

# ROTO

## SUPER DESIGN IDEAS



When we think about design in rotational molding there are so many elements that enhance not only the function of the product, but the look of the product and its versatility. Below, Dru Laws from Seljan Company discusses the use of granite material in rotomolded products.

## Granites: A Vendor Dilemma

by R. Dru Laws, Seljan Company

For most rotomolders, material procurement is crucial to overall success. To keep project bids competitive and continue winning business we must carefully control the costs of everything that goes into our products. Historically this has meant we attempt to become master negotiators and will stop at nothing to reduce material costs when possible. Novice purchasers may even try to pit their suppliers against each other in a continuous bidding war, which never ends, and no one ever wins.

### Antagonistic Purchasing Model

When you apply this antagonistic purchasing model to non-commodity materials, you're really playing with fire. Because the way granites behave (or don't behave) during processing can make them very un-commodity-like.

Here, I'd like to share an abbreviated story of how I evolved to a more strategic level of procurement, and what this has done for my business.

### The Granite Dilemma

The granite industry in general has some special considerations. It's not very big



Seljan's 42-gallon dometop trash receptacle

because not too many molders use it (and the ones who do don't buy a lot of volume). Of course there are a few massive companies that are buying tons of granites, but for the most part molders don't buy a lot of granite. This can make purchasing granites a discouraging event. As a molder, your small volume may not inspire the greatest of

service. And pricing can get ridiculous because of our low purchase quantities. This entire granite "dilemma" is frustrating for the buyer and also frustrating for the supplier who needs to take care of small customers who buy only a little at a time. But when granite is done well, the final product looks so great it's well worth finding a better way.

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## An Opportune Market Gap

All of this unfulfilled need on the part of smaller-volume granite buyers created a market gap. And there have been a few suppliers who noticed it, understood the potential upside, and made commitments to serving the granite market. I, fortunately, was involved with one of these suppliers from the early stages of their development. Unlike other suppliers who simply added granite materials to their product offering, Winsell took a more focused approach by making granites their only product offering.

## Working to Earn My Business

Most companies I've worked at have used at least three different granite suppliers, which were typically distributors. When I began working at the Seljan Company (Lake Mills, Wisconsin) the situation was the same. As a result of previous supply issues, one of these suppliers was dismissed my first week on the job. When it was down to just two distributors, one of them encouraged me to try working directly with their suppliers,



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Seljan makes a wide variety of planters

which was Winsell. Even though it meant potentially losing my business, this distributor said I should really check them out!

So I asked Winsell to match a particular granite that I knew would be a challenge. We went back and forth several times, showing samples to my customer along the way, and Winsell just kept at it until we obtained an approval. As we worked, I noticed something strange happening: my new granite supplier actually cared about working to earn my business!

## Makes An Enormous Difference

Fast forward to today, and now I purchase 100% of my granites from Winsell. This transition from using multiple companies to using one company has been a bit of a journey but it's been a good one. Having a supplier who has skin in the game makes an enormous difference and today we enjoy:

- A very small number of quality issues
- A supplier who is super responsive
- Immediate action whenever there is a problem

I like buying from a guy who eats, drinks, and sleeps granites, because that's the kind of vendor I want working for me.

## Finally...Consistency

As we all know, granites can sometimes be a nightmare in processing, and I don't enjoy that at all. Now that I have a supplier who's working in my best interests, I have a partner who refines their process so that my products look better without me having to tinker around with things. Now I can achieve consistency. My days of granite troubleshooting are over.

## Seljan makes a wide variety of planters A Special Recipe

We've also taken a very direct approach regarding dilution of granite materials. It's very common for rotomolders to dilute granites with non-granite, natural material. However, different molders use a different amount of natural material to water it down. That's always been a concern for me



Strong Spa Cobblestone

## "To solve the Granite Dilemma it took a clean-slate approach."

because, suppose the magic recipe is to use 80% granite with 20% natural material, and that gives me the effect that I want. Sometimes we'd see inconsistencies in the way operators interpret this. They might actually get it backwards and use 20% granite and 80% natural and then they'd make a lot of product incorrectly. For this reason suppliers often offer to premix to our specifications. With my new partner/supplier I said, "Look, I'm going to dilute your granites, just so you know. And I'm going to use your product 50-50 always. Because nobody can mess up 50-50. If they do it in the wrong order, it's still 50-50." Because we have a mutually beneficial partnership, this special request is delivered, no problems.

But, you may say, is it really unusual to fulfill a customer's request? Here's my experience. Other suppliers would say "This is what we provide. This is what you have to buy. We're not going to do

anything custom." Normally they have certain granites on the shelf, and that's what you get to choose from. Actually this makes good sense in the old school business model of straight-up supply and demand. I had often found it easier to purchase granite from a competitor than it was to purchase from a supplier.

## The Clean-Slate Approach

To solve the Granite Dilemma, it took a clean-slate approach. Now I work with a supplier whose entire business focus is on granite, day in and day out. This means today I have a partner who has a vested interest in helping me grow my business so I can grow my granite orders. It sure beats the old bidding wars.

My granite journey with Winsell is not about granites. And it's certainly not about Seljan and Winsell. It's about forging business relationships the right way. It's about finding vendors (and customers) who complement your business model and ethics. It's about being in sync with your supply chain. This journey was not unique to Seljan Company, but it certainly has been fruitful. Fruitful enough that I am at different stages of the same journey for many of my other raw material needs. **R**