Introducing brickweb™ Thin Brick

A new product called brickweb should help General Shale penetrate the Do-it-Yourself market even further for interior renovations. The kiln-fired clay is the same as the thin brick product, but it’s positioned on tile webbing for easier and faster installation.

“This is exciting for us because it is simply thin brick units that are glued to traditional tile web backer. The beauty of this is the ability to install it faster and easier than individual thin brick products,” says Mark Stutz.

There are 12 bricks per sheet that covers 1.75 square feet. The corner pieces have eight brick corners per sheet. One box of brickweb will cover 8.7 square feet in a fraction of the time it would take to install individual bricks.

Stutz also says the familiar look of “tile” is a plus for selling it to customers. “Because this product is already adhered to a tile back, when the customer sees the product, it communicates that it’s similar to tile, and many folks are more familiar with installing tile. They get it right away that it’s going to be a simple project.”

Stutz says the brickweb is not intended to replace existing thin brick product, but it’s another vehicle to penetrate DIY markets. With its retail friendly box, it should open up more doors as a retail product.

Eight colors of the brickweb product have been in production at the Denver plant and were available for shipment at the beginning of May.

General Shale Ambassadors

As General Shale continues to evolve into a more retail-friendly company, it’s important to bring a new focus to improving customer interactions. Instead of working through a third-party contractor, the General Shale sales force is working with the end customer more than ever. “We need to take time to get to know the customer and to really listen to them and not assume what the customer wants,” says John Hammett, Vice President of Sales for the company. “If you really listen and hear what they’re saying, you’ll have a better idea of what their needs are and how to meet those needs.”

Hammett says the sales staff needs to emphasize the value of General Shale products to the customer. “Someone seeking value is not necessarily looking for the lowest price,” he says. “I define it more as what the customer feels he got for his investment.” General Shale is a great investment. “The sales staff needs to differentiate the professional-grade CP product from a big box store product.

“We’ve got to sell them on the quality of the product, the expertise of our staff and the great experience that we’ll be giving them,” says Hammett, who notes sometimes the relationship you build with a customer could last a lifetime if it’s done correctly.

In today’s world of social networking, one customer has the ability to affect an average of 250 other potential customers either positively or negatively, depending on the experience he or she had. So Hammett says his goal is to create “ambassadors” out of our customers.

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Building with a Clear Conscience

Although General Shale has been around for more than 80 years, the company is continually learning how it can do things better ... including becoming a more sustainable company.

As part of the Success Profile initiative, General Shale has four core areas of sustainability measurement:

Work continuously on the improvement of our product process in ecological and economical respects.

Work continuously on the improvement of our products and their application with respect to ecological, economical and social performance.

Work continuously on the improvement of the workplace environment of our employees and our processors.

Actively appreciate our responsibility to society in all regions where we are active. (All these measures of course have to follow the clear premise of economic feasibility.)

“This is an ongoing effort,” says Mark Kinser, Vice President of Corporate Development and Marketing. “Much of it are things we began doing a long time ago, but now with a more clear directive and looking for measurable results.”

Kinser explains the four initiatives:

Making the production process more eco-friendly includes reducing the use of certain types of energy and increasing the use of more renewable energy and protecting natural resources. There will also be a great emphasis on trying to increase the company’s share of recycled material in the process.

General Shale does have an advantage in the area of product sustainability. Brick has always been eco-friendly and energy efficient. But as General Shale expands its product line beyond brick, those new products need to meet green standards as well. Items like Green Guard drainage system, Endurance RS4™ Structural Brick and permeable pavers are all energy efficient.

“Providing a great workplace environment for our employees means more than just providing a safe place to work. It’s also personal development through education and training.

Making an extra effort to support the area in which we are located is part of the social responsibilities to our communities. This means not only supporting social organizations year-round, like Habitat for Humanity or fundraisers for local charitable causes, but stepping up during the unexpected. We provided product at no cost to people who were impacted by tornadoes in northeast Tennessee and southwest Virginia last spring. We gave block and brick for nearly a dozen homes after working with local authorities to find those in need.”

First-quarter sales for GS Outdoor Living Products were “fantastic” according to Corky Clifton, Regional Manager over Outdoor Living Products. Hardscape kit sales were up an astonishing 600% over first quarter last year. Retaining wall product sales were up about 70%, and pavers have seen a 200% sales increase from this time last year.

“We are very pleased with the sales for first quarter in this segment,” says Clifton. “I couldn’t be more pleased.”

A new company-wide training initiative is under way for General Shale employees, called General Shale University. The training includes both hands-on instruction from General Shale experts and computer-based training with software specializing in “soft skills.”

“This has been necessitated by the development of all our new products, especially our Outdoor Living line, and our entrance into the retail market,” says Scott Ledford, General Shale Recruitment and Training Manager. “We realize as we expand into the retail market it requires a different skill set to work with the general public versus working only with contractors. These ‘weekend warriors’ as they’re often called, need more direction when it comes to cost, installation and options for their projects. So we want to make sure our sales staff is well-versed in those areas.”

Some of the hands-on training has taken place after hours at more than 30 distribution centers and showrooms around the country. The training includes familiarizing the sales staff with the new products as well as the basic installation process and techniques to help consumers get the most out of their purchases.

“It’s our goal to be the one-stop shop for customers, and we want them to feel confident. We have product experts on-site who are a real resource for them, so they feel confident to come back to us for other products and to tell others what a great experience they had.”

This training will be ongoing for both current employees and new hires. GSU fits nicely with the existing quality process programs called GQO. GQO has been in place since the ’90s and is a team-based quality process at all our locations. It’s the mechanism used to drive improvement at the local level, solicit input about ways we can improve product quality and increase the level of service our customers receive.