

Tiledealer: How do Chinese-made tools compare to American made?

For the most part, Chinese tools are substantially different than American made tools. But our product is the exception.

We manufactured tools for 60 years, so when I went to China to have tools made, I didn't go in with the idea of ordering tools they were already making. I went in with the specs I wanted for the specific tool, and they made it to my specs. So our Chinese made tools are of at least the same quality as our American-made tools, because they're made to our specifications.

Tiledealer: How are you countering the perception that imports are not always the same quality?

We've overcome the perception by telling our story, and by giving our customers and their customers samples of our tools so they can see firsthand the quality, and compare it to tools they're used to buying in the United States.

Tiledealer: How are you managing the manufacturing process there?

Besides traveling over there several times a year, I have an office in Taiwan with English-speaking employees who spend weeks in the factories monitoring the quality of the manufacturing. I have spent almost 20 years working with these Chinese representatives, and when I'm not there, they have the ability to monitor the quality themselves.

They are veterans of the tool business for decades, and I've trained them myself to understand the difference between an ordinary and a quality tool.

Tiledealer: Can you walk us through the product launch process?

The "official" kickoff will take place November 1. We are already selling some of the new products like

Bucket Brush and Wringmaster in select areas. In the initial launch, we will have more than 100 new products available. To get them in the marketplace, we have a network of independent sales reps that will be calling on the wholesale and tile distributors.

In conjunction with our sales reps, we will be attending the contractor events put on regularly at our distributors' facilities. We will continue to exhibit at industry shows like Coverings and Total Solution Plus. And we will be giving samples out for the contractors to use and test. This effort will be supported by extensive advertising.

Another key component will be our packaging and the way we are simplifying the tool selection process, specifically in the price-quality relationship. We know that the marketplace wants tools in varying performance levels -- typically good, better and best. So we have assigned our Primo P1 to the "best" quality, P2 to the "better" quality and P3 to the "good" quality.

The majority of our products are P1 "best," but there are offerings of P2 "better" and P3 "good" quality to meet market demands. We think the result is an attractive, effective and innovative package, especially for the tool industry. This packaging makes it easy for the contractors and distributor counter sales people to identify the relationship between price and quality.

We will continue to offer a private-label tile tool program for the larger distributors that recognize the value of having their company names on quality tools. We have put a fair amount of effort into our website, www.primo-tools.com, to help tell our story, especially [by means of] the product videos.

We still have a lot of work to do, but we are already getting people contacting [Primo Tools] to find out where they can buy products like Wringmaster and Bucket Brush.

Tiledealer: Where has it been smooth, and where has it been rough?

Great question. It has been smooth getting input from distributor and contractor "friends" on things like product offerings, packaging layout and display design. Having been in the industry so long, we know a lot of very smart, helpful people willing to take the time to give us constructive feedback.

It's been rough in the length of time it takes to get it all done. Sort of like the old adage when you start something new, you take your original estimate of time and expense, and double it. It has not been quite that bad, but pretty close.

Tiledealer: What would you do differently next time?

There are always things you can do differently. But I'm pretty happy with how things are turning out, though I wish it could have happened faster.

I've been fortunate to have the background of a family business that has been sustained for 60 years. I grew up in the business, working in the shop floor sweeping and packaging at the age of 13. By the time I was out of school, I started selling to customers, and grew that in the late 1980s into traveling overseas and starting to source products in Asia. I've had 25-plus years to really build that side of the business. So deep down, I knew it would take as long as it did. But I guess I just did not want to admit it to myself.

Tiledealer: How big is the marketplace for tools?

There are various estimates of its size. A couple of issues make it difficult to arrive at an accurate number. Unlike some other industries, we do not have an independent agency [to which] all manufacturers confidentially report their sales, so an aggregate number is available.

And second, there are really several different channels to market

for tile tools: home centers, online sales and wholesale distribution.

At Primo Tools, we are only focusing on the wholesale distribution. So if we can get the same share wholesale distribution we had with Superior Featherweight, I will be very happy.

Tiledealer: How expendable are tools?

It depends on the tool. For the most part, contractors are looking for tools that will last them a long time. They're not looking for tools that will wear out easily or fall apart. They're willing to spend a little more for a tool that will last and ours will do that.

I would say the true contractors are looking for quality more than ever. They want to stretch their dollar farther than they did before.

But your question speaks directly to our rationale for developing the "good, better and best" product offering

Tiledealer: Can you give a few examples of your line?

Our tagline is "Innovative Tools, Professional Results." Because of my history in this industry, I've had contractors on a regular basis contact me with ideas they've come up with for "better mousetraps." I've helped them develop, manufacture, and market those tools. That's a point of differentiation for our company versus others.

One example is our Bucket Brush. The product was invented by Grant Jones, a successful California tile and stone contractor, who wanted a faster and better way to clean mixing buckets. This product will truly revolutionize bucket cleaning. With just a few inches of water and a variable speed drill, the Bucket Brush eliminates the tedious and time-consuming hand-cleaning process.

WringMaster is another innovative product developed to make cleanup of newly installed grout faster and easier. Steve Putnik, an Australian stone installer, is the inventor. He came up with a fast

I believe there is a huge opportunity in today's marketplace to do something innovative and different with tools, and second, I can't help myself, tools are in my blood.

and efficient system to rinse and clean grout sponge floats. While there are mop-and-bucket grout cleanup systems on the market, there is nothing like Wringmaster.

The wringing system attaches to virtually any three-gallon or five-gallon bucket with a few twists of the handles. That's one of the Wringmaster differences. Contractors can line up several buckets with clean rinse water and simply transfer the wringing system to another bucket when the water gets dirty. This saves a tremendous amount of time. The other really cool thing is that the opposing rollers get the sponges much cleaner and drier than other roller systems, and much, much drier than does hand wringing.

Tiledealer: In today's economy, is the tool marketplace faring any better than tile or than other tools?

That question I really can't answer.

But with tile tools, even if it is not necessarily a good idea, a contractor can possibly "stretch" the use of a worn tool until he replaces it. So in today's difficult economy, I would say, overall, tools may be doing a little worse than tile. That said, I believe the tile tool marketplace is healthier than the market for other construction-oriented tools. I believe 100 percent that right now there is a greater market for rehabbing and remodeling than there is for new

construction, and that the rehab and remodeling market is growing.

Tiledealer: So you have already rolled out the private-labeled idea to customers?

Yes, we have. We started going to some of the larger distributors in the U.S. that we've known for years, and talked to them about a tile tool program.

Tiledealer: How has it been received?

That's been fairly well received. With the flexibility we have in our factory, we can produce tile tools with the distributors' logos either molded into the soft grip handles of the trowels and floats, or the logos can simply be on packaging and labeling. That's how we started. There was something of a test of the concept before we rolled out with our own line of Primo Tools.

Tiledealer: Are there other private-label related products in the marketplace?

There are not other private-label companies doing it the way we do it, at least to the best of my knowledge.

Tiledealer: Where would you like Primo Tools to be in five years?

Well, as stated in our name Primo, we would like to be in the number one position in the wholesale distribution channel. And I would base that on both tool sales volume and reputation.

Relationships in the industry are very important, and both my partner and I value and enjoy the relationships we have developed over the years. So five years from now, I would expect to see us working hard, being very successful and having fun working with our distributor and contractor friends. **TD**

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