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SMALL BUSINESS

Eric Schigiel carves out a solid business in marble, granite, onyx and limestone

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ROCK-SOLID STRATEGY

Eric Schigiel has carved out a growing Miami business selling marble, granite, onyx and limestone to homes and businesses.



SMALL BUSINESS

Carving out a piece of the stone market

Opustone Granite & Marble, founded in 2001, has built a solid business on the rising demand for luxury stone products.

BY JO WERNE
Special to The Miami Herald

Eric Schigiel spends his days surrounded by materials that are millions of years old — marble, granite, onyx and limestone.

The 30-year-old travels the world — to Italy, Spain, Turkey, Egypt, China and Brazil — to find nature's best.

Schigiel says he knew nothing about stone when he founded Opustone Granite & Marble in 2001. With degrees in finance and international

business from Florida International University, Schigiel says, "to be honest, I just wanted to work." He and his father were sitting around drinking wine — a California vintage called Opus One — when they got the idea for the company name.

Now with 75 employees in his Miami location and 10 in Jacksonville, Schigiel offers customized materials for flooring, kitchen countertops, backsplashes, bathrooms, patios and driveways. Prices range from \$2 up to hundreds of dollars per square foot.

BILLY JOEL'S HOUSE

One of Schigiel's bigger jobs was supplying over \$350,000 worth of stone for the home of entertainer Billy Joel in Miami Beach. "The project was all the stone in the house, from bathrooms, the main house to exterior columns," Schigiel says. "We supplied even the pool tiles and driveway pavers."

Selling stone is a good business to get into, says Bill Levy, president of Levy

Media Group of Cleveland, Ohio which represents the 2,000-member trade organization Marble Institute of America.

"The business is growing quite rapidly," he says. "The reason is that over the last several years new sources of stone have been found around the world in places like India, China and Russia. And new technology enables them to quarry the stone more efficiently which has brought the price down."

Schigiel's 6,000-square-foot showroom in Doral is a high-end designer showroom with displays of stone arranged like works of art. Customers can browse and

visualize how their kitchens or even their driveway will look according to the patterns on display.

"There are so many applications of stone," Schigiel points out. "You can have polished or honed (a satin finish), or a leather finish (a brushed look). White is very popular for floors in South Florida."

His market varies according to location. "South Beach [where he has a condo] is very trendy. Coral Gables is high end, conservative."

In just six years, Schigiel has expanded his business to include, not only a second showroom in Jacksonville, but five warehouses in Miami totaling 100,000 square feet.

Some of Opustone's clients buy a slab to frame and hang on the wall like a piece of art. Designers browse to find just the right color and pattern for a client's kitchen countertops.

"I've done a lot of business with Opustone the last two years; it's one of my main suppliers of stone products," says Mark Alpert, owner of Concierge Flooring & Interior



PHOTOS BY ANDREW ULDEA/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

HARD WORK: Eric Schigiel, owner of Opustone Granite & Marble, shows off a beautiful onyx, above. Customers, below, inspect the firm's showroom.

Solutions in Boca Raton. "In terms of presentation, service and inventory levels, the company is one of the best suppliers in the tri-county area."

FUTURE PLANS

Schigiel got into the slab business only recently. In January 2008, he expects 150 containers of slabs to arrive, greatly increasing his selection.

There are also man-made stones that mimic the ancient material, of course, but they can be repetitive and artificial looking. Natural stones are produced as a result of millions of years of geological changes, resulting in the variety of colors and characteristics.

Schigiel, who declined to reveal his annual sales, says his clients understand the value of natural stone.

"People are buying marble just to say they have marble in the house when they put it [the house] on the market. If you have a house valued at \$300,000 and up, you have to put in stone. It's like fashion. If you are wearing brown pants you have to wear brown socks."



MARBLE/GRANITE FACTS

Top export countries by sales: Italy, Brazil, Turkey, China, India, Mexico, Spain, Taiwan, France, Portugal
Biggest import markets: United States, China, Europe
Most expensive stone (apart from the semi precious): Lapis Lazuli (from Chile); Blue Sodalite (from Brazil); Blue Sodalite (from Namibia)
Oldest stone: Roman travertine; Greek Thassos; Italian White Carrara

SOURCE: trade publication Stone World