

A structured approach to stoneworking

Based in Frederick, MD, GranTops has a formal strategy for all aspects of its business — from shop procedures to customer satisfaction

by Michael Reis

After only five years, GranTops of Frederick, MD, has become a high-volume producer of natural stone, fabricating 150 to 160 kitchens per month. And to maximize efficiency and quality, the company has a well-planned strategy for all areas of the craft — from the shop to the field.

The company works with builders and kitchen/bath dealers, and it also gets a lot of business from Lowe's home improvement centers. Junior Seidl, who learned the trade in Brazil before opening a facility in the U.S., is the company's production manager, and his brother, Paulo Seidl, is the marketing director.

Overall, the operation has a very structured environment in which all of the employees follow company procedures and guidelines, which are maintained in a book that all workers must read. Moreover, Color-coded forms and checklists are filled out for all activities — blue for templating; green within the shop and yellow for installation. Additionally, the customer fills out a "Final Project Completion/Installation" checklist after a project is completed. This ensures that all tasks were completed to satisfaction, and helps avoid problems down the road.

The company first operated out of



GranTops of Frederick, MD, fabricates an average of 150 to 160 kitchens per month.

Junior Seidl's garage, and moved to an 8,000-square-foot location as the business grew. Today, GranTops has a total of 30 workers, including a templating manager, a shop manager and a production manager, and it now operates out of a 15,000-square-foot facility. The new plant not only provides extra space, but it also gives them the necessary infrastructure. "We grew to a point where we did not have enough electricity to do the work we needed to do," Seidl said.

The shop has two bridge saws — a Marmoelettromeccanica America bridge saw, which was purchased from Regent Stone Products five years ago, and a Park Industries Yukon. It is also equipped with a Pro Edge II from Park

Industries for automated edge processing, a Piranha edging machine from U.S. Granite Machinery, a Marmoelettromeccanica Master 3500 portable edging machine, and a Park Wizard multi-purpose machine. The crew also completes a lot of work by hand, and water is reclaimed with an advanced system from Water Treatment Technologies of North Hampton, NH.

Seidl explained that a lot of thought went into how to lay out the shop. All material goes in through one door, goes through the various production processes in the shop, and then leaves through a second door. There is a staging area for material to be fabricated, and every saw has racks assigned to it. "We don't want to lose



The company's first saw was a Marmoelettromeccanica America bridge saw, which was purchased from Regent Stone Products five years ago.



Slab cutting is also completed with a Park Industries Yukon bridge saw.



A Pro Edge II from Park Industries is used for automated edge processing.



Straight polishing is completed with a Piranha edging machine from U.S. Granite Machinery.



Water is reclaimed with an advanced system from Water Treatment Technologies of North Hampton, NH.



Many of the operations are completed by hand.

time with people hunting for material, information, etc.," Seidl said. "All of the material to be cut is staged the night before."

Work in progress is placed on individual metal dollies, which are moved from place to place as needed throughout the process. After fabrication

is completed, the stone is sealed and placed on a portable A-frame and shipped to the job site.

Templating is done with styrene plastic, which can be placed directly over the workpiece during sawing operations, and since the plastic is solid, pertinent information about the project

can be printed directly on the template.

The crew is working beyond a typical eight-hour shift, but GranTops is trying to avoid putting a second shift, which would require a second foreman. Seidl estimated that it takes 45 days to effectively train a worker to start producing, and the employees



Some of the more complex edging operations are completed with a Marmoelettromeccanica Master 3500 portable edging machine.

are trained for multiple tasks. Everyone can install as a helper, can operate the saws, and can do cut outs and polishing. Seidl shifts the workers from task to task regularly so that they are prepared for absences. "To be the lead installer or to work on the Pro Edge takes more skill, though," he said.

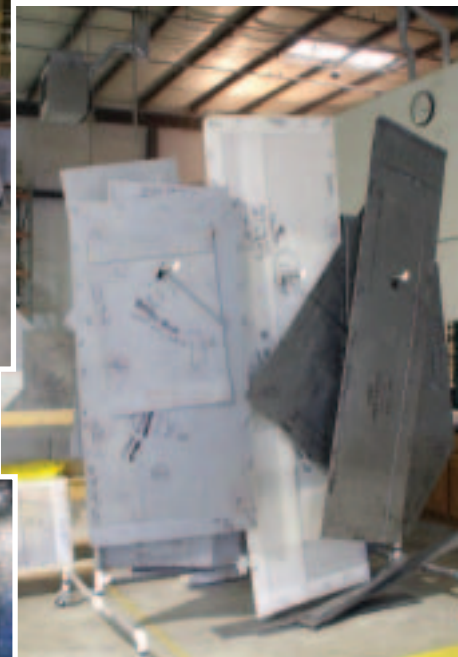
Internal performance evaluations take place every 45 to 60 days, and cameras are set within the shop to ensure that the correct procedures are followed. "We not only have cameras on the slabs, but also on the saws to make sure the slabs are being laid correctly and the use is maximized," he said.

No one on the current roster had stone experience, as the company has found that many of the experienced workers developed bad habits at other locations. The installers work solely on a pay system based on productivity. "It took a while for some people to accept, but now they are actually being paid more money," Seidl said. "Their approach is different and people are more eager." In all cases, the same person who goes to the home for templating also goes to the installation. Having the same person interact with the homeowner helps to avoid miscommunications.

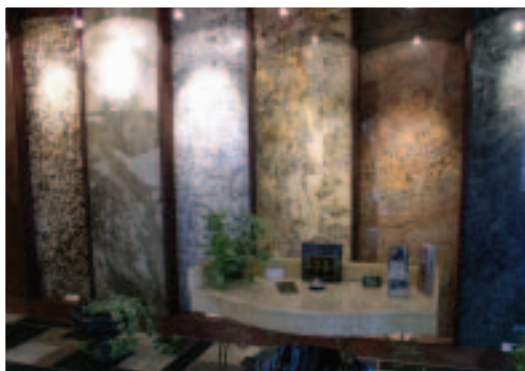
The company places an emphasis on involving the homeowners as much as possible. It also strives to make sure the



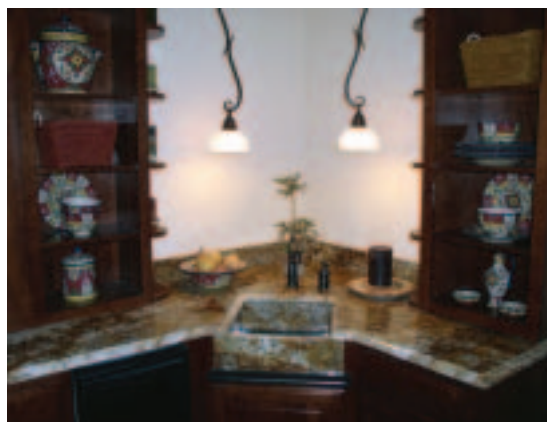
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The company's offices include a display of some exotic stone varieties.



The office also has a few examples of finished stone applications.

designers and builders, and the company is currently in the process of arranging a trip for architects, designers and builders to go to the international stone fair in Vitoria, Brazil, which will take place early next year.

Lowes representatives have a working knowledge of stone that they can pass along to their customers.

GranTops imports stone directly from overseas suppliers, and it maintains a high inventory of stone. "I believe in having material in hand, even though it ties up capital," Seidl said, adding that it increases turnaround time, which is seven business days. The firm is continually investigating new options in exotic stones, which appeal to interior designers. It also does some quartz surfacing, which comprises 15% of overall business.

Over the past few years, the firm has been making a name for itself with

The company essentially works in an 80-mile radius of its location in Frederick, which covers Maryland, as well as the Baltimore/Washington, DC, area and points in Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia. Although the makeup of its client base does not require a showroom, the facilities have some examples of finished applications as well as slabs of exotic stones. This allows customers to see larger samples and offers a better environment for business. Although most of the business is residential work, GranTops has also done some commercial projects such as hotels, condominiums and even some stonework for Oriole Park at Camden Yards. □