Hunter Panels says using polyiso roof insulation is a cost-effective way to reduce energy consumption, and is suitable for green construction.

Alma Garnett doesn’t believe in commodities, even in a commodity business. She says people define and differentiate a brand. In 1998, she founded Hunter Panels, marking the first new company to enter polyiso insulation manufacturing since 1975.

“Myself and a core group of industry friends wanted to build a new polyiso company founded on principles of service and a fun, well-organized people-machine as opposed to a company that sells a commodity,” she recounts. “Our challenge was to create a brand from nothing in an industry that has long-established brand names as our competitors.

“Because our people are willing to infuse their enthusiasm and dynamism into the business on a day-to-day basis, they aren’t selling a commodity anymore, they are creating a personal brand. That’s truly the meaning of brand identity.”

Garnett says customers welcomed Hunter Panels into the industry. The company opened its first plant in Kingston, N.Y., in June 1998 and its second in Chicago in March 1999. “We are incredibly fortunate to have such a strong and loyal base of customers,” she says. “And the product itself drives the demand. Polyiso is the backbone of a roofing assembly for a variety of reasons. It is a universal substrate for roofing membranes. It is the only roof insulation with Class 1 fire ratings and its thermal performance is second to none, as well.”

North American polyiso manufacturers produced and shipped more than 5 billion board feet of insulation in 2004, a record year of nearly 15 percent growth, she notes. “That tells us that energy efficiency is back in vogue, finally,” Garnett states.

In response to this rising demand, Hunter Panels built its third facility in Lake City, Fla., which became operational in June 2004, and another is scheduled to open in July 2005 in Terrell, Texas. “Each one of our plants is capable of producing 300 million board feet of polyiso,” she notes. “That’s good news for energy conservation. Our mission is to save energy and contribute to the construction of responsible, energy-efficient buildings. It is urgent that the United States...
reduce its dependence on foreign oil by reducing consumption, and using more insulation is a painless and cost-effective way to achieve that goal. We also must actively engage in ways to slow global warming and cut carbon dioxide emissions. It behooves all industries to strive toward good environmental stewardship.

In 2002, Hunter Panels became a wholly owned subsidiary of Carlisle Companies, a diversified manufacturing corporation that includes Carlisle Syn Tec, a leading manufacturer of single-ply roofing systems. She says the move didn’t change the core philosophy of Hunter Panels and the integration has had many benefits. Carlisle is an ideal parent, with a long-standing record of excellence in the roofing business, she states. “It has given us greater depth of resources and capital to grow our business, as well as the obvious synergies of having a partner company that believes in and supports polyiso and the Hunter model,” Garnett states.

Garnett calls her company’s service approach “psychic marketing.” The goal is to “get into the hearts and minds of customers so that they don’t even have to ask for special attention.”

A company must be agile in order to service the construction business – “it is a world of constant changes, material substitutions and shortages, labor and insurance issues and extremely competitive timelines,” she emphasizes.

“It is not for the faint of heart. A manufacturing company today has to be ready to respond to this type of dynamic, fast-paced and changing environment in the wink of an eye. You have to answer your telephone with real people and those people have to be informed and able to make decisions. Contractors don’t want to wait for an answer, and why should they have to? We feel the secret to our growing success lies in the passion of the people who work here and their willingness to do whatever it takes for the customer – our founding motto.”

This approach requires a willingness to invest in employees, she states. Some companies unduly stress their organizations because they are unwilling to add the people needed to get the job done, Garnett says. “It’s simple – if your customers are not getting the information they need in a timely fashion, then you don’t have enough people, or worse yet, you haven’t trained your people to know the answers – that’s what I mean by investing in people.”

Garnett says the roofing business is personally rewarding because it’s relationship driven. “Know your customer, produce and deliver a quality product, remain innovative technically and answer your phone – those are the simple truths of the business.”

She is excited about Hunter Panels’ future. “Polyiso is a green product, and suitable for incorporation in sustainable design building practices,” she continues. “With the environmentally intelligent choice for roofing insulation as our calling card, we intend on continuing Hunter’s growth and getting better every day at what we do. My personal goal is to keep building a working family who are part of the Hunter legacy and will become leaders themselves in the polyiso industry. We strive to develop our people and keep them challenged and evolving as human beings and as contributors to our organization.”

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