgrading. We do a significant amount of remodel business. As you know, there is a large stock of older homes in Tacoma. So our work comes from a couple of different directions.

Any odd requests?

We've done fireplaces. Once had a order for a granite pedestal in a parking garage.

Where do you get the stone?

We get the man-made Zodiac

Quartz from Canada. We also get natural quartz from Israel and from Minnesota. We get granite from India, Brazil and Italy. In all, we have 50 different colors in the back lot.

How much does the stone cost?

It will range from \$65 to \$100 a square foot depending on the quality and type. A typical kitchen may cost \$3,000 or so.

Are there different colors that go in and out of favor?

The most popular granite (color) we have is a gold color. Customers seem to like lighter colors in the winter and darker colors in the summer. So lighter colors (as he looks out at the rain) are more popular this time of year.

- - -

Barbara Clements: 253-597-8652
barbara.clements@mail.tribnet.com

- - -

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

People: Maiwurm, Chuck
Section: Business