

A man in a dark suit and red tie stands with his arms crossed on a speckled floor. He is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a dark, speckled floor with some light reflections.

SOLID FOOTING

SPECIALTY FLOORING SYSTEMS INC. SEIZES GROWTH OPPORTUNITY

When Marc Antonucci teamed with his father, Peter, and partner Robert Tarabocchia to start up Specialty Flooring Systems Inc. after each had spent some years toiling in the commercial flooring industry, their initial vision was modest.

"I think my father and Robert were really looking at becoming a glorified mom-and-pop shop," says the younger Antonucci, the company president after his father's recent retirement from the South Amboy, N.J.-headquartered flooring contractor. "And that's what we were in 1996, our first year. We did about \$1 million."

But where some may have found relative comfort at that level, Antonucci saw huge growth opportunity. It was regarded in some circles as a somewhat curious vision, given that the market was already saturated with well-established flooring contractors.

It turns out Antonucci's eyesight wasn't so bad after all, as he expects to post at least \$18 million in 2006 revenues.

The keys to success? Bringing a new sense of customer service to an industry that was starving for it; attaining the credibility that comes with a major project success; and later, partnership with a supplier that does more than deliver product.

Customer service

When Specialty Flooring Systems first set up its New Jersey shop in 1996, the partners identified an immediate opportunity.

"In the whole industry out here, there was an attitude that was short on customer service," says Antonucci. "Basically we went in and said, 'You're the customer. Whatever you need, let me know and we'll take care of it.' They hadn't heard that very often."

The fact that executive vice-president Tarabocchia serves as operations manager and as such, is a familiar face in the field while projects are in progress, made a statement about the company's service attitude,

Marc Antonucci has put Specialty Flooring Systems, Inc. on a fast growth track

according to Antonucci.

"The customer or the general (contractor) is talking to an owner of our company in the field if there's an issue," says Antonucci. "I think that says we'll be there when you need us there, that we have some accountability."

Facility ownership and general contractors with whom Specialty Flooring Systems work took note of the company's service, whether it was in the pharmaceutical facilities where they first made their mark, or the public buildings, schools and research centers the company has worked in since.

But bringing that attitude to the field was only the first step in achieving greater growth. Notching a major project success was the next.

Success begets success

New York's Penn Station is a major train and subway terminal in Manhattan, handling more than 1 million passengers daily. In the late 1990s, Antonucci submitted a bid to apply a Terrazzo floor as part of a renovation project performed by Tishman Construction. He got the job, although his bid demanded efficiency both in terms of the project execution itself and its administration in order to make it profitable.

Sectioning off work areas and keeping traffic flowing through a building that never shuts down was "tedious," according to Antonucci, but it was "a project that definitely propelled us to the next level."

The next level was the American Airlines Terminal at New York's JFK Airport. One of the largest flooring contracts in the United States, this four-year, multi-million dollar, 600,000-square-foot terrazzo project is set for completion in 2007.

"The Penn Station project gave us momentum that kept building and segued into the American Airlines Terminal," Antonucci says. "And it gave us something to hand to our customers. Before that, it was, 'What have you done?' We could talk our way around it, but we needed something to show them, a reference that said we could handle a multi-million dollar job. Penn Station gave that to us."

Not every job would be as high-profile as these, but the experience has been valuable in the execution of the

At A Glance

Bringing a new focus to customer service has helped Specialty Flooring Systems of South Amboy, N.J., become a major player in its 10-year history

Project successes at New York's Penn Station and JFK Airport have given the company valuable credibility



smaller projects Specialty Flooring Systems regularly handles. Today, the company manages a wide array of flooring systems in a variety of settings, ranging from high-end terrazzo to Mechanical Equipment Room (MER) systems.

Supplier partner

And with Sherwin-Williams' brand of floor systems, General Polymers, they've found a supplier capable of providing the product they need for their range of applications. The company was among the first to be a General Polymers brand-certified contractor.

"Partnership with General Polymers has been extremely important for us," says Antonucci. "I basically view their people as free salespeople for our business, the way they develop leads for us.

"Between General Polymers and now with their association with Sherwin-Williams, they have more feet on the street than any other supplier out there. They go out and get business for us, plus they stand behind the product and there are never any questions if there are performance issues. It's just taken care of. How could you not embrace that?"

Next steps

Antonucci sees no slowing in the company's growth rate. It's recently established operations in Philadelphia and has seen promising early sales there, is on the brink of starting operations in Boston and has cast an eye to the

"Sherwin-Williams has more feet on the street than any other supplier out there. I basically view their people as free salespeople for our business."

west for further expansion.

The company also has established a precast division in which it can use General Polymers brand epoxies to precast various floor pieces that are more difficult to create on site.

"It had always been easier to outsource the precast, but we got so big and decided that we needed more control of it," says

Antonucci. "We have too much at stake to put that in the hands of subcontractors. Bringing the precast in puts us back in control."

And "in control" is a status the ownership of Specialty Flooring Systems likes, especially as its leadership pursues some pretty lofty growth goals.

"The future?" ponders Antonucci. "As long as we keep the focus on the customer, I think we can be a \$60 million flooring contractor."