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SIZZLE AWARDS

EXHIBITOR Magazine's 21st Annual Sizzle Awards

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Sand and Deliver

Hoping to improve product awareness and bolster booth traffic, the Amerimix brand of preblended mortar devises a data-driven integrated program that bests the previous year's lead count by 156 percent and doubles its goal for total impressions.

By Linda Armstrong

Stone masons aren't exactly early adopters. They tend to do things as they've always been done, using skills and techniques that have been passed down for generations. In fact, while masonry has been employed to erect everything from the Taj Mahal to the Great Wall of China, the craft isn't all that different now than it was in the days of King Tut — well, minus the focus on tomb construction and petroglyph panoramas. As one might expect, then, convincing masons to adopt a new type of mortar is like persuading Mario Batali to substitute zucchini noodles for his handmade pasta. Yet the Amerimix brand of preblended mortar faced this exact challenge at the World of Concrete in 2018.

Traditionally, masons have used a general-purpose mortar mix that typically involves cement, lime, sand, and varying amounts of water. With this method, a sand pile is often dumped at the job site, and for the duration of the project (which could be anywhere from hours to years), workers mix the four ingredients to create the mortar. The sand is often exposed to wind erosion, absorbs precipitation, and quickly becomes contaminated with debris, including everything from other aggregates to animal feces. (Can you

say "giant litter box"?) Plus, given the four-part mixing process, worker errors and inconsistencies abound. And although this method appears to cost less than a premixed product up front, considerable sand is wasted due to erosion and runoff, and moving it between various locations and shoveling it around on the job site contributes to additional loss.

While conventional mortar methodology has weathered the ages, it's currently neither the most consistent nor cost-effective option according to Amerimix. Compared to traditional sand-mixing methods, the company's preblended mortars, stuccos, grouts, and specialty cements are combined only with

water, a process that lessens the amount of measuring and variations in material consistency and decreases the risk of worker error and mixing disparities. Similarly, it arrives in single or bulk packaging, virtually eliminating runoff, erosion, and movement-related product loss at a construction site.

So when the rubber meets the road, Amerimix believes its mortar saves time and money, and the product contributes to a higher quality and more consistent final construction. Nevertheless, masons change methodologies less frequently than Halle Berry changes hair styles, so therein lies the rub.



Problems Piling Up

Challenging the foundations of an eons-old profession, however, was just the tip of the iceberg for Amerimix. Oldcastle Architectural Inc., a CRH plc company, purchased the Amerimix brand in 2007, and according to Joey Peters, senior brand manager at Oldcastle Architectural, there were serious marketing-related challenges straight out of the gate.

"When we acquired the Amerimix brand, it was more of a regional offering and had never developed its own marketing strategy," he says. "In certain parts of the country, people knew the brand, but elsewhere we were invisible. Even where we had a footing, we were a distant second to our competitors." And these foes weren't small potatoes. We're talking the likes of Quikrete, a household name for everyone from masons to weekend DIY warriors.

Name recognition had long been a sore spot, and the company made few strides after the purchase, a factor that Gretchen Turner, trade show manager at Oldcastle Architectural, attributes to a lack of manpower. "I was hired roughly 11 months ago as the company's first ever national trade show manager," she says. "Prior to this time, brand managers had to handle events on top of their existing duties. And when planning trade shows, there was an attitude of 'let's do the best we can to simply get through this.' In effect, the brand had been understandably neglected in terms of marketing."

To make matters worse, Amerimix's booth had begun to resemble the Marrakesh medina. "Prior to 2018, we stuffed the booth with products, handed out collateral, and hoped for the best," Peters says. "The show was a check-off item versus an integral part of our marketing mix."

INTEGRATED PROGRAM

Exhibitor: Oldcastle Architectural Inc., a CRH plc company (Amerimix brand)
Creative/Production: Blue Sky Exhibits, Marietta, GA, 404-983-5050, www.blueskyexhibits.com

Creative: FitzysnowmanStudios, Boston, 781-249-1494, www.fitzysnowman.com; Interrupt LLC, Sylvania, OH, 419-724-9900, www.interruptdelivers.com

Show: World of Concrete, 2018

Budget: \$100,000 – \$199,000

Goals:

- ▶ Increase leads by 50 percent compared to 2017 World of Concrete results.
- ▶ Generate 750,000 impressions.
- ▶ Secure press mentions for the first time.

Results:

- ▶ Topped 2017 lead results by 156 percent.
- ▶ Scored a total of 1.5 million impressions.
- ▶ Produced five press mentions.



Given the lack of engagement activities and promotions, exhibit traffic was abysmal, and the stand's location within the Las Vegas Convention Center only exacerbated its shortcomings. "There's a masonry section in the venue's West Hall, so from a categorization standpoint, it made sense to select a booth space there," Turner says. "But the location hindered our efforts, as the area doesn't draw as much traffic as other halls."

Brand and location challenges aside, Amerimix also faced hurdles with regard to its target market, as masons comprise a relatively small percentage of the WOC audience. "We want to talk to mason contractors, as opposed to the average construction professional," Peters says. "Of the show's attendees, roughly one in six are true masons. So any successful strategy had to attract masons and subtly filter out general tradespeople."

Going into WOC, then, Amerimix had a bucket loader full of challenges and less than \$200,000 to surmount them. But with Turner on board and

optimism on the upswing, the marketing team set several lofty goals. It hoped to devise some kind of mason-centric integrated program that would boost leads by a whopping 50 percent, produce 750,000 impressions, and generate significant press coverage for the first time in company history.

Laying the Foundation

Pairing up with Blue Sky Exhibits and creative agency Interrupt LLC, the Amerimix team immediately focused on what it felt mattered most: providing value to customers. As such, it brainstormed for a strategy to illustrate product benefits in a manner that would speak directly to this audience.

After talking with customers and internal salespeople, the team discovered that most masons were unaware of some critical product attributes: cost and time savings. "Clearly, our product saves customers money and time compared to the old sand-pile-and-lime method," Peters says. "In the past, though, nobody had presented these metrics to attendees in a manner and language they could immediately grasp and appreciate."

Thus, the creative team settled on an integrated campaign aptly named Ditch the Sand Pile. It would illustrate how the old way of doing things was both inefficient and expensive, and it would feature easily digestible data points and masonry-specific imagery. The team also set to work on creating the perfect blend of traffic-building tactics and face-to-face educational interactions, all in hopes of telling the Amerimix story and driving attendee and press attention.

In addition to crafting a killer theme, however, the team made a brilliant pre-show modification: It switched exhibit halls. "We made a pretty bold move and relocated to the South Hall for 2018," Turner says. "It was a gamble, especially since the

West Hall was home to most masonry exhibitors. But we felt changing locations would offer us a much better chance of meeting our goals."

And in one final stroke of pre-show genius, Amerimix devised a partnership with EZG Manufacturing, which offers the Mobile Mud Hog on-site mortar, grout, and concrete mixer. Amerimix purchased a top-of-the-line Mobile Mud Hog, the Lamborghini of mixing machines, and planned to display it in its booth and give it away via a drawing at the end of the show. In addition to serving as a big-ticket giveaway, its presence would lure in the masonry crowd and prompt general contractors to self-select out of the booth experience.

In exchange for displaying the mixer in its booth, Amerimix convinced EZG to promote the drawing via word of mouth and signage in its stand in the West Hall. "So this one tactic would help us specifically attract masons to the exhibit, provide a couldn't-miss in-booth focal point, and give us a presence in the West Hall," Turner says. "It was a simple but key part of our strategy."

Sand-Aid Treatment

The first attendee-facing element of the campaign was a series of targeted print ads Amerimix placed in various industry publications, some of which were also distributed at WOC. Those ads featured the Ditch the Sand Pile slogan, an image of a mason loading sand into a mixer, and the Amerimix logo paired with the words "Stop wasting time. Mix 50% faster with pre-blended mortar."

Similarly themed social-media and email missives, which went out at regular intervals before the show, directed readers to a special landing page: www.ditchthesandpile.com. Here they discovered bite-sized data nuggets regarding the speed and



The Amerimix brand's valuable giveaway, a fire-engine-red Mobile Mud Hog mixing machine, stood front and center in its exhibit at the World of Concrete show.

cost savings of Amerimix versus traditional mortars and a video offering an in-the-field comparison illustrating the minimal product lost with Amerimix versus sand-pile methods. The page also allowed visitors to request on-site product demos and free samples.

Once at the show, attendees couldn't miss Amerimix's outdoor activation just 50 yards from the hall's main entrance. Leased from show management, the 8-by-8-foot space held a branded pop-up tent, a massive pile of sand, and Sean Fitzpatrick of Fitzysnowman Studios, who worked tirelessly to magically transform the sand dune into a massive sculpture during the course of the show. The resulting two-part monument depicted a mason laboriously shoveling sand while another mason, who'd apparently used Amerimix instead of the traditional sand-based option, was already halfway through construction of a cinder-block wall. Along with the firm's logo, the sand sculpture featured the campaign's Ditch the Sand Pile slogan carved into the front corner. Nearby signage offered a photo of the bright-red Mobile Mud Hog and text directing people to the Amerimix booth where they could enter to win the prized possession.

Eager to enter the drawing, masons beelined to Amerimix's 20-by-40-foot island space, where the previous Moroccan souk had been transformed into more of an open Italian piazza. The airy layout was capped by a suspended white-fabric box bearing the Amerimix logo and a secondary sign featuring the words "Mix less. Save more. Build big." Beneath the structure rested the Mobile Mud Hog — a roughly \$12,000 piece of finery any mason would covet.

The remainder of the ground-level space was divided into four stations, each of which included graphics with bold, masonry-related images and simple text that drove home the benefits of Amerimix in easy-to-digest data nuggets. For example, one graphic offered a photo of a weary mason shoveling sand along with the text "Stop wasting time in the sand pile. Get Amerimix." Another graphic echoed the pre-show ad's "mix 50% faster" message and included images of masons laying bricks.

The graphics and exhibitry were also part of a four-part passport-style activity. "As people entered the booth, we gave each of them a branded punch card, which once completed via four punches would serve as their

entry into the Mobile Mud Hog drawing," Peters says. Then, guided by a staffer, attendees visited three areas of the booth before making their way back to a central reception desk for the fourth and final experience.

One punch-card station illustrated the time- and quality-related pitfalls typically associated with sand piles. Here, designers positioned a roughly 2-by-4-foot mound of sand and filled it with debris, including everything from cigarette butts to gum wrappers. Meanwhile, staffers stacked two neat, comparatively clean bags of Amerimix next to the dirty heap. As a tongue-in-cheek topper for the sand pile, staff added an animatronic cat, which periodically moved its head and meowed to generate attention — and drive home the litter-box point.

In addition, a 42-inch monitor broadcast animated infographics that served as talking points for staffers. The messaging and ensuing conversations provided metrics highlighting the problems of on-site sand piles, including the estimated amount of lost time and materials along with data regarding decreased end-product consistency and quality.

Another section provided both individual- and bulk-size product displays along with a monitor positioned atop a cinder-block wall. Here, discussions and video content centered on how masons can lay up to 30 percent more blocks with Amerimix compared to traditional mortars.

The third station comprised a mortar and trowel demo, permitting visitors to get hands on with the product. While also acting as an aisle-side traffic draw, the demo helped illustrate the consistency of premixed mortar and gave seeing-is-believing masons a chance to manipulate it firsthand.

Finally, after visitors had earned three punches on their cards, staffers

led them to the reception desk. Immediately behind it, designers located a storage space covered in graphics that read "Kick ass service in every batch." Here, staffers discussed the above-and-beyond service Amerimix offers as part of every product order. They also instructed attendees to write their contact info on, or attach business cards to, the punch cards, and then collected the cards and added them to the post-show drawing. As a token of appreciation for attendees' time, staff gave each visitor a comfy, job-site-appropriate T-shirt bearing the Amerimix logo and Ditch the Sand Pile slogan as well as a branded neck shade, which attaches to a construction hat and shields the wearer's neck.

Piles of Payback

The T-shirt and neck-shade giveaways signaled the end of attendees' in-booth encounter, and aside from some social-media posts and tweets to draw people to the exhibit, they rounded out Amerimix's at-show tactics.

Of the 260 booth visitors that completed the punch-card activity, 223 were masons and thus hot leads. This figure tops Amerimix's 2017 results by 156 percent, as the Marrakesh medina approach previously scored a paltry

87 leads. Amerimix also estimates that 195 additional people had substantive conversations in the booth but didn't fully complete the punch-card activity. So while they didn't hear the entire Amerimix product story, they were still considered potential leads, bringing the total number of visitors with whom staff had in-depth conversations to approximately 418, a figure almost five times greater than the firm's 2017 tally.

Amerimix's impression and press results were equally inspiring. The 2018 efforts resulted in 1.5 million impressions, twice its goal and leagues beyond the 25,000 impressions made in 2017. And while the company hadn't previously received any major news coverage, it scored a whopping five coveted press mentions as a result of WOC 2018.

According to one Sizzle Awards judge, "Amerimix connected with the audience because it identified their pain points and showed in numeric, easy-to-understand terms how the product addresses them. It was a modest campaign, but it offered a potent theme, indoor and outdoor experiences, press and social-media outreach, and even an animatronic cat. You can't beat that."

Peters appreciated the way the campaign took his competitors by surprise. "Aside from aesthetic changes, the booth really hadn't changed in the last 10 years," he says. "This program put customer benefits front and center and changed the game."

So it just goes to show that if you're willing to alter your marketing efforts and put customers' needs first, you can change a few games — and maybe even alter some ancient industry mainstays. And while masons may never become early adopters, it appears they're willing to shift a little with the sands of time. ■

Adding to the Heap

Amerimix ultimately collected 156 percent more leads at World of Concrete 2018 than it did at the previous year's show.

