

PART 2 Empires under construction

■ Houston's biggest privately owned companies build that this is a good place to build a construction company. Home building, commercial construction and selling all the parts they need are all avenues for profits. The section also covers jobs, health clubs and more.

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HIS BUSINESS IS SURFACING: Roberto Contreras is president and CEO of C&G, the Stafford-based company that distributes Silestone in North America.

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THE CHRONICLE 100® PRIVATE COMPANIES

MARKETING

Leaders say Silestone is a rock-solid product



OFF THE WALL: Bruce Harnish and Donnie Thompson check out a Silestone granite countertop at the Kitchens and Bath Industry Show and Conference in Chicago in April.

By SHARON HUGG

TWO years ago, Houston sales rep Cavananagh traveled to the Spanish Riviera for a crash course in kitchen and bath countertops. He returned with knowledge about the differences between granite, Silestone, Microban and other countertop materials. "I never heard of the last one!" Don's reply. Marketing executives with Construction Group, the Spain-based manufacturer of Silestone and Sherrie Rowman of C&G, the Houston-based distributor, were there. Their efforts were rewarded by a group of people who

they always describe as a "natural born" audience — manufacturers' sales that are 93 percent female and substantial parts of the product line. "Silestone," it's a new product category to kitchen contractors and bathroom remodelers, but it's been around since the 1980s. "What makes it so popular is that it's a natural stone, but it's a synthetic stone," says Donnie Thompson, CEO of C&G, a U.S. distributor of Silestone. "It's a natural stone, but it's a synthetic stone." "Silestone is a household word and a popular feature in homes," says Donnie Thompson, CEO of C&G, a U.S. distributor of Silestone. "It's a natural stone, but it's a synthetic stone."



THREE WITH A MESSAGE: Sharon Hugg, left, director of marketing, Sherrie Rowman, middle, distributor of Silestone, and Donnie Thompson, right, CEO of C&G, are working to promote Silestone in the Houston area.

SILESTONE: Marketing is central mission

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 he struggled to manufacture quartz, but it ultimately prepared by partnering with Cosentino and its Silestone brand. And as the middleman in a global enterprise, he has launched the company's product-defining marketing campaign. In 2005, Silestone made a splash with its first television commercial — a national ad during the Super Bowl. Cosentino paid \$2.4 million for 30 seconds to get its name in front of the largest TV audience of the year.

"The Super Bowl ad created a platform of momentum that gave us more coverage and more attention as we launched our advertising campaign," said Monica Canales, Cosentino's U.S. marketing director. They followed that year with seven spots aired during the prime time coverage of the Winter Olympics, including two during the closing ceremonies, Canales said. "All of that cost less than the Super Bowl ad," she said. The costly television ads are meant to attract the attention of key customers — contractors, home builders and homeowners who are remodeling — and to get them to buy the product.

"Marketing, to us, must link to sales," Canales said. "It's more than a coupon or rebate; it's a way of doing something of long-term value to the customer." Yet, discounts that undercut the price of competing products get sales moving when Home Depot introduced Silestone in 1999 in its product lineup. Silestone has been a great addition to our countertop product offering," said Sherrie Rowman, a spokeswoman in Home Depot's Atlanta headquarters. "The natural



AGGRESSIVE ADVERTISING: Brandon Witzel, left, Kayla Gutzmer and Heather Carwell are pushing the Silestone name aggressively and has bought ads during a Super Bowl and the Winter Olympics.

quartz product is a high-quality solid surface material with the benefits of durability, easy maintenance and an upscale look and feel our customers want in their kitchens and bathrooms at a value they expect from the Home Depot." But after those introductory offers, Cosentino moved to establish firm price ranges, Canales said. That could change, however, as the price of granite continues to fall, and solid surface rises. Technological advances have allowed small companies throughout the country to polish and transport granite easily, which makes it more readily available. Solid surfaces are made with petrochemical products, which are costly in the days of high oil prices. "Today it's more about what you like rather than price," said Cavanaugh, who sells every type of countertop available. "But people still have an impression that Silestone is more fake than real."

New-home builders who finish out homes before clients walk in Home Depot's Atlanta headquarters. "The natural

because of the wide range of colors and consistent pattern markings. But in upscale home renovations, the updates that most closely follow home design trends, natural stone holds sway. "In my circle of clients who live in the Heights, MacGregor and the East End, they are all going back to real stone — granite and marble," Don Broman, owner of Broman Design and Construction, said. "My clients who are doing custom renovations want looks that are so unique they are almost bizarre."

Contreras offers points out that granite is only 40 percent countertop that makes it easier to clean and control bacteria. "Silestone tries to stay ahead of the pack and there are several other manufacturers chasing them, including DuPont's Zodiaq," Cavanaugh said. "If Silestone stays ahead, it will be for two reasons — they've done an excellent job with marketing and promoting their product, and they're doing an excellent job supporting the pipeline they created."

"We don't limit our offerings to quartz," he said. "The Cosentino Sensa line — quarried marble, granite, soapstone, travertine and limestone — completes the stone spectrum, offering customers any stone they could want for any project." CAC is paid through the

importing and sale of quartz and quarried stone slabs, as well as by selling fabricated products through distributors, such as kitchen countertops, vanity tops, flooring, sinks and shower walls. And to keep sales growing, Contreras has helped Cosentino develop technology-enhanced products aimed at American aesthetics and health anxieties. The company now makes countertops with a leatherlike surface and others with Microban, anti-microbial protection built into the countertop that makes it easier to clean and control bacteria. "Silestone tries to stay ahead of the pack and there are several other manufacturers chasing them, including DuPont's Zodiaq," Cavanaugh said. "If Silestone stays ahead, it will be for two reasons — they've done an excellent job with marketing and promoting their product, and they're doing an excellent job supporting the pipeline they created."

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