

Senergy

Paying close attention to service helps make this EIFS manufacturer one of the top companies in the industry

By Michael J. Major

What's a manufacturer to do when several other manufacturers are producing basically the same product he is? One way to distinguish himself from the pack is through service. This is the route taken by Senergy Inc. of Cranston, R.I., a manufacturer of exterior insulation and finish systems.

The technology for EIFS, a polystyrene insulant with low density and great flexibility, was developed in Europe and introduced in this country by Frank Morsilli in 1969 when he founded Dryvit Systems, Inc. The three Dryvit principals who broke off from Dryvit in 1979 to form Senergy are Joseph J. Vuono, now president; Paul Pattek, who was executive vice president before his recent retirement; and Douglas Creed, who left the company some time ago. That, along with some incursions from some foreign EIFS makers, marked the beginning of

EIFS in the United States, explains Senergy's national marketing manager, Kent Stumpe.

Today there are nine domestic manufacturers of EIFS that constitute the EIFS Industry Members Association, based in Clearwater, Fla. The industry estimates that 14 percent of the commercial cladding and about 4 percent of residential cladding is now EIFS. He points out that the industry is only about a quarter century old, with competition spurring it only for about the past 15 years. The last five years have seen a rapid growth of EIFS, and Stumpe reports that during this period Senergy has seen an annual 25 percent growth rate.

"There's so much competition now, so we're pushing each other, and this is helping EIFS to grow in popularity," Stumpe says. "The industry is really full of the entrepreneurial spirit. We see more and more breakthroughs on the horizon,

with more and newer types of finishes and easier-to-apply products."

Tech Support

Though EIFS is a fairly new technology, it has been a stable one, relatively complete at the start, and its improvements have been steady but incremental in terms of ease-of-application and aesthetics. So, as says Stumpe, "A key way we differentiate ourselves from our competitors is through our technical support. We have a heavier commitment on that side, and we invest more dollars on support than anybody else."

Senergy has more than 100 employees at its Rhode Island headquarters and additional manufacturing facilities in Marietta, Ga., and Lancaster, Texas. There are six men in the field every day representing the company's technical application consulting (TAC) program. This program includes the training



Left: Senergy is responding to the unique demands of the growing residential market for exterior insulation and finish systems. This home in Virginia Beach, Va., is an example.

all the details and specs of the products. "For contractors we provide an estimating software that allows them to estimate an EIFS project a lot faster and more accurately than other methods," Stumpe says. "The software also records the results so that a contractor can measure prof-

of applicators, inspecting jobs and promoting EIFS at trade shows and open houses.

In addition, two staffers are always available via an 800 number who can answer any application or design questions, or questions on topics such as water vapor transmission or windload tests. They can also provide additional detail drawings. "In short," Stumpe explains, "we do everything we can to support the contractor and make sure the implementation is done correctly. And this goes along with our emphasis on making products easier for the applicators to use. Labor is such a large cost. We feel if we can trim costs by making products that go on easier, we help profitability, rather than trying to drop prices a penny or two a pound."

Stumpe says that in addition to the two men regularly assigned to the 800 lines, two managers, a vice president and the technical department manager are also available to speak to contractors on specific issues. Also, two coordinators make sure the department runs smoothly.

"That group is responsible for us having an extremely user friendly technical literature binder," Stumpe says, "It may not be the prettiest binder, but it is more complete from the technical side than is available anywhere else."

Support from Senergy Software

Senergy also provides software for the architect and designer, with

itability from one job to the next. We believe this is unique in the industry. Everybody says they are good at listening to customer needs, but with us it's a given that what contractors say they need is what we try to provide."

In terms of marketing, Senergy doesn't do much advertising, but it does publish a quarterly newsletter promoting EIFS, *EIFS Briefs*, which is sent to about 5,000 architects and contractors on a quarterly basis. Contractors also receive the *TAC Advisor*, a quarterly technical bulletin.

"We also have an approval process as part of the TAC program, to make sure contractors are well trained to do the job right," Stumpe says. "We have a very concentrated approach, and annually review the contractors before renewing our approval."

Stumpe reports that Senergy also assists in the development of industry standards with specification organizations such as ASTM and

code bodies. These efforts contribute to continuous improvements in product quality.

Membership Counts

Stumpe points out that EIFS as a technology arrived pretty complete; therefore, past improvements have been incremental and are most likely to continue in the same vein. Stumpe says organizations such as the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries—International, based in Falls Church, Va., help.

"EIFS was a new technology, so once groups like AWCI get involved, the technology gets defined and then continues to be upgraded within those parameters. AWCI provides its expectations of the system, and, as the system gets more clearly defined, it continues to grow."

In the case of EIFS, however, the growth has come not so much through technological improvements as the increased awareness of this technology, which is already

there. "What's been happening is that there is a wider recognition that this technology is the most flexible, versatile, and reliable in terms of cladding for certain wall constructions," Stumpe says. "EIFS works. This is something many people haven't known about. Now they're learning."

One of the big changes that has occurred, and that will continue, is that of making EIFS less labor intensive. "We've worked hard to make the product so it involves much less labor, so that it's available, for instance, in a manner that doesn't require mixing or the applying of time-consuming additives at the site," Stumpe says. "We even use pails with zip strings for easy opening, which saves the contractor a couple minutes on every pail."

Perhaps the main improvement over time has come in the area of aesthetics. "There's been a greater use of foam shapes," Stumpe says. "Architects and builders love the flexibility of incorporating a variety

of shapes and detail to improve the overall appearance.”

Stumpe explains EIFS was first sold on the basis of its energy saving/insulation value, with only a minimum choice of colors and textures. But over the past 10 years there have been introduced a wide variety of textures, with many exotic stone replications, and an infinite variety of color. “We offer as wide a product variety as any in the business,” Stumpe says. “We have eight different base coats, each one designed for a different application. We have over 18 finishes, in any color you might need. EIF systems have evolved to the point where one of the easiest ways to sell it is simply on appearance.”

What the improved aesthetics make possible, and Stumpe feels Senergy is doing for the wall and ceiling industry, is market expansion from what was originally low-rise commercial to high-rise and residential.

Although Senergy hasn't depend-

ed on advertising for its commercial market, Stumpe believes that more advertising may be necessary to reach the residential/consumer market, in terms of point-of-purchase materials and public relations efforts in newspapers. Senergy currently prides itself on a three-day delivery time, with the distributor generally having the material to allow the contractor to get started on that same day. The distributor also is set up to provide additional services, such as tinting the material either at his facility or at the job site.

“We recognize that from a distribution standpoint, the builder in the residential arena will need the material more quickly than in commercial building.”

Stumpe adds that AWCI, to which Senergy has belonged since day one, “helps keep their members informed of new improvements and new requirements in the industry. For ourselves, being a member of AWCI keeps us in touch with many of the most influential contractors in

the business. This helps keep us abreast of the changes they want to see, the changes in their operations, and what their needs are.”

In terms of joint conventions, such as the recent one combining AWCI and the Ceilings & Interior Systems Construction Association of Elmhurst, Ill., Stumpe says he hopes to see a way of attracting newer contractors. “Ten years ago when I would work a booth, a lot of people would come through who didn't understand EIFS,” he says. “We would tell them how to apply it and have a chance to pick up that new business. Now we see the contractors who are well established in the industry. It's logical to assume that as the industry continues to grow, we'll need more contractors. So, we have to find a way to attract younger blood.” *CD*

About the Author

Michael J. Major of Port Townsend, Wash., is a free-lance writer for the construction industry.