Systematically building better buildings

The national approach to promoting a lightweight concrete masonry wall system is gaining momentum

BY RICK YELTON

Go ahead and pick it up," urges Steve Minnock, vice president of Grand Blanc Cement Products, to several masons as they encircle his van. Minnock slowly backs away from the vehicle as one mason reaches for an 8-inch concrete masonry unit (CMU) on the van's bed.

Gripping the block firmly with both hands, the mason starts to hoist it up out of the van. There's a sudden jerk in the lifting motion as the mason tries to stop the block's upward movement. Surprised by the unit's light weight of 22 pounds, compared with the typical 36 pounds, the mason nearly hits himself in the forehead.

Minnock smiles as the rest of the crew laughs at their friend's near miss. Ever the salesman, Minnock has used the introductory method to showcase Grand Blanc's new line of lightweight CMUs developed for the "SmartWall" high-performance concrete masonry wall system they've been marketing for the past two years.

When the crew's teasing ends, Minnock looks at his audience and asks, "Wouldn't you rather be laying these units than those heavy blocks over there?"

Grand Blanc, located in Grand Blanc, Mich., is one of a small but growing number of concrete block producers that are expanding the traditional promotion method used in the gray block market. United under an Expanded Shale, Clay and Slate Institute promotion effort (ESCSI), these producers are converting masons, architects, and building owners to a systematic building system that helps the concrete masonry industry compete against metal and wood frame building systems.

Lightweight masonry is not a new concept, but a national promotional effort of a lightweight building system is. Also new is the source of the promotion effort: ESCSI aggregate producers themselves.

In the highly fragmented masonry construction industry, ESCSI producer members found their product's message lost in jurisdictional and association battles. "Several years ago we noticed that overall gray block sales growth had flattened and had begun to decline," says Barrett Reese Sr., vice president of sales at TXI, Dallas, and chairman of ESCSI's marketing committee. Inspired by the results of a Cooperative Research Development Agreement to design a better building unit conducted under a grant from the U.S. Army Construction Engineering Research Laboratories, Champaign, Ill., ESCSI members decided the industry needed a new message.

"If Army engineers determined a need for a new masonry building system to protect workers and increase the long-term value of their structures, and the research indicated that there was an economical solution, it was only natural that our target should be the commercial market," says Reese.

"ESCSI developed the SmartWall system to maximize the competitiveness of concrete masonry by providing a high-performance wall system that is mason-friendly and owner-friendly," says John Ries, executive director of the association. "The system far exceeds conventional ASTM standards for wall design and uses CMUs that are lighter (an 8x8x16-inch unit weighs 26 pounds) and stronger (minimum compressive strength is 2500 psi).

A driver from Grand Blanc Cement Products delivers "SmartWall" block.

"The end result is a construction method that helps contractors reduce workers' compensation claims, provide safer scaffolds, shorten construction time, and provide a building that gives its owner long-term energy savings in lower heating and cooling costs," says Ries.

Walls vs. units

"We started analyzing the gray block market six or seven years ago and decided to focus on the fact that architects specify systems, not individual blocks," Ries says. So to increase concrete masonry's market share, ESCSI

One Michigan masonry contractor substitutes SmartWall CMUs on interior walls to increase worker productivity.

members wanted to systematically simplify the industry's message.

In many ways ESCSI found simplifying the message of a higher-quality lightweight CMU was more difficult than first believed. Over the years they had used numerous marketing approaches to promote lightweight units.

One appeal, focused on the masonry contractor, touted the back-saving labor benefits of a lighter block. Another appeal tried to convince block producers that lightweight block was a value-added product with sales yielding higher margins, even with the higher production costs. Then there's the architectural appeal lighter blocks offer with energy savings, better fire ratings, and improved line control and thus, better-looking and performing buildings, and the insulating value of units made with lightweight aggregate.

The masonry industry's multicustomer approach that uses fragmented messages has placed block producers and masonry contractors at a disadvantage when positioning their product against competing systems including wood and steel, suggests Ries. "Numerous studies determined that architects liked to deal with just one set of decision makers on a job," points out Ries. To compete, the masonry industry must think of itself as providing a complete system.

In our view, the SmartWall banner unites the masonry contractor with the block producer.

Up-lifting Michigan results

As a block producer, what Steve Minnock likes about the SmartWall promotion campaign is that he can market one aspect of the system to each participant in the construction circle. For one contractor, Minnock can focus on labor efficiencies. To another contractor, building with lightweight block might be portrayed as a way to encourage mason retention and quality of life.

Appealing to the contractor has been successful for Grand Blanc. Armed with the documentation of SmartWall research and specifications, contractors can successfully request a lightweight block as an approved substitute on projects. "We have one masonry contractor who routinely substitutes lightweights in portions of commercial structures and schools," says Minnock. Even though there's a price premium for the lighter units, the masonry contractor feels that his crew's productivity and increased safety awareness more than provide payback.

Grand Blanc's success under the SmartWall promotional banner has a direct effect on its business. For 1999, Minnock estimates that about 10% of his total production will be SmartWall block, matching the production level of the company's landscape unit.

To meet the increased demand, Grand Blanc has had to make some plant changes. First they've added feed hopper capacity. When making the CMUs, some adjustments to the block and cubing machines might be necessary. Even with the adjustments, final product quality hasn't been a problem. The increased cement content, combined with the lightweight ESCS aggregates' strength, creates a block that's strongly resistant to chipping.

Grand Blanc offers SmartWall units in 6-inch, 8-inch, and 12-inch units but hasn't begun production of any lightweight fittings. "We match our lightweight CMU's texture to our standard block to avoid excessive inventorying," says Minnock.

"It's been fun demonstrating our lightweight block to the contractor," says Minnock. "Normally there's a good deal of lunchbox talk after each tailgate demonstration, so that by the time I catch up with that crew again a few weeks later they'll try a pallet," says Minnock.

ESCSI aggregate producer member Hydraulic Press Brick Co. has worked closely with Grand Blanc and others in promoting and developing the SmartWall system in the Great Lakes region, says Steve Rowe, vice president of sales and marketing for Hydraulic Press Brick Co. "Once they try the system, the masons and designers want to use it again," Rowe says. Rowe's company has certified four block producers including Grand Blanc: Consumers Concrete Products, Kalamazoo, Mich.; Michigan Certified Concrete Products, Grand Rapids, Mich.; and Koltcz Concrete Block Co., Cleveland.

The strength of ESCS aggregates aids the SmartWall CMU's chipping resistance.

The SmartWall promotion is becoming a national effort. Another ESCSI member, TXI, Dallas, has given its aggregate the brand name PyroTherm and certified seven block producers as exclusive manufacturers of SmartWall CMUs. TXI's marketing approach includes a comparison of its SmartWall system with tilt-up construction. In a head-to-head comparison of construction and annual costs for a large-platform, prototype retail facility in Houston that would eventually use 50,000 12-inch CMUs, the study indicated that the SmartWall system was a better buy.

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