



Century Tile Store in Mundelein, Illinois.

CENTURY TILE & CARPET BUSINESS STATS

Location:

Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan and Indiana

Years in Business:

69

Number of Stores:

11

Annual Revenue:

\$30 Million

of Employees:

180

Promotional Mix:

Email, online advertising, social media, television, radio

BEST PRACTICES

■ By Jessica Chevalier

Family relationships are complicated, which is why many people are awed by families that not only live but also work harmoniously together. Members of the Carlson and Spiewak families, who co-own Century Tile & Carpet of Chicago, Illinois, have managed to do just that for not just a year or two, but for nearly seven decades.

The result is impressive. Currently, 14 members of the two families are running a flooring operation with 11 retail stores across Chicagoland and commercial operations reaching into dozens of states. This year, the business expects to hit \$30 million in sales, and the families hope to keep up the same pattern of success for at least another 70 years.

MAKING IT WORK

So, how do they do it? As families that work together often explain, success lies in dividing duties and honoring the lines that lie between them, and that is certainly the Carlson-Spiewak strategy. Each active member of the families has an area of specialization, and they respect one another's skills and expertise. "Everyone focuses on their job category consistently," says Keith Carlson, general manager of material management and web director at Century. "Collectively, we get the final product that is Century Tile. We get together once a week for meetings to have a top-level look at the whole business. We're always talking about and working towards the goal of being a profitable company."

But what really drives their success is a shared respect for a common objective: honoring the business that Frank Parks and Phil Spiewak Sr. started in 1947. Keith's goal, above all, is to stay true to the culture that his grandfather created, maintaining the level of service and integrity that Parks prided himself in—and that begins with respecting his familial co-workers.

"My family taught us that we all had to get along and that if we didn't get along, we were never going to achieve our goals as a business," says Keith. "That's true of the other side of the family [the Spiewaks] as well. We all grew up together."

Amazingly, at the age of 89, Frank Parks is still active in the business that he created, though from afar, as he now lives in Florida.

EVOLVING WHILE STAYING EXACTLY THE SAME

Honoring his grandfather's style of business doesn't mean keeping things just as they were. Century Tile is bent on evolving to meet the needs of the current market, especially with regard to product. "We pride ourselves at being first to the market with the latest and greatest," says Keith.

Century's focus on staying at the forefront of new product means that it is willing to both try and drop items. In fact, in spite of its name, Century Tile & Carpet has moved well beyond those two product categories to carry a full line of flooring products. The core of Century's business is tile (ceramic, glass and stone), resilient, carpet, hardwood and laminate. The company also offers area rugs, ceiling tile, tools and sundries. "Ceiling tile is a small number, as are tools and area rugs, but sundries are a big part," Keith explains. "Cement and grout, glue and adhesives are a substantial part of the business. Underlayment, too."

In addition to its 11 retail locations, Century Tile & Carpet



Partners Frank Parks (left) and Paul Spiewak (right) in 2004.

operates a distribution arm called CT Distributors. On a daily basis, CT serves significant portions of six states and another two dozen states with particular products. The operation is headed by Keith's brother Scott, who has four employees on the road servicing customers and another two in the office handling order processing.

Ultimately, Century's business is half retail, half contractor. With its commercial business, the company services virtually every niche in the market. Keith names property management, A&D, small homebuilders and big commercial projects as a few of the segments that are important to the company. "We hit all the conduits," says Keith.

Over the years, Century has handled the installation side of the business in different ways. "Many moons ago, we handled installations using contracted installation teams. But for years, we deviated from that and did referral business to installers for everything but carpet. Then, when the 2000s rolled around, we started thinking that we could add installation to our portfolio." Today, Century uses contract workers, but it manages the installation process.

Currently, Century, which reports that the Chicago market is experiencing positive but slow growth, says that it is struggling to keep up with installations. "We are trying to figure out how to optimize what we do," says Keith. "Adding labor? Adding innovation with online services to streamline the process? We are feeling the pressure more now because people want to get jobs done before the holidays. We want to grow and

CENTURY'S EARLY YEARS

Frank Parks began installing plastic tile for Tile Master as a young man. Business was booming, and soon Parks and Phil Spiewak Sr. started installing backsplashes in the evenings as an independent business. Thus began Century Tile.

The original Century Tile storefront was on Austin Avenue in downtown Chicago, a space that is today the business' carpet location. As the name suggests, it started as a tile-only business—vinyl asbestos and plastic were popular at the time—then moved into sheet goods and continued adding products as the years progressed. Today, the business sells what Carlson calls "the whole gamut" of floorcovering: ceramic tile, carpet, hardwood, vinyl, laminate and rugs, as well as setting materials and ceiling tile.

keep up with the business that we're getting. For us, it's not as much about finding skilled labor as keeping up with demand. Are there enough installation houses out there? I don't know. But I do know that if you have too much work and not enough labor, customer service becomes an issue."

GETTING IN FRONT OF THE CUSTOMER

Keith's mother, Elaine, is in charge of creating advertising for Century, and the company has now shifted the bulk of its advertising online. "How we get to the customer has changed," says Keith. "We do lots of email marketing now, using databases and point-of-sale to gather connections. This grows every day. We use Facebook and Twitter. We are trying to branch out and do different types of search advertising, website retargeting, finding the people who are looking for us. We are always striving to figure out what people are really looking for in their online searches."

Recently, Keith attended a conference where Houzz trainers were present and was really impressed by the platform. "Houzz has more than 35 million unique visitors a month, and the most searched thing is flooring," Keith reports. "It's the first social media conduit that really fits our industry." Keith plans to start utilizing Houzz shortly.

Like many retailers, Keith feels that the world of online advertising can be overwhelming. "Understanding the digital shift is one of our greatest challenges. How do you hit all the right outlets and make sure you are being seen and relevant? We still do a bit of TV and radio, but as that traditional customer gets older, you are shifting to the younger customer, and their buying habits aren't the same as their parents'. How do you capture all of them effectively?" What's more, Keith points out that having a good grasp on the online world today doesn't mean that you will tomorrow, due to the rapid rate of change. "Within 30 to 60 days, there is something new out there," he says.

BUILDING ON ITS STRENGTHS

Above all, Keith believes that the business' greatest assets are its brand recognition and reputation. "So often we go to a trade or home show and people say, 'My parents bought from you all,' or 'I've always bought from you.' My grandfather made sure we were relevant back in the day, and that has continued as our greatest strength."

To do that, of course, Century Tile has to have employees who carry that same passion for relevance and service, which is becoming more of a challenge. While Century is well staffed now, Keith worries about what will happen as the second generation of Carlsons and Spiewaks start to retire. "I have a few uncles thinking about retirement, and I want to make sure we can continue the tradition that my grandfather started, making sure the business will be around for the next 69 years," says Keith. ■

Floor Focus' goal with this monthly column is to not only give recognition and acclaim to a successful dealer but also provide our readers with ideas they can put to work in their own stores. If you know of a retailer who exhibits exemplary leadership in any facet of their business, please let us know either by email (info@floorfocus.com) or by mail.