

Women in Flooring

Ann Wicander: Fifth-generation success in cork, underlayments

By Lindsay Baillie

Ann Wicander, president of WE Cork, represents the fifth generation of her family to be involved in the cork industry. Wicander's journey began with her father, who headed the branch of the family's cork company in Switzerland, where Wicander was born. "We were there for 11 years, during which time my father gave my older brothers and me lots of opportunity to earn extra money by gluing samples on brochures," Wicander recalled. "He would pay us by piece and quality."

Wicander recalled the turbulent fourth generation of the family business—a time when her father sold his shares of Wicanders to remaining family members and started a competitive business. The original family business was later sold out of the family to a large Portuguese manufacturer. A few years later Wicander and her family moved to the United States and established what is now called WE Cork. During that time, Wicander would occasionally accompany her father to trade shows.

"After University, he asked if I would be interested in going to California and exploring the sound control market for our new WECU Soundless products, which were doing extremely well in the new condo market that had sprouted during the late '70s, early '80s in Florida," Wicander said. "His package included \$50/day for food, hotel and car; compensation was 100% commission."

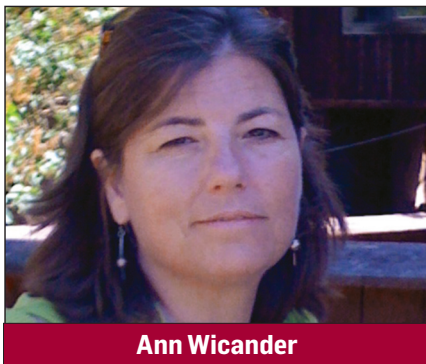
"After eight weeks, two sales, much rejection and virtually no income, I took a position as a sales rep for a veterinary pharmaceutical distributor in Connecticut," she added. "Three years later, in 1990, my father offered me another opportunity, and I, a bit wiser, negotiated for a more industry-competitive package."

From her early start gluing samples to exploring the sound

control market, Wicander's journey to becoming president of WE Cork was marked by many ups and downs in the economy, market conditions and with respect to personnel. She initially started in sales and rose to the position of marketing manager before her father split the sales territories. She was elevated to the position of president of the Western division in 1995, although she technically ran both divisions despite her new title. In 1998 Wicander took the reins as president of the entire company.

As president, Wicander has helped WE Cork expand within the flooring industry. With a shifted focus toward the flooring division, she has headed numerous product launches. "When I first entered the industry, the majority of our business was underlayment and other products outside of the flooring industry. I have since been very focused on the flooring segment and have incorporated new technologies in developing our collections. Our Serenity collection is a perfect example; the high-definition print technology—which has for years given ceramic tile new life—offers our customers the comfort, quiet, warm and sustainable solution which cork has always offered, under the cloak of wood and custom visuals which appeal to the mainstream."

Wicander was clear that her shift in focus toward the flooring segment has not stopped WE Cork from working with underlayment. "[It] is still a big part of our business. We're still looking for new applications for our products. We have an LVT underlayment named Silently, which grew out of the LVT market and has been fantastic for us. In recognizing where the market is going, I see what it needs and I'd like to think I'm pretty quick



Ann Wicander

to address those needs."

To that end, WE Cork is meticulous when introducing new products. "We put a lot of work into making sure our products are ready for the market," Wicander said, referring to the consequences associated with product misfires. "Bad news travels much faster than good news."

Traits for success

Wicander describes herself as an "on-the-ground" type of person. Throughout her day-to-day she is most happy talking to people, going to trade shows and traveling. Luckily for her, no two workdays are the same.

"If I am at the office, my day may entail corresponding with customers about products and programs, discussing marketing updates and changes with our design team, receiving updates and requests from salespeople and, of course, reviewing the financials," she explained.

"Much of my time is spent on the road calling on prospective customers, providing support to our distributors, traveling to Europe where the new technologies and designs are incorporated as well as going to trade shows."

With all the work that Wicander does, it can be hard to find downtime. While achieving the right work-life balance can be challenging, she strives to keep it all in perspective. "This is a challenge for us all, but I do subscribe to the belief that you should work hard and play hard. My big release is fox hunting on horseback. I also go eventing, which is similar to a triathlon on a horse. I have friends who help keep my horses fit, and then I ride whenever I can."

As a woman in a male-dominated industry, Wicander said she hasn't felt much adversity and believes her formative years have had a significant impact on her current position. "I was the third child with two older brothers and a neighborhood that was primarily all boys," she recalled. "Furthermore, my parents treated my younger sister and I the same as my brothers; we all had to do the dishes and we all had to help stack wood. The expectations were the same, regardless of gender. This would prepare me for the future in a male-dominated industry. I never saw any

roadblocks, only opportunities."

Wicander hopes a shift will bring more women into similar positions like hers. "There certainly has been a larger influence by women in the design and marketing segment; there now just needs to be more representation on the managerial side. This will come in time."

Her advice to other women in the industry is straightforward. "Make sure you are prepared for your meetings; know your product or service; honor your word and promises; and be persistent."

This advice is not only self-practiced but has been shared with others at WE Cork. "She taught me a lot in business—how to work with salespeople, distributors and how to keep the business going," said Diane Farrell, office manager. "She really knows what she's doing."

It's that same work ethic and laser focus on professionalism that Wicander plans to employ to propel the company forward. "My plan is to continue in the path I am following now," she said. "Adapt new technologies to help cork increase its footprint and continue to educate the distributor, dealer, architect and designer about the unmatched virtues of WE Cork products. As we in the cork industry currently represent a small speck in the flooring industry, my work will never end."



Ann Wicander enjoys spending time in the field, working closely with suppliers, retailers and distributors. She is shown here meeting with visitors at the WE Cork booth at Surfaces 2016.