

Reinventing the Commercial Window

by Tara Taffera



During the Civil War, troops gathered at Fort Evans, the highest location in Leesburg, Va., to look out for enemy soldiers. Today that hillside is the site of Rehau's North American headquarters, where a bunker from Fort Evans remains as a reminder of the battles fought there. Just as each side had its strengths in fighting the Civil War, Rehau says its strength is in battling against its competition. In the current commodity-type window market, companies have to offer more—much more—to gain market share.

So with an eye toward sustainability and whole system building solutions, backed by the company's expertise and driven by its additional divisions, Rehau has unleashed a slew of tools in the battle for market share.

Its biggest fight has been one of changing options. In a commercial market where aluminum has long-been known as the premiere product, Rehau, and others in the marketplace that are challenging that premise, must overcome misconceptions.

Material Differences

"The mantra has always been aluminum is better," says Brian Guyer, market development manager, windows and doors business unit. "Building with PVC can save building owners tens of thousands in heating and cooling costs."

Proponents of vinyl in commercial applications say it can meet thermal and structural needs.

"Vinyl products can perform better [than aluminum] structurally," says

Guyer. "People don't think it can go 40 stories. It can."

Helmut Grohschaedl, the business unit manager for doors and windows, agrees that when architects hear this it is "eye opening to them."

"They have this misperception that it is cheap and not structurally sound—then we show them the profile cut," he says. More are listening now."

Among the listeners is the hospitality industry. The company's uPVC door and window systems have been specified by a top hotel chain, and the company stresses that it is positioning its products as an alternative to thermally-broken aluminum.

"If we are higher on cost [as compared to an aluminum supplier] we can show a payback," says Guyer.

More education still needs to be done, however, and the company's "Academy" aids in that process. It has a special training room at its facility where everyone from engineers to building owners, general contractors and architects can come and receive insight into a variety of topics. At least every other week there is a training event, and for those who can't make it to Leesburg, participation is possible via webinar.

Christian Fabian, CEO, proudly reports that as of mid-October, more than 4,000 people had been trained.

Complex Company Offers Simple Solutions

When talking about Rehau Worldwide, Christian Fabian, CEO, says "it's a complex company that offers simple solutions." Following are a few facts on the global supplier of "unlimited polymer solutions" and its various business units.

Employees in North American headquarters: Approximately 130

Employees worldwide: Approximately 15,000 at more than 170 locations worldwide.

Global Regions: Eight

Sales: Not released

North American Regional Offices: The company has regional offices in Canada, the United States, Mexico and Panama to "provide local support and make sure its partners are well serviced."

Divisions: Automotive, Industry (includes edgebanding and tambour doors for furniture, etc.) and Construction (radiant heating and cooling, geothermal, energy transfer piping, etc.).

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REHAU has an in-house testing facility and also offers its customers services such as field mockups and energy modeling.

Christian Fabian, CEO; Brian Guyer, market development manager; and Helmut Grohschaedl, business unit manager, at far left: the company's North American headquarters.

Could Vinyl be the Next Big Thing?

Vinyl products aren't exactly taking the commercial glazing market by storm, but manufacturers of this product category continue to produce products they say have the structural capabilities of aluminum with the strong thermal performance of engineered products. The American Architectural Manufacturers Association (AAMA) has data that indicates that as of 2011 the use of vinyl in storefronts had grown to 1 percent (from zero in data dating to 2009), while vinyl's use in nonresidential shop-fabricated windows sits at 25 percent (up from 23 percent in 2009). The push is there to use this alternative material, but glazing contractors who have been seeing vinyl go into commercial projects indicate that these windows might be becoming more of a standard for multifamily units but not your standard office building.

"We are seeing an increase of vinyl windows in the mid-rise apartment projects in the Denver area," says Craig Carson, vice president of A-1 Glass Inc. in Englewood, Colo. "We don't install or sell vinyl windows, but I have heard from a couple of general contractors that the windows are being sold for as little as

\$11 PSF installed—a number that makes me believe that these are just the garden variety track housing windows."

Dwight Denisiuk, who handles technical sales for Battle Creek Glass Works Inc. in Battle Creek, Mich., has been installing vinyl windows into commercial projects for more than 13 years now, although he says his colleagues have been offering that option even longer. "A lot of our customers are apartment complexes," he says, "and that's just a good fit."

However, Denisiuk also says he's found over the years that the vinyl window manufacturers, in many cases, offer better service in terms of lead times. "The other thing is that [the vinyl window] industry has gotten to where the quality is so much better," he adds.

Bill Sullivan, president and CEO of Heartland Glass Co. Inc. in Waite Park, Minn., says his company has also seen an increasing market for vinyl and/or composite windows for light commercial and multifamily apartment projects. He says, in fact, his company is a dealer for both Vector Vinyl Windows and Andersen Windows, which traditionally have been marketed toward the residential market.

"Prior to the housing market crash we

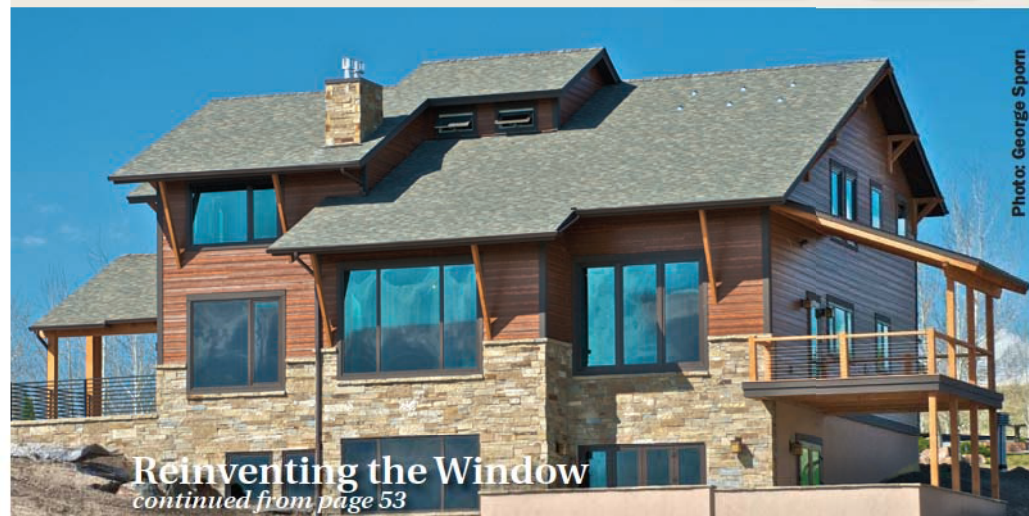
saw isolated projects specifying vinyl or composite products; since the housing market crash, manufactures have increased their marketing efforts in getting their products specified on light commercial projects in an effort to replace the revenues that have been lost in the residential market," says Sullivan. "I believe in the right application there is a market for vinyl and that's why we have added it to our product offerings."

He adds, though, that there are trade-offs.

"The life span for a vinyl product is not as long as an architectural aluminum window, for example," says Sullivan, adding, "We are typically furnishing these types of windows as a compliment to our storefront offerings."

If multifamily units follow their projected course for growth in 2013 and beyond, then more commercial glazing contractors are likely to discover the pros and cons of vinyl windows. —MH

If you're a commercial glazing contractor who has worked with vinyl fenestration materials then we'd like to hear your thoughts: is vinyl the next big thing? Email erogers@glass.com with the subject line "Vinyl" to weigh in.



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Getting “It”

While some in the industry may not be informed as to the potential benefits of vinyl in commercial applications, “there are pockets where we have clearly taken hold,” says Grohschaedl. “In the Pacific Northwest, for example, they know the benefits of vinyl and they are taking advantage of its benefits.”

This stronghold is taking place in both residential and commercial applications. In fact, the company was one of six window companies that exhibited at the Seventh Annual American Passive House Conference held in Denver in October. At this event, suppliers of high-performance building components were able to meet with architects, engineers, passive house consultants and others looking for energy-efficient products.

Guyer adds that its products are not only energy efficient but offer a long product life cycle. “Independent research shows our product will last 40 years,” he says.

The company even has a real-world testing site dubbed, “Rehau Montana ecosmart house,” which is a home with the company’s various products installed so it can be used as a platform for testing and training.

“We’re not typically the lowest guy in town,” Guyer adds. “But if you want performance that is better than the competition, we can offer that product.”

Sealing in Sustainability

Overall, Grohschaedl says those door and window companies that focused on other markets definitely did well through the downturn and, for many, this meant expanding into commercial applications. Rehau’s expertise in this area is especially strong given its broad range of business units and the variety

of offerings it can bring to building owners (*see box page 52*).

“From generating renewable energy using geothermal probes to distributing it efficiently through radiant heating and cooling pipes, our HVAC solutions deliver sustainable comfort. And with our window and door designs, you can create thermally-efficient walls of glass that seal in this sustainability.”

“So we can also talk to an engineer about their waste management and water supply,” says Grohschaedl. “This is one of our biggest advantages. Go to one shop and stay there.”

Rehau also offers other services including field mockups and energy modeling, and it was this service offering that was the main message representatives took to a recent industry trade show in Las Vegas.

“We went in promoting our services rather than our products,” says Guyer. “As a profile supplier we are sending a message that we are supporting our fabricators and that we will bring business to them.”

Commercial Expansion/ Focused Growth

The hospitality industry is one that Rehau is targeting for expansion.

“For this industry, we built a louver right into the window that vents out,” says Grohschaedl. “Typically these are made of aluminum but we used PVC and the hospitality industry has accepted it.” The company worked with Renolit on the film for the louver.

Its products can also work in a variety of other applications and have been tested to meet industry standards. It even has a test lab on site and members of Architectural Test-

How many companies have a real-world testing site? Rehau has its Montana ecosmart house to test its products in real world conditions.

ing Inc. come in to validate the testing.

“To be able to offer our products for government work and blast resistance is a strong offering,” says Grohschaedl.

Fabian adds that he wouldn’t call the commercial market buoyant, not yet anyway, but there are so many opportunities.

“There will always be some investment in the commercial market and there is a lot of potential,” he says.

Fabian has been with the company for more than 20 years in a variety of international roles, and was named CEO in July. He says he has a clear focus and clear model for growth.

“We are well-placed to support this focused strategy,” he says. “Despite a difficult market situation we are poised for growth.”

“We aren’t starting from the drawing board,” he adds. “We have products readily available and we have the experience and people to support that, and we will grow organically. We will then put additional salespeople in to support that growth.”

Those fabricators who also are pushing for increases should also focus on innovation, says Grohschaedl.

“Those who will succeed are those who are open to new things and new business approaches,” he says. “If you don’t have an approach that focuses on innovation and a systems approach you will have a difficult time.” ■

the author



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