

Luicana Industries:

From garage shop to diverse kitchen and bath enterprise



PHOTOS: GENILEE PARENTE

Gathered in the front of the Luicana showroom are (from left) Don Luicana, Office Manager Patty Slaby, and Designer Greg Bernhard.

BY GENILEE PARENTE

If you ask Don Luicana, owner of Luicana Industries, Boyertown, PA, what the key to surviving, then thriving through the ups and downs of the cast polymer industry is, he'll point to one factor: diversity.

"You have to learn the give and take of what's happening in your market, recognize when a situation calls for new thinking, then not be afraid to go after new areas of business," he says.

Don should know. Luicana has been around since the 1980s, a family-run business that started in a three-car garage with just Don and his father Don Luicana Senior.

"We had one modular mold in a few sizes and one no-bowl mold to make custom-size tops," Don recalls.

Today, Luicana has a 4,000-square-foot showroom in downtown Boyertown and a 20,000-square-foot manufacturing facility in Bally, PA. The company has nine full-time manufacturing employees (including Don's son Nathaniel),

four installers, two full-time office workers, a full-time designer, an on-the-road salesman and Don.

The company offers a full line of kitchen and bath products and services, including other countertop materials besides engineered composites as well as a full line of kitchen and bath cabinetry and fixtures. It also now has almost half its manufacturing business in the commercial field, which was a new venture for Luicana that arose from the most recent housing crash. This 50/50 mix is a good example of why diversity has worked.

"When the big recession hit, we saw that the only way we were going to get through a time when the housing market was so weak was to expand our product offerings into the commercial trade," Don says. The company merged with Marbleon, which was owned and operated by Chris Hurdleston, who helped the new company market the strengths of engineered composite products to upscale retirement communities, commercial building owners and organizations

that needed remodeling work such as universities.

“Cultured marble and cast polymer are a natural fit for places where both durability and an attractive surface are needed,” Don explains.

Luicana’s growth patterns

When Don’s father started Luicana & Son Inc. in 1980, the company wasn’t even in the cast polymer business. His dad had been a flooring manager for Sears for many years before deciding in the 1970s that alternative heaters were the wave of the future.

“We sold and installed coal and wood stoves, as well as sold and serviced kerosene space heaters in the fall and winter months. In the spring and summer months, we sold redwood furniture, pressure-treated furniture and other miscellaneous outdoor furniture,” Don says.

By the early 1980s, however, the coal and wood business was slowing down and Don Senior traveled to Florida to an entrepreneurship seminar. Dad came home with several ideas, including manufacturing cultured marble.

“My father had a few contacts in the local retail home centers and plumbing supply houses in the area, and they were all interested in the product we were going to start producing,” Don says. His dad also had an old friend from school who was already running a cultured marble shop in Georgia and gave the father/son lots of advice and business tips.

“In 1984, we received our first shiny red molds from Gruber Systems,” and the duo spent a few weeks creating colors, learning the business and coming up with procedures and practices to run the operation, Don says.

After two years of operating out of the garage making six to eight vanity tops a day with one part-time employee on staff, a full-time employee—Don’s brother-in-law Carl Oswald—was hired. He was one of several employees who stayed with Luicana many years.

The company purchased its first shower base mold and started making wall panels from particle board and Formica in the late 1980s, and in 1987, the Luicanas took another step they hoped would help the business spread its wings: the company became members of ICPA.

“We discovered by joining that there were many other items we could make as well as colors we could offer, and procedures we could follow in our business. By networking with other manufacturers and suppliers, we learned we could expand on our product offering if we had some more room to do so.”

A few years later, the walls of the garage were starting to close in, and Luicana created its first expanded manufacturing plant by remodeling a barn on the Luicana property.



One of Luicana’s newest offerings—subway tile—is made with a special mold that creates a grout-less panel. Above is a finished project. Below is the mold being prepped for pouring.





John Webster (right), owner of Monroe Industries in Avon, NY, visited the Luicana shop to share one of the grout-less tile molds with Don Luicana (left).

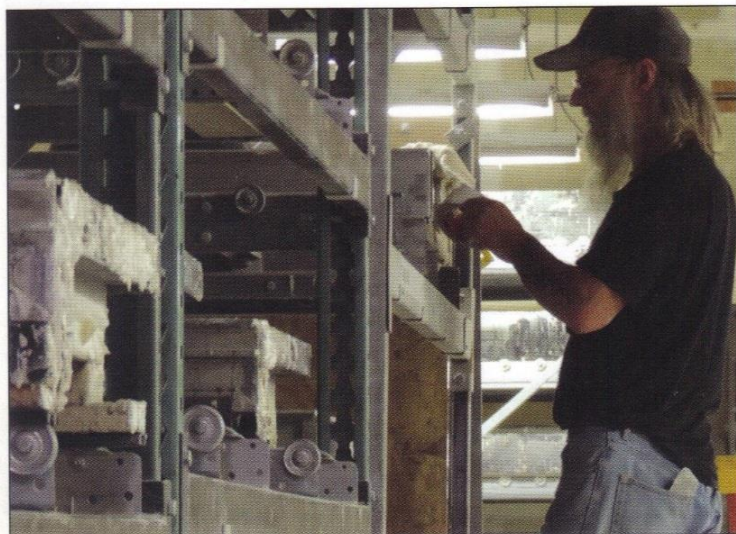
“It was a little primitive and just 3,500 square feet but an upgrade from the garage,” Don jokes.

The company turned the garage into a showroom, then eventually moved that showroom to a strip mall. Luicana Industries was already diversifying and offered kitchen cabinetry as well as different types of countertops. It also had already hired a designer. In 1996, the company began entering into the remodeling fields.

By 1998, Don had made the decision to branch off into his own company with his wife Sandy, brother-in-law Carl and his secretary Debbie Kolarz.

The first plant was a 7,500-square-foot facility that had 1,200 square feet for an office and showroom. The number of full-time manufacturing staff increased, installers were

Jeff Babb, a 14-year employee, pulls a mold from Luicana’s extensive collection to prepare it for production.



hired and the product line expanded into numerous modular shower base molds, custom shower bases, different size tubs, and numerous shower wall panels. The company grew its cabinet line offering and started selling plumbing fixtures.

By 2000, Luicana Industries purchased its current downtown Boyertown building for the showroom, and by 2007, it moved its manufacturing facility to its location in Bally.

Today’s opportunities

Through all of this, Luicana has continued to perfect its engineered composites line, and Don is excited about a recent new addition—a line of shower wall panels that looks like tile, but has the advantage of being grout-less.

“There are many customers out there that love the look of tile, and we have expanded our own range of tile lines. But this new product allows us to create an entire panel from one mold, which creates a wall of tiles easy to clean, but with the rich look of individual tiles and at an affordable cost,” he says.

He’s also excited about all the looks that new products can have including a veined granite and a wide range of new color offerings.

“We continually lean on our suppliers to come up with new designer colors and textures to keep up with the ever-changing tastes of homeowners and builders,” he says.

In fact, the range of possibilities is why Don feels the company’s extensive showroom is so important to his business today.

“People can’t walk into most home centers and see any cast polymer showers, walls and tubs. Yet I believe that the more products a homeowner can see installed and can touch and feel to experience what the finished product will look like, the better this whole business will do,” Don says.

“We feel so strongly about this that we offer installation to kitchen and bath retailers or plumbing supply houses for a minimal cost,” he says.

At the same time, Don believes that cast polymer companies today need to find new ways to showcase what they offer. Luicana will be expanding its website this year to provide more color samplings and to update its picture portfolio to include new products such as the grout-less tile panels.

The idea is to find as many ways as possible to reach customers, he says.

“My advice to anyone in this business is that we all have to find ways to listen to what our customers are telling us they want, then to stay on top of the color trends and textures we can now offer,” he says. ■

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