

Maintaining quality through technology

by Alexis Fisher

Posted: March 1, 2010

With the aid of the latest advancements in equipment and machinery, Myrtle Beach Granite and Marble Inc. of Myrtle Beach, SC, has continued a successful course, reaping some benefits from a slower economy. According to company owner Joe Blackmon, the economic downturn actually benefitted the industry in his region.

"It has removed some of the granite fabricators from the mix that were not good for the industry," he said. "They produced low-quality countertops with poor edgework, improperly installed seams with improperly mounted sinks, and [they were responsible for] many other negative aspects that were giving natural stone the perception of an everyday commodity material."



Living by one of the company's principles to stay on the cutting edge of new technology, Myrtle Beach Granite and Marble of Myrtle Beach, SC, operates three Z. Bavelloni CNC router/edge profiling machines, including the Egar 450-4, the Egar 315-4 and the Egar 102S — all from Glaston North America of Greensboro, NC.



Production is done under a 16,500-square-foot shop, which also includes a covered inventory area.

Getting a start in the industry soon after graduating from an MBA program in 1988, Blackmon began working for a company that engineered and manufactured waterjets and CNC stone routing machines along with laser, plasma and oxyfuel cutting machines. After gaining 17 years of management and marketing experience there, he went on to work for Grassie Granite and Marble — now operating as Myrtle Beach Granite and Marble Inc, but still doing business under its original name of Grassie Granite and Marble. Two years later, he and his wife, Laura — who worked as a machine tools sales manager and

later a software-programming manager — purchased the company in 2007.

Myrtle Beach Granite and Marble produces countertops in all natural stone types, quartz, solid surface, glass and many recycled materials including those made from glass and oyster shells. In addition, the company produces custom pieces of furniture, tables, benches, floor medallions, inlays, grave and other markers and urns in stone. It also offers laser etching and waterjet cutting for countertops and other stone applications as well as waterjet cutting in other materials such as all metals, plastic, wood, etc., all of which is done in house.

To display some of its capabilities, Myrtle Beach Granite and Marble recently added two new showrooms, giving the company a total of three. Together they measure 8,500 square feet in size.

Inside the shop

According to the company, "a key to providing the best quality and on time delivery is to stay on the cutting edge of new technology and having equipment that gives us the ability to complete large or small projects on an uninterrupted basis." Myrtle Beach Granite and Marble maintains a line of state-of-the-art machinery inside its 16,500-square-foot production facility, which has a covered inventory area housing over 1,500 slabs.



Cutting in the shop is completed using one of three bridge saws, including one manufactured by Pedrini of Italy.

Cutting in the shop is completed using three gantry bridge saws, including an Astra bridge saw from Emmedue Technology of Italy, another bridge saw from Pedrini of Italy and a Z. Bavelloni Sharp 500 saw from Glaston North America of Greensboro, NC — its most recent addition. Once slabs are cut to size, further shaping is done with three Z. Bavelloni CNC router/edge profiling machines from Glaston North America, including the Egar 450-4, the Egar 315-4 and the Egar 102S.



Cutting is also completed on a Z. Bavelloni Sharp 500 saw from Glaston North America.

Adding a third gantry bridge saw and a third CNC router were among the latest investments to the shop. "[Those investments] were made to increase production and give us a total of three of each type of machine," said Blackmon. "They definitely increased our production by about 30%."

The CNC routers mainly utilize Diamut, Diarex or Glaston North America diamond wheels, and polishing wheels in either rubber or clay for polishing. Terminator blades from Continental Diamond Products, Inc. of San Carlos, CA, are generally used for the gantry saws, and Diarex pads from GranQuartz for

hand polishing.

Intricate laser etching is handled by the CamTech LMS151020 laser etcher. Complex cutting is accomplished using an ESAB Hydro Cut PR waterjet cutter that can handle 7-x 13-foot material sizes and is equipped with an SL IV-50 intensifier from KMT Waterjet Systems of Baxter Springs, KS. Blackmon believes the waterjet has been one of the

biggest advancements for his fabrication shop. "Waterjet cutting allows us to cut complex, non-linear, customized countertops and other products such as granite, marble, quartz, solid surface and really any material except tempered glass," he said.

Straight line polishing is accomplished using a Comandulli Speedy System polishing machine from Italy as well as a Marmo Meccanica LCV 711 M straight line polisher from Italy. Meanwhile, dimensional pieces and slabs can be top polished using a Model 10P bed polisher from Sawing Systems of Knoxville, TN. Moreover, the shop utilizes two overhead Gorbel gantry lifts, three forklifts and a mobile crane to maneuver slabs.

A water filtering system from GranQuartz of Tucker, GA, was also recently put in place in the facility to recycle the water coming from the company's three bridge saws. "The water recycling system was utilized in order to reduce our water consumption, which in 2007 was about 360,000 gallons per month," said Blackmon. "We have greatly reduced our water consumption by 60%, adjusted for the slower economy in 2009."

For templating, the company applies Luan wood template material, a Stealth Digitizing arm (now serviced by Touchstone Instruments, LLC) or a Laser Products LT-55 laser templator. The type of templating method used is determined by the type of job being measured. "It just depends on the situation," said Blackmon. "For instance, the shape of the desired countertop and the accessibility and surrounding area of the cabinet or structure that is to receive the tops."



Myrtle Beach Granite and Marble has three showrooms, which together total 8,500 square feet.



The two new showrooms that recently opened display stone fountains, handmade bowls, statues, pedestal sinks, outdoor furniture and other unique items.

Acquiring top personnel

In order to obtain the most top-quality employees in the area, Blackmon strives to maintain a highly regarded work environment. "We have established a reputation of treating our employees really well by offering and assisting in paying for healthcare, paying for 50% of the tools that installers use on the job, a 401K program, having a heated shop with overhead lifts, the latest equipment that is maintained properly and providing a safe, secure and technologically advanced environment for employees to work. With all of these things in place and more, the most talented employees in the area gravitate to our

shop, and we are able to select and retain the best artisans that this area has to offer. We have no shortage of applications from stoneworkers that would like to work at our facility."

According to Blackmon, the majority of the shop's employees are cross trained to run multiple types of equipment. "For example, any of the three CNC edge profiler operators can run any of the three bridge saws," he said. "The bridge saw operators can also install, hand fabricate, template or run the laser-etching machine as needed. The install crews are also trained in templating, so we have a lot of versatility and can move personnel around as needed in a tight economy."



The third showroom features furniture vanities, powder room pieces and much more.

Additionally, new workers are trained on the job alongside more experienced peers, which Blackmon has found to be more beneficial than a formal training program. "We do send employees out for specific training to the manufacturer for a new material, or periodically we may have a training class internally for a new piece of equipment," Blackmon added.



The countertops in this kitchen completed by Myrtle Beach Granite and Marble feature Juparana Fantasy granite, and the island counter is finished with intricate detailed edgework.

Production capabilities and market share

By establishing the proper equipment and right personnel, Myrtle Beach Granite and Marble is able to produce 1,500 square feet of material per week. Broken down in terms of projects, it can do a combination of 25 commercial condo or residential projects.

Some of its most recent commercial projects include the Hard Rock Theme Park (now called Free Style Music Park), North Beach Plantation condominiums, Mar Vista Grande condominium, Towers on the Grove condominiums, Wall of Service for the City of Myrtle Beach — for which the company has cut

and etched about 1,600 granite nameplates — and Cinza Spa. Additionally, it has been a participant in ABC's television program "Extreme Home Makeover."

"We templated, fabricated and installed countertops in the kitchen, laundry room, two baths and a fireplace surround, completed in only a 17-hour period," Blackmon said of the "Extreme Home Makeover" experience.

Given the slower economy, which has resulted in a lack of commercial condominium work for Myrtle Beach Granite and Marble and other fabricators, Blackmon noted that the market is calling for versatility and flexibility. "Our market for the most part is within a 120-mile radius of the Myrtle Beach, SC, Grand Strand Area," he said. "Although, we have done jobs as far as Virginia for customers. In those cases, we had done their vacation home here at the beach, and they were so pleased that they wanted us to provide the countertops for the permanent residence in their home state. With today's economy, we probably would not turn down a job anywhere in the continental U.S."



In addition to countertops, the company processes slab work such as bathtub surrounds.

And because of this, Blackmon has no short-term plans for expansion, but still sees a future in maintaining the most current technology the industry presents. "Long term, we are looking to grow and keep updating our equipment to the latest that the industry has to offer, and to keep providing the highest quality products and promoting natural stone as the ultimate and most sought after countertop material," he said.

"Also long term, we are investigating expanding by supplying cabinets [in addition to] countertops since we have the resources and knowledge base in-house to do this very easily, and it is a good fit since we are currently engaged in a lot of remodel business," he continued. "As long as you have something to offer such as quality, uniqueness and customization, and compete on levels other than simple low cost, you will always have a customer base."

Sidebar: Myrtle Beach Marble and Granite Inc.

dba Grassie Granite and Marble

Myrtle Beach, SC

Type of work: countertops in all natural stone, quartz, solid surface, glass and many recycled materials such as those made from sea glass and oyster shells; in addition, custom pieces of furniture, tables, benches, medallions, inlays, grave markers and urns in stone; laser etching and waterjet cutting for countertops and other stone applications

Equipment: Three Z. Bavelloni CNC routers, including the Egar 450-4, the Egar 315-4 and the Egar 102S — all from Glaston North America of Greensboro, NC; three gantry bridge saws, including an Astra bridge saw from Emmedue Technology of Italy; one manufactured from Pedrini of Italy; and a Z. Bavelloni Sharp 500 from Glaston North America; a CamTech LMS151020 laser etcher; an ESAB Hydro Cut PR waterjet cutter — equipped with an SL IV-50 intensifier from KMT Waterjet Systems of Baxter Springs, KS; a Comandulli Speedy System edge polishing machine from Italy; a Marmo

Meccanica LCV 711 M straight line polisher from Italy; a Model 10P bed polisher from Sawing Systems of Knoxville, TN; tooling and accessories from Diamut, Diarex/GranQuartz of Tucker, GA, Glaston North America and Continental Diamond Products, Inc. of San Carlos, CA; two overhead Gorbelt gantry lifts; three forklifts; a mobile crane; a water filtering system from GranQuartz; a Stealth Digitizing arm (now serviced by Touchstone Instruments, LLC of Plaistow, NH); a LT-55 laser templator from Laser Products Industries of Romeoville, IL

Number of employees: 25

Production rate: capacity for 1,500 square feet of material per week or a combination of 25 commercial condo or residential projects a week

Sidebar: Demonstrating the depth of its craftsmanship



Myrtle Beach Granite and Marble recently completed a 24-foot long x 6-foot-wide granite conference table that involved two different layers of granite — Minotaurus and Ubatuba — and a middle layer of glass.

In order to create a unique piece of furniture for a client, Myrtle Beach Granite and Marble recently took on the task of completing a 24-foot-long granite conference table that involved a middle layer of glass. "The design goal was to make a one-of-a-kind conference table for the customer, Active Glass and Mirror in Myrtle Beach," said company owner, Joe Blackmon. "The purpose of the table is to serve as a conference table for visiting customers and company meetings."

The top layer of the table features 3-cm Minotaurus granite, with the middle layer being 3/4-inch-thick glass and the bottom layer being 3-cm Ubatuba granite. "The initial challenge was to design the table to meet the customer's

expectation while using the characteristics and boundaries of natural stone, and marrying granite up with glass," said Blackmon. "This was overcome by off setting the seams of the top layer from the bottom two layers. By staggering the seams, it made the table stronger so the layer could help support itself."

Aside from the initial challenge, Blackmon explained they needed to acquire the proper pattern and coloring from the five different exotic slabs that would be used in the table, and they all had to match at the six different seam locations. "This was done by careful planning and the layout of the five large pieces of the table prior to any cutting being done," he said.

All cutting was then done with the company's ESAB waterjet and Glaston North America Z. Bavelloni CNC edge profile machine, which involved accurately cutting pieces of a larger



size on a continuous arc and then machining the edgework so that everything lined up properly.

Meanwhile, the company used its CamTech laser etcher to etch its company logo and the customer's logo on the center glass insert pieces. Also, the glass layer in between the granite laminates is lighted for effect.



Additionally, etched glass inserts feature Myrtle Beach Granite and Marble's logo as well as the customer's logo.

The company's mobile crane was used to transfer the pieces onto the second floor of the building where the table would be located. Following, the five large slabs had to be supported onto only three bases, so they could be seamed properly and to give the stone support to not break over years of use, according to Blackmon. "This was overcome by carefully selecting the mounting locations for angle iron that was bolted into the concrete table bases," he said.

Finally, the pieces were seamed, some being as long as 6 feet, which will allow them to last and hold over time. "We used flowing at the seams with biscuits in the stone along the inside of the seams to give the strongest and surest bond," said Blackmon. Accenting the table within the conference room is a 30-foot-long wet bar with matching Minotaurus granite.

Blackmon made the first drawing of the project design on May 18, 2009 and final completion of the installation took place on October 10, 2009. "The customer is very happy with the end result," said Blackmon. "All that have seen it are impressed by its size of 24 feet long by 6 feet wide. All are impressed by the way all of the edge work from all three layers and three different materials line up all of the way down the 24-foot-long arc."

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