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JANUARY 2026

# TileLetter

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**IN COMMERCIAL AND  
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The magazine of the National Tile Contractors Association


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# WHAT THEY SAY...



I realize that other NTCA members probably feel the same love for the industry and artistry in tile - and we all share that feeling - NTCA is a home for that family. People communicate, help each other, support each other, and celebrate each other's accomplishments.

*Alex Tsituk, Owner, Trimworks, Inc.,  
Shrewsbury, MA*

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# TileLetter

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A network diagram with various icons connected by lines. The icons include a speech bubble, gears, a smartphone, a laptop, a '4' in a circle, a 'www' in a circle, a '@' symbol, and a smartphone with a checkmark. The background is a teal-to-green gradient.

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## Meet the 2026 NTCA Training Team



**Matt Weiner**  
Training Department  
Manager



**Randy Fleming**



**Chad Jones**



**Kate Koerber**



**Bill O'Connor**



**Amber Fox**  
Director of Strategic  
Initiatives



**Anthony Oliver**



**Robb Roderick**



**Alex Smith**

## 2026 NTCA Workshop Programs \*

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### FEBRUARY

- 9 **Floor & Decor** – Miami Gardens, FL
- 10 **Daltile** – Virginia Beach, VA
- 10 **Floor & Decor** – Georgetown, TX
- 10 **Floor & Decor** – West Palm Beach, FL
- 11 **Daltile** – Dulles, VA
- 11 **Floor & Decor** – Orlando, FL
- 12 **Floor & Decor** – Parkville, MD
- 12 **Daltile** – Seminole, FL
- 17 **Daltile** – Redding, CA
- 17 **Daltile** – Tempe, AZ
- 17 **Daltile** – Wilmington, NC
- 18 **Emser Tile** – San Diego, CA
- 18 **Arizona Tile** – Roseville, CA

- 19 **The Tile Shop** – Dunwoody, GA

- 19 **Daltile** – Los Angeles, CA

- 19 **Floor & Decor** – San Leandro, CA

- 24 **Daltile** – Pittsburgh, PA

### MARCH

- 3 **Floor & Decor** – Portland, OR

- 3 **Floor & Decor** – Toms River, NJ

- 3 **Floor & Decor** – Springfield, NJ

- 4 **Daltile** – Mechanicsburg, PA

- 4 **Floor & Decor** – Seattle, WA

- 5 **Daltile** – Rochester, NY

- 10 **Southeastern Tile Connection** – Mills River, NC

- 10 **Daltile** – Ventura, CA

- 10 **Daltile** – Woburn, MA

- 11 **Floor & Decor** – Knoxville, TN

- 11 **Floor & Decor** – Bellingham, MA

- 12 **Daltile** – Hartford, CT

- 12 **Floor & Decor** – Atlanta, GA

- 17 **Floor & Decor** – Farmingdale, NY

- 24 **Floor & Decor** – Las Vegas, NV

- 25 **The Tile Shop** – Lombard, IL

- 26 **Daltile** – Kentwood, MI

- 31 **Floor & Decor** – Devon, PA

## 2026 NTCA Regional Programs \*

Register online at [NTCATraining.com](http://NTCATraining.com)

### FEBRUARY

- 5 **Floor & Decor** – Cedar Park, TX
- 5 **Daltile** – Atlanta, GA
- 12 **Floor & Decor** – Conyers, GA
- 12 **Floor & Decor** – Live Oak, TX
- 17 **Floor & Decor** – Charlotte, NC
- 19 **Floor & Decor** – El Paso, TX
- 26 **Best Tile of NC, LLC** – Greensboro, NC
- 26 **Floor & Decor** – Phoenix, AZ

### MARCH

- 5 **Mosaic Tile** – Alexandria, VA
- 5 **ESG Gallery** – Las Vegas, NV
- 12 **Floor & Decor** – Turnersville, NJ
- 12 **Caesarstone** – Sun Valley, CA
- 19 **Floor & Decor** – Avenel, NJ
- 19 **Floor & Decor** – Roseville, CA
- 26 **Floor & Decor** – Shrewsbury, MA
- 26 **Daltile** – Tualatin, OR



NTCA maintains an ongoing list of training events through an interactive map on its website. Check it out by scanning.



*\*Dates are subject to change*

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# The perfect foundation for 2026

*“It’s a funny thing about life, once you begin to take note of the things you are grateful for, you begin to lose sight of the things that you lack.”*

– GERMANY KENT



Lesley Goddin

It’s a chilly November morning a week before Thanksgiving. I’m sitting in my office, looking out at an aspen tree glowing gold in a last blaze of glory before the winter hits. But—because magazines work so far ahead to get you content in a timely manner—here I am writing about January.

I know I talked about gratitude in my November letter, but it seems to me that it’s also a good springboard to a brand-new year. And here’s why: I am grateful for this industry and the passion, dedication, and artistry that is constantly on display.

I’m grateful for the technical expertise that is shared—and that you can read about in our Ask the Experts and Technical stories.

I’m grateful for the stellar craftsmanship displayed by our tile setters—and I’m happy to bring you a story about recipients of the 2025 NTCA Tile Setter Craftspersons of the Year in this issue.

I’m thankful for the indispensable tools and materials our cover sponsor RTC Products offers the industry and the opportunity to learn more about the evolution of that company in Bart Bettiga’s One-to-One story this month.

I’m grateful for TSP speaker Bruce Zwicker’s expert analysis of our economy and how it’s shaping up in 2026, and for the zeal and creativity exhibited by Anna McCortney and Sam Robinson of Ultimate Floors and how they have embraced this industry. They are presenters at TISE this month, so don’t miss their exploration of mentorship as the new marketing while you are there.

I’m also grateful to those who are contributing in new

ways. In this issue, NTCA Member and Ambassador Lucas Hendrickson of Northwest Artisan Tile Company is creating cartoons for us that relate to the monthly theme, bringing some lightheartedness into the issue. And look for Mindset Matters monthly installments too. A group of caring industry professionals developed a Mindset Matters Facebook group last year to support mental wellness and fitness. The monthly installments will share illumination and grounding from the group, starting with this issue.

I’m also deeply grateful to all our sponsors and advertisers who enable us to bring you “training in print” through *TileLetter* and *TileLetter.com*, and to the stellar *TileLetter* and NTCA teams who work tirelessly to support our members and with whom I’ve collaborated over my 20 years as editor.

In our working content calendar, our theme this month is “laying the foundation/substrate prep.” What better foundation could there be but a solid layer of gratitude for all the industry offers? That is reflected on the pages of this magazine and in what NTCA offers tile contractors, installers, and artisans. So, welcome to 2026. May it give you many opportunities to count your own blessings in this industry and in your life as the year unfolds.

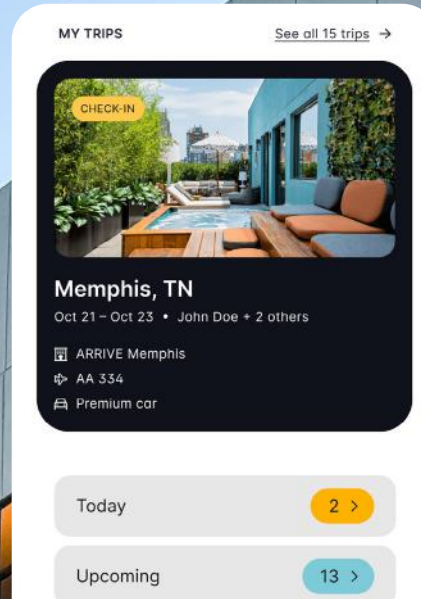
God bless,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lesley". The signature is enclosed within a simple, hand-drawn oval.

Lesley  
lesley@tile-assn.com

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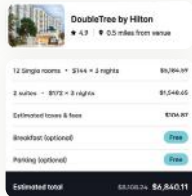
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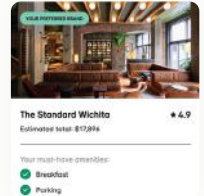
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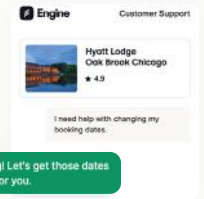
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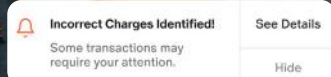
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Rod Owen

# BUSINESS ACUMEN SERIES: PROBLEM-SOLVING

Happy New Year! The holidays are behind us, the decorations are packed away, and it's time to turn the page and get back to building momentum for a great 2026. January always feels like a fresh start, a chance to reset goals, refocus priorities, and put new ideas into motion with renewed energy and optimism.

If you're attending TISE 2026 in Las Vegas this month, make sure to stop by the NTCA booth, which shares space with CTEF in booths 4854 and 6965. I'd love for you to introduce yourself and share what's going on in your business.

Events like TISE are a great reminder that none of us are in this trade alone. We learn and grow best when we connect with one another, sharing challenges, solutions, and lessons learned from the field.

And speaking of planning ahead, be sure to mark your calendars for Coverings 2026, coming up March 30–April 2. It's one of the best opportunities all year to see innovation in action and strengthen the relationships that keep our industry moving forward.

This month we pick up our Business Acumen Series, as we dive into Problem-Solving Acumen: the capacity to analyze complex issues, identify root causes, and develop effective, lasting solutions.

In our line of work, problem-solving isn't optional, it's a daily reality. Jobsite conditions change, schedules shift, materials arrive late, specifications and the scope of work get revised, and sometimes things just don't go as planned. The leaders who stand out aren't the ones who avoid problems; they're the ones who face them head-on with clarity, confidence, and a steady hand.

Strong Problem-Solving Acumen starts with slowing down enough to define the real issue. Too often, we jump straight to a fix without understanding what's truly causing the problem. Ask yourself: is this a materials issue, a process issue, a communication gap, or maybe something in the planning stage that needs to be revisited and improved?

Next, involve your team. The people closest to the work often see things leadership can miss. Encouraging open dialogue not only helps uncover better solutions but also strengthens trust, teamwork, and accountability. Remember, no one learns alone.

Collaboration is one of the most powerful tools we have.

And finally, document your lessons learned.

Every solved problem is a chance to refine your systems, improve your planning, and strengthen your reputation for reliability.

So, as we start this new year, challenge yourself to lead with curiosity, not frustration, when problems arise. Each challenge is an opportunity to grow—for you, your team, and your business. Let's make 2026 a year defined by action, improvement, and practical solutions.

Next month in our series is People Management.

Until next time, stay focused, stay connected, and as always, Educate for Excellence.

Rod Owen  
NTCA President  
rod.owen@ccowen.us

*"The leaders who stand out aren't the ones who avoid problems; they're the ones who face them head-on with clarity, confidence, and a steady hand."*



# ONLINE LEARNING

NTCA University is a comprehensive online platform offering tile installation courses designed for individuals new to the industry or those seeking to refresh their skills. These courses are an excellent resource for training or apprenticeship programs, ensuring that learners are equipped with industry-standard methods and practices before applying their knowledge through hands-on or on-the-job learning. Additionally, these courses are beneficial for sales associates and professionals in other roles within the tile industry, providing valuable insights into the principles and processes of tile installation. NTCA University also features business courses tailored to small business owners. Accessible 24/7 via computer, tablet, or smartphone, NTCA University allows learners the flexibility to study at their convenience.

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The *NTCA Reference Manual* is released annually and a **printed copy is mailed to all active members**. PDF and print are available by visiting the [NTCA Online Store](#).


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# Mentorship is the new marketing

By Anna McCortney, Ultimate Flooring

At the Ultimate Flooring storefront are (l. to r.): Anna McCortney, with 2024 summer interns Jahree (JOG Student Intern) and Sid (JOG Student Intern), along with Sam Robinson and Mike McCortney

By way of introduction, I want to mention I met these two young women at Coverings last year, amidst the numerous NTCA Women in Tile activities and Thriving Minds series offered by NTCA Five-Star Accredited Contractor Gianna Vallefuoco of Vallefuoco Contractors, LLC. Then the August 2025 Artisan issue of TileLetter featured one of Anna and Sam's mosaic creations in the Gallery section, and Sam's creative approach to her high school graduation appeared in the News section. It was also recently announced that they are both Coverings Ambassadors for 2026. Now they are taking their partnership up a notch with their education session in Las Vegas this month, bringing experience and heart to the next generation of flooring and tile.

—LESLEY GODDIN

If there's one thing we've learned in the flooring industry, it's this: success isn't built on products, it's built on people.

Tile, wood, vinyl, stone; every surface we touch comes down to relationships—between installers and retailers, mentors and students, and the people who show up every day to keep this trade alive. When those relationships are strong, everything else follows.

That's the heart behind our upcoming session at The International Surface Event (TISE) 2026: "Mentorship Is the New Marketing."

## A family legacy in tile installation blossoms into flooring store

Our story begins with my uncle, Kurt, who bought a storage unit complex years ago and turned part of it into a flooring store. He started as a tile installer, and his love for the craft quickly became the foundation for a full-fledged business: Ultimate Flooring.

He and his wife, Connie, ran the store for years before retiring. When Kurt sold the complex, my dad, Mike, stepped in to keep the family business going.

At the time, my life looked very different. I had just left an abusive relationship, and I was starting over with a 2-month-old baby. I needed stability; my dad needed help with bookkeeping. So, I joined the business, thinking



Ultimate Flooring was awarded Employer of the Year in April 2025 by Jobs for Ohio Graduates (JOG). Shown are (l. to r.): Rachael Jolly-Kosakowski (JOG Business Engagement Professional), Anna McCortney, and Carolyn French (JOG Work Experience Team Lead).



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At Coverings 2025 are (l. to r.): Matt Welner, NTCA; Scott Carothers, CTEF; Gianna Vallefuoco, Vallefuoco Contractors, LLC; Sam Robinson and Anna McCortney, Ultimate Flooring.

it would just be temporary until life settled down. But as I learned the ropes—meeting customers, talking with reps, helping with installations, figuring out marketing and sales—I found more than a job. I found a purpose. I realized flooring wasn't just about surfaces; it was about building something solid again, both personally and professionally.

**The babysitter who became a leader**

Around that same time, a young woman named Sam Robinson entered my life—first, as my babysitter.

Her mom worked alongside my mom, and Sam was working at the local library while finishing high school. She was responsible, calm, and kind, someone I trusted with my daughter when I was trying to balance new motherhood and a demanding family business.

It didn't take long before Sam was helping out at the store, too. Through Jobs for Ohio Graduates (JOG), she officially joined Ultimate Flooring, filing paperwork, labeling displays, and assisting with small tasks.

But it was clear from the start that she had potential for so much more. Sam listened carefully, asked questions, and wanted to understand the “why” behind everything. Eventually, I pulled her out of the back office and onto the showroom floor—and she thrived.

Fast-forward a few years, and that quiet babysitter now helps run the business with me. She trains new interns, manages customer projects, and represents our store with professionalism, empathy, and drive.

That's mentorship. It's seeing potential where others might not, and helping someone see it in themselves.



Anna McCartney (l.) and Sam Robinson on the job at Ultimate Flooring. Photo: Narrative Digital Media.

### **Mentorship changed everything**

Neither of us started with a plan. I needed help; Sam needed an opportunity. But through mentorship, we both found direction.

That's why we say mentorship is the new marketing—because it changes people, and when people change, your whole business changes.

In a world where everyone is competing for attention, mentorship stands out. It builds loyalty, confidence, and a sense of belonging—three things no ad campaign can buy.

Customers can feel when a team genuinely cares. Interns and new hires stay longer when they're valued. And in an industry struggling to attract young talent, mentorship might just be the missing piece.

### **What mentorship really looks like**

Mentorship isn't a corporate training plan or a fancy HR program. It's personal. It's messy. It's real.



Ultimate Flooring Sales and Showroom Coordinator Sam Robinson (l.) works with a customer. Photo: Narrative Digital Media.

## ■ BUSINESS

For us, it looks like late-night conversations about leadership, standing in a messy warehouse explaining why prep work matters, celebrating wins and learning from losses—together.

Here's what we've learned along the way:

1. **Mentorship starts with trust.** I trusted Sam with my child before I trusted her with customers, and that trust became the foundation for everything.
2. **You don't need a title to mentor.** You just need to care enough to teach. Whether it's a new installer, salesperson, or intern, take the time to explain why something matters.
3. **Mentorship builds culture.** When one person takes the time to teach, others start to do the same. It spreads naturally.
4. **It's a two-way street.** I've learned as much from mentoring Sam as she's learned from me. It's helped me grow as a leader, a mom, and a person.
5. **Mentorship attracts customers.** People want to support companies that invest in others. It's that simple.

### What you'll learn

When we take the stage at TISE 2026, our session won't be about theory. It will be about real life.

We'll share:

- How mentorship transformed our small family business—and how it can transform yours.
- Step-by-step ways to build a mentorship culture, even if you don't have extra time or money.
- How mentorship improves marketing and retention by creating team members who believe in what they do.
- Practical strategies for connecting with schools, trade programs, and youth organizations to grow your workforce.

You'll walk away with ideas you can implement immediately and stories that remind you why this industry is worth investing in.

### From the showroom to the stage

Today, Sam and I lead Ultimate Flooring together. But our work goes beyond our store. Through our platform, "Sam & Anna: Flooring Facts. Real Answers," we're focused on helping others in the industry embrace authenticity, mentorship, and community. Find out more here:

We believe the future of flooring will belong to the companies that build people, not just sell products. That's what our session at TISE is all about: proving that mentorship isn't just good for ethics, it's good business.



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Sam Robinson and Anna McCortney will both be Coverings Ambassadors for 2026.

### The heart of it

Looking back, it's hard to believe how far we've come—a young mom trying to rebuild her life, a teenage babysitter looking for direction, and now, two women standing on a national stage, sharing a story built on second chances, trust, and grit.

We didn't plan it. But mentorship found us, and it's carried us all the way here. Because mentorship doesn't just change one person, it changes *everything*. It turns fear into confidence, work into purpose, and co-workers into family.

Mentorship is the new marketing—not because it sells more; because it means more.

Join us at TISE 2026 to see how mentorship can transform your business, your team, and your impact on the flooring industry. **TL**



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# Steadying the tile industry:

2026 may start market recovery



**W**ith 20 years in the flooring industry in various roles in the U.S. and in Europe, China, Canada, and Brazil as CEO, Board Director, Interim CEO, and an advisor to boards and CEOs, I have experienced many market cycles. At the 2025 Tile Solutions Plus conference, I offered my perspective on the tile industry and my outlook for 2026. There are many uncertainties, but there are reasons to believe the worst is coming to an end. The challenge is managing carefully through the uncertainty until demand recovers.



By Bruce Zwicker,  
Zwicker Advisory

## Three difficult years—though tile held up better than most

Despite optimistic predictions, demand never recovered in 2023, 2024, or 2025. While overall flooring sales in 2025 were down roughly 4%–5% year-to-date, tile demand stayed essentially flat. That is a relative victory. Tile’s share of the total U.S. flooring market is 13%, and in the past few years increased slightly as other product categories declined more sharply.

Looking ahead, tile demand in 2026 is likely to land somewhere between –3% and +3%—essentially a flattish year, with any upside or downside coming from the unknown factors of mortgage rates and consumer confidence. Any meaningful recovery is more likely to come in the second half of 2026.

We may be near the bottom of demand and price. Tile import tariffs have been split among the offshore manufacturer, the importer, and the final customer.

## PRODUCT SHARES OF TOTAL U.S. FLOORING MARKET

Flooring type	2019	2023	2024
Resilient (Including LVT)	23.4%	31.5%	32.2%
Laminate	4.0%	4.7%	4.6%
Wood	11.6%	10.1%	9.4%
Ceramic Tile	12.8%	13.3%	13.5%
Carpet - Roll	21.6%	19.0%	18.2%
Carpet - Tile	11.5%	11.1%	11.2%
Area Rugs	13.0%	8.3%	8.4%
Rubber	2.9%	2.3%	2.5%
Totals	100%	100%	100%

Tile is 13% of U.S. consumption

Tile consumption stable in 2024

Tile’s share has increased slightly because other products’ consumption declined more during market softness than Tile consumption declined

However, domestic producers also need modest price increases after two years of rising costs and price decreases. For the moment, pricing remains competitive and margins are tight across the value chain.

## Imports play a major role

Two-thirds of the tile sold in America is imported. The U.S. does not have enough domestic capacity to meet



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overall demand. Major U.S.-owned domestic manufacturers still have to import a portion of their products, and some domestic factories owned by non-U.S. companies also import in addition to manufacturing products here.

Italy and Spain continue to lead in import value, while imports from Turkey and India have increased significantly in the past eight years. India's imports surged starting in 2022, before slowing in late 2024 due to concerns about anti-dumping petitions.

Tariffs distorted the 2025 market. Some companies built inventory ahead of tariffs, some companies shifted a portion of their import sourcing to new suppliers, and some companies shifted some portion of their purchases to domestic supply. Once tariffs became clearer for European tile imports—at a relatively benign level compared to much worse possible outcomes—uncertainty shifted to other supply countries, such as Mexico, Brazil, and India.

Despite these disruptions, imports will remain essential to the U.S. market, and domestic producers will continue to rely on both their own output and purchases from offshore partners.

### Consolidation everywhere you look

Across the flooring and building products industries' value chain, consolidation continues to reshape the competitive landscape. Mega retailers—Home Depot, Lowe's, Floor & Decor—have grown from holding a 25% share of the residential remodel retail flooring market in 2016 to more than 40% today. Recent acquisitions in building products by Home Depot and Lowe's are an aggressive strategy to access more of the total addressable market with a broader product range and through new and multiple channels to more end markets.

Meanwhile, flooring distribution also continues to consolidate, though deal activity slowed in 2025 compared to the flurry of acquisitions between 2021 and 2023. However, merger and acquisition (M&A) activity will pick up as the market recovers. Private equity remains heavily invested in tile distribution, such as Transom Equity's platform Artivo Surfaces, which combines Virginia Tile, Galleher-Duffy, and Walker Zanger.

Manufacturing M&A has been limited. AHF's purchase of Crossville stands out. Very recently, AHF acquired Wellmade's U.S. LVT plant and Beaulieu acquired Congoleum. The overarching trend is fewer players, larger platforms, and a growing divide between highly capitalized companies and smaller independent businesses.

### A complicated economy—and tile feels it

The U.S. economy presents a confusing picture. GDP and the

### YTD TILE VERSUS OTHER FLOORING TYPES

Flooring Consumption Change	2025 v 2024 YTD %	
	Volume/Units Y-T-D June	Dollars/Value Y-T-D June
Product Categories		
Ceramic Tile	1.1%	0.3%
Luxury Vinyl Tile	2.5%	2.2%
Wood Flooring	-2.3%	-3.5%
<b>Total Flooring</b>	<b>-3.9%</b>	<b>-4.0%</b>
All Other	-5%	-5%

YTD Total Flooring Declined -4% to -5%  
YTD Tile Flat  
LVT growth continues But slower  
Laminate not shown Maybe grew slightly  
Imports grew in first half due to pre-Tariff inventory building

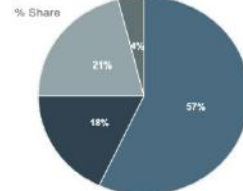
### 2025 TILE CONSUMPTION MAY BE STABILIZED

Year	Quantity (Mil SF)	Value (Mil \$)
2023	2,846 SF	\$4,013
2024	2,700 SF	\$3,749
% Change Full Year 2024 vs 2023	-5.1%	-6.6%
% Change YTD 2025 vs 2024	0.3%	1.1%

2024 Consumption dropped 6.6% in Dollars/Value 5.1% in Quantity/Units  
2025 Year To Date (YTD) Flat But boosted by Pre-Tariff Import inventory Building

### U.S. TILE SALES BY END USE

■ Residential Replacement  
■ Home Renovation  
■ Commercial Replacement



- Commercial is 25% of consumption**
  - 85% of Commercial Tile demand is Replacement
  - Demand has been good longer than expected
  - Pipeline still providing business
  - Slowdown still anticipated
- New Residential is 18% of consumption**
  - Very slow
  - Alternatives take some share from Tile
- Residential Remodel is 57% of Tile Demand**
  - The key to Tile Demand Recovery

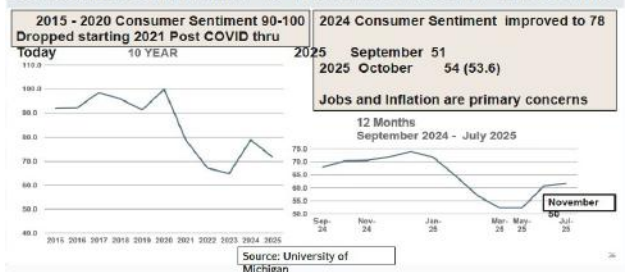
### LIRA - REMODELING ACTIVITY

Leading Indicator of Remodeling Activity – Third Quarter 2025



Remodeling declined drastically mid 2022  
Bounced along the bottom in 2024  
Gradual improvement 2025  
LIRA forecasts slow 2026 after record Q1  
Problem is flooring is a ticket discretionary item Easily postponed

### CONSUMER SENTIMENT 10-YEAR AND RECENT 12 MONTHS



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stock market remain positive, but the prospect of even higher inflation, record-low housing affordability, relatively high mortgage and home equity interest rates, and slowing job growth weigh heavily on consumers.

Commercial is a bright spot, representing 25% of tile demand. It has held up better than many expected due to a healthy project pipeline. But pipeline work eventually runs out, and we may be nearing that point. Thankfully, commercial replacement is strong when there are fewer new projects.

However, housing is the weakest link.

- Existing-home sales are stuck at 4 million units, similar to 2009 levels. This stalls remodeling.
- Over half of homeowners have mortgages at 4% or lower, which means they don't want to move.
- A doubling of the average home price since 2020 and 6% mortgage rates make homes unaffordable.

Residential remodel—about 60% of tile consumption—is the most important driver of tile demand. So, the pivotal issue is consumer sentiment, which averaged 90–100 before COVID. Post-COVID consumer confidence declined to 60–70 and in early November was only 50! This clearly tells the story: consumers remain in a wait-and-see mode.

### Hope for a turnaround

Despite the headwinds, several long-term fundamentals support eventual recovery:

- **Demographics:** Family formation and aging housing stock can drive future demand.
- **Massive homeowner equity:** A powerful engine for remodeling once interest rates drop.
- **Pent-up renovation need:** Years of deferred projects have created a backlog.
- **Mortgage interest rates:** A return to the mid-5% range could reignite home sales.
- **Resilient consumers:** Historically, American consumers bounce back faster than expected.

Morgan Stanley suggests mortgage rates would need to be 5.5% to drive a 5+% increase in existing-home sales and start a recovery of new-home sales. If that happens, 2026 will be a modest recovery in tile demand followed by stronger growth in 2027.

### Guidance for leaders

At the risk of offering advice, I believe these actions are useful during these uncertain times.

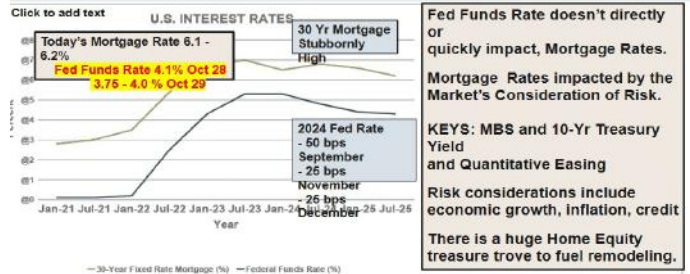
- **Strengthen product differentiation**—large-format, outdoor, and wall tile are growth categories.
- **Be agile with multiple supply options**—both domestic and imported.

### COUNTRY SHARE OF U.S. IMPORTS (DOLLARS/VALUE)

Country of Origin	2014	2017	2020	2023	2024
Italy	35%	34%	31%	28%	29%
Spain	9%	14%	23%	26%	24%
Mexico	16%	10%	11%	11%	13%
India	0%	0%	7%	10%	11%
Turkey (Turkiye)	4%	5%	9%	7%	8%
Brazil	3%	3%	7%	6%	5%
Vietnam	0%	0%	1%	2%	2%
Thailand	0%	0%	1%	1%	1%
Malaysia	0%	0%	1%	1%	1%
Peru	1%	2%	1%	1%	1%
Others (incl China)	31%	32%	6%	5%	5%
<b>China</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>	

China was largest importer with 26% share until cut off  
Italy top Importer in Value/\$  
Spain Import Share grew  
Turkey and Brazil also grew  
India surged 2022-2024  
2024 20% of Units imported  
2025 YTD July Units down - 31%  
Coalition for Fair Trade in Ceramic Tile reopened prior India Anti-Dumping Petition

### INTEREST RATES – FED FUNDS AND MORTGAGE RATE



But home prices will fall.

- **Use a price-for-profit strategy**—marketshare is not always more important than using price as a profit tool.
- **Manage cash carefully**—delay large expenditures until conditions improve.
- **Prepare now for growth or sale of the business**—this takes time. Get expert advice.
- **Above all, invest in your people**—talent is the hardest asset to find and replace.

### Looking toward 2026

The tile industry has endured three difficult years, but it is stabilizing. The key variables—mortgage rates, consumer confidence, and tariff clarity—are moving slowly, but hopefully in the right direction. If no major shocks occur, 2026 may finally represent the beginning of the next upcycle.

As I've said many times to the tile industry: hang in there. We will get to the other side. **TL**

*Bruce Zwicker, Founder and CEO of Zwicker Advisory, has more than 20 years of success growing public, private, and private equity-owned businesses domestically and globally. His experience is across manufacturing, distribution, and retail in the building products sector. He provides customized services in North America and Europe to help CEOs, boards and investors in matters of strategy, governance, executive teams, organization structure, business development, and buying and mergers and acquisitions. He can be reached at 410-903-8357 and Zwicker.bruce2@gmail.com.*

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# Shower systems and connectors help turn SUBFLOOR CHALLENGES into SOLID FOUNDATIONS



By Ken Ballin, CTI #1392,  
CFI #13604, Skyro Floors

*Bostik's CMP LiquiTek™ self leveler in the master bath main area is contained with spray foam and sill seal around the plumbing. This leveler has a very loose consistency and very fast dry time, which moved the project along.*

With 21 counties, a population of just over 9.5 million, a landscape ranging from mountaintops to beachfronts, and the largest remaining Atlantic coastal pine barrens ecosystem


consisting of 14 million acres, the New Jersey peninsula is surrounded on its southern half by barrier islands. It's about a three-hour drive from its northernmost to southernmost point, but an hour before you complete that journey you would pass a little corner of Southern Ocean County by Long Beach Island that I call home.

I specialize in custom tile and hard surface flooring. I am CTI #1392, CFI #13604, and I own Skyro Floors. Most of my clients are second and third homeowners who vacate their summer homes from the beginning of October until Memorial Day weekend, giving me the time I need to leave them with projects they'll love for years to come.

### **Rapid Recess: Brackets and BPC**

This particular project took place in a home where I had already completed all of the other tile work. These last two bathrooms completed the full renovation. Two curbless showers in a beach house that's been renovated more times than I can count proved to be a bigger challenge than expected as substrate prep began. I turned to RTC Products for solutions that would make this project a success.

The guest bath consisted of a simple layout. However, due to obstacles below the subfloor, space was limited. I used Rapid Recess brackets to lower the subfloor. They are designed to provide the necessary depth to install a zero-entry curbless shower and are installed from above the joists, without the use of additional lumber or compromising the structural integrity of the existing framing.



After Bostik's CMP LiquiTek™ leveler was poured and the patch was dry, the uncoupling membrane was installed prior to tiling.



*The master bath linear drain was installed into the Rapid Recess Blind Pipe Connector (BPC) with a custom foam pan.*

Rapid Recess recently introduced an innovative pipe fitting for linear drains, which I used in the master bath on this project. In the past when I've used linear drains, I've had to install a Fernco fitting connecting the drain body to the straight pipe and then make the connection to the trap blindly. This gave me more anxiety than the rest of the project.

With the Rapid Recess Blind Pipe Connector (BPC), I can access the connection from above, and I can connect 2" linear drain pipes to 2" waste lines.

### **Gruen: waterproofing and quick pipe connection**

A linear drain was originally planned for the guest bath, but a point drain was needed due to height issues. I used a mix of Gruen Shower System products with GoBoard® walls and Maxisil MaxiGrab to seal the seams and screws. The Gruen drain bodies come with fabric waterproofing, approximately 4'x6' attached, right from

the factory. The Gru-Connect patented compression fitting connects the Gruen flange to a standard 2" plumbing pipe with no glue needed. This allows the plumber to relocate the pipe and make an effortless connection after the tile installation is completed.

The prep in the guest bath was fairly straightforward. The master bath was where things got interesting. This space had been renovated several times and originally featured a sunken bathtub that was flush with the subfloor. It's been framed over and patched to the point where it's unrecognizable from the original layout.

The subfloor in the area for the new freestanding tub was about 1" out in a 5' span. It got progressively worse as you got closer to the far wall. And since we generally like water to actually go down the drain, some additional prep was required.

From a total thickness of just under 2" down to a feather edge on the opposite side of the room, I used Bostik's CMP

LiquiTek™ to level the area and a combination of spray foam and sill seal to contain the pour. To maintain the same height as the existing hardwood and the rest of the house, I used Bostik UltraRamp™ to transition down from the 1"-high self leveler at this point of the bathroom. I was lucky enough to land a grout joint at the angle change.

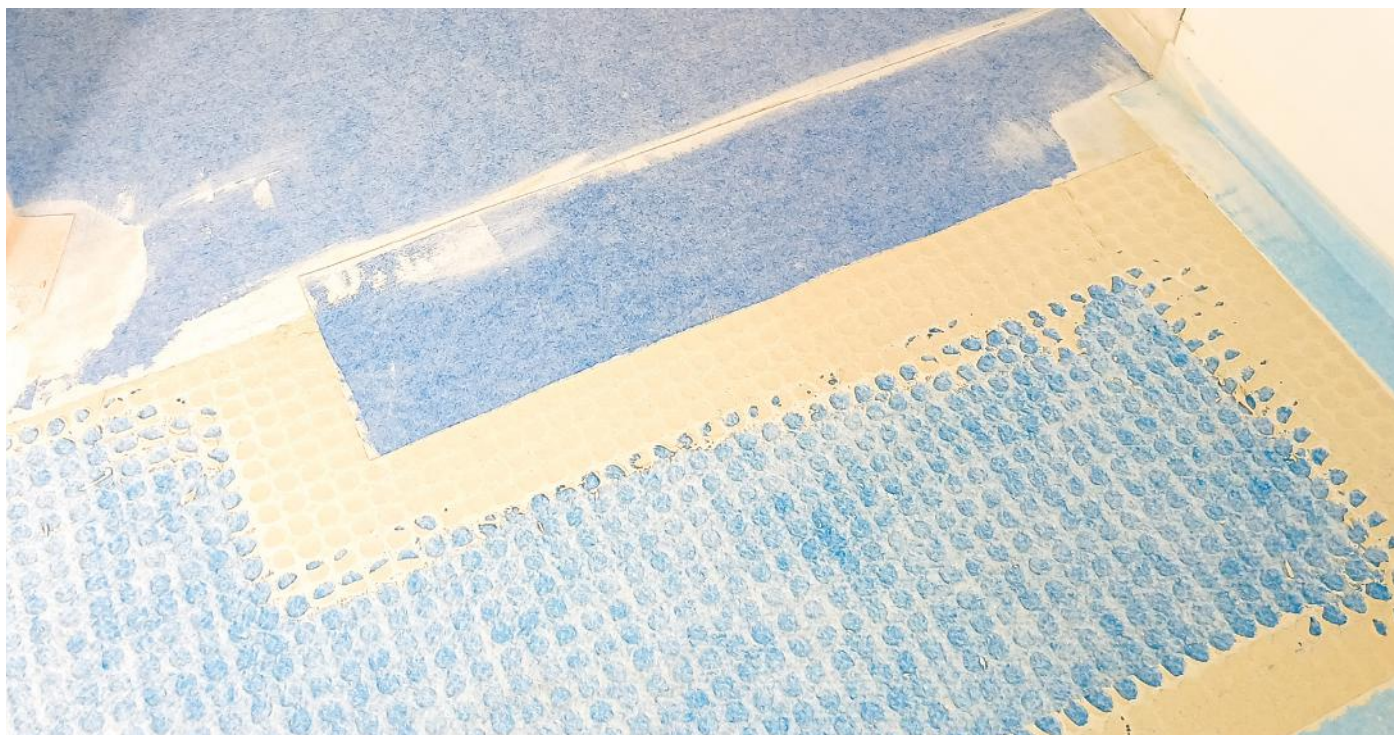


After bringing the subfloor up to industry standards, I gave it a primer coat of Bostik GoldPlus™, diluted 3-to-1, and installed the uncoupling membrane.

The tile selection and layout in both showers were fairly simple: a 12"x24" floor, pebble shower pan, and subway tile wall. This clean and simple look will last for years to come.

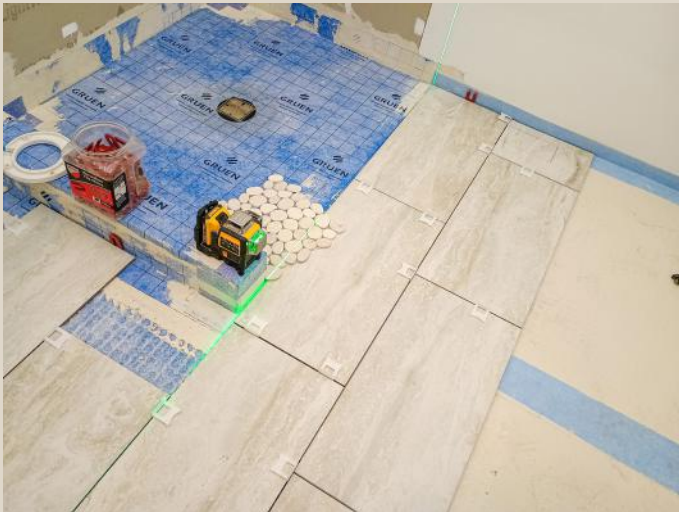


The Gru-Connect fitting in these two bathrooms connects simply by applying pressure into the drain and the pipe. The rubber ridges on the outside of the fitting make the waterproof seal on the inside of the other components.



Fabric waterproofing is from Gruen. The fabric is a bit thicker than I'm used to but was very nice to work with/on.

■ FEATURE



*In the guest bath, the Gruen point drain with tileable grate and integrated fabric waterproofing provides a factory seal and flexible options for any project. Gruen Shower Systems are available from RTC Products.*



*The tileable grate gave a clean look to the master bath shower, and the linear drain—used with the Rapid Recess Blind Pipe Connector (BPC)—made for a seamless install.*

Tile selections and setting materials will vary from project to project, but the most important element of any tile installation will always be what's underneath — the parts that lie below all the pretty things, the parts that support the pretty things, the parts that build the foundation.

Thank you to all the companies that provided the parts that built the foundation on this project, especially RTC Products for supplying the Rapid Recess elements and Gruen Shower Systems. Much appreciation also for providing the support needed to make all those parts work together seamlessly. **TL**



**EXHIBITING**






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# ONE to ONE



## BILL RUSSO

Bill Russo, President of RTC Products



## STEVE SPRUNG

Steve Sprung, COO of RTC Products

# RTC Products celebrates 25 years of INDUSTRY INNOVATION AND SERVICE



*In the One-to-One column, NTCA Executive Director Bart Bettiga interviews industry leaders about pertinent topics.*



Steve Sprung (r.) hams it up at the LATICRETE Customer Appreciation Event at TISE 2020, with (l. to r.) Christopher Rachel, the late Dan Hecox, Brad Denny and Amber Hunter.

**B**ill Russo, experienced in telemarketing and sales of industrial tools, entered the tile industry in the early 1990s as a partner at Midwest Trade Tools. When the partnership ended, Russo formed RTC Products in 2000. This company continues to be one of the leading tool and allied products businesses in our industry.

Steve Sprung, who originally worked for Midwest Trade Tool and rejoined the company in 2012 after leaving the business for several years, is the COO of RTC Products. Russo continues as President.

### **How challenging was it to build a tile products company selling one product, and how did your business evolve from that?**

**Russo:** The high-quality grout sponge was where it began. That one item kept us afloat until we started adding more items. I met the leaders of the Raimondi Company around 1999 at the ITSE Tile Show in Miami. We created a partnership—I formed RTC Products and marketed it as DBA Raimondi Tools USA. That partnership ended about 15 years ago and we just kept the RTC Products name.

### **Steve, how has your role evolved now that you are COO of this growing company?**

**Sprung:** I had a background in tile sales and liked working with tile contractors. I left the company for a few years and rejoined them when the

# MARAZZI

SETTING TILE TRENDS NOT FOLLOWING THEM.



PHOTO FEATURES COTTO REVIVAL™



Bill Russo (r.) at the RTC booth, Coverings 2017.



The Russo Trading Company booth at Coverings 2023. The company has standardized new branding—the RTC Products brand is replacing Russo Trading Company for clearer messaging across the board.

Raimondi partnership was ending. I have a strong interest in operations, and it has been a great ride helping Bill build a successful team here at RTC Products.

**How challenging was it to develop a whole new offering of products when you parted ways with Raimondi USA?**

**Russo:** We had a 12-year relationship with Raimondi and had success developing a program for independent distributors during that time. Economic challenges in 2008–2009, along with philosophical differences on how I envisioned running the business, led to that separation.

**Along with your 25-year celebration, you are rebranding the company. Tell us about that.**

**Sprung:** The marketing group we hired interviewed many of our distributor customers. It discovered that many of our customers thought Russo Trading Company and RTC Products were different companies. We had been using the logo and marketing on our website in a way that added to that confusion.

We are developing a consistent message now focusing on RTC Products as the brand name. The idea is to rebrand onto one platform so that there's one known name, and start operating as RTC Products. We want to give that name visibility so that there is no question of who we are.

**How are you developing products and systems that fit your strategy of offering quality products to the trade?**

**Russo:** We don't have a main method for sourcing. A lot of it has to do with being in this business for as long as I have, just knowing other people. We like to provide something unique to the industry. While we have a lot of what I call me-too items—a trowel is a me-too item; you need those to fill your line—we've been able to find some unique things as well. For instance, we have this electric sponge machine that rinses out the sponge and wrings it out. This was well received at Tile Solutions Plus. We introduced this product years ago, but it was discontinued. I found a local source for it again, and now it seems like it's going to be a very popular new introduction for us.

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## ■ ONE-TO-ONE

I think RTC Products has its finger on the pulse of the business and the industry's tools. Another example is when we developed an excellent line of porcelain-tile drill bits and high-quality diamond blades to accompany them. We hit the porcelain products and created the solutions for that hard porcelain at the right time. That's what launched us, in a sense. And we always try to keep up with technology trends.

### **What is a current trend you are looking at and the tools or system solutions to support it?**

**Russo:** A lot of tile is coming in larger formats and different thicknesses. We're aligning ourselves with related partners to offer a stronger portfolio as well. Lately, we've been finding more good partners. We're taking those products and advertising under their name, but we're the distributor for that product, for example.

### **You have the distributor supply chain and you have salespeople who are engaged with contractors all around the country. Do you welcome entrepreneurs who have a great idea but don't know how to take it to market?**

**Sprung:** Yes, this is something we are open to exploring. Even if they know how to get it manufactured, they need an avenue to get it to market, and they want to use us as that avenue. Probably a handful of times a month somebody will reach out with a product idea. Some of them are great, and some of them aren't.

### **Do you manufacture products in your program or are you mainly agents for distribution who source these products from around the world?**

**Russo:** We don't manufacture, but we have several patents and we work with our partners to produce the tools and systems.

Recently with the tariffs, we've moved a lot of our products to the States. Our Spin Doctor Tile Leveling System is all made in the United States. We're looking at a lot of changes in that to avoid the tariffs.

### **What other products that you sell have been well received by distributors?**

**Russo:** Spin Doctor Tile Leveling products are still very popular. We were really the first to come up with the most successful spin system where the cap spins on a threaded post. It's either that or the wedge. It seems like a lot of our distributors have both.

### **What opportunities in training, either from the NTCA or other sources, do you take advantage of, and how is this important to your strategy?**

**Sprung:** After COVID, we saw an increasing opportunity to participate in events. Ever since COVID, we get daily emails inviting us to participate in training events. NTCA is doing way more events than ever, and our salespeople support those programs as well.

Our investment in salespeople is paying off, because the independent distributor needs to build that relationship with a professional representative they can trust. It opens

## Some of RTC's most popular offerings

### **4BN Sigma cutter**

The Series 4 is the flagship from Sigma Italia and is the pinnacle of manual tile cutters. Boasting a complete redesign from its predecessor, it offers maximum cutting performance and practicality. Years of research and improvement have merged to create a new line that combines innovation, precision mechanics, and design to offer a unique cutting experience.



### **Spin Doctor Lippage Control System**

Achieving a flush surface from one tile to another has never been easier. With the Spin Doctor Lippage Control System, you can spin the leveling cap down with ease to the tile surface in seconds. Other systems require tools, the use of both hands, or awkward repetitive motions, which can cause user fatigue when installing large-format tile.



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## ■ ONE-TO-ONE

the door for us to get our products displayed and seen in many different markets.

### How does RTC Products help the distributor with merchandising and sales support?

**Sprung:** We have no minimum stock expectation. We do offer a free prepaid program, which guides clients into X amount of product to start. We provide display shelves based on what their orders look like. Typically, we install these units that handle all of our small-scale products. This includes our leveling system, trowels, blades, sponges, etc., not tile cutters and saws. We get the PO, we put the displays in, we ship everything out. Our outside representative goes into the store and sets up the displays with the customer. It's really working out well.

### What is new on the horizon for RTC Products?

**Russo:** We offer bridge saws and rail saws and many products that support gauged porcelain tile panel products. We also have one of the best pedestal systems out there; one of the simplest systems. Many of our competitors offer multiple stocking levels of pedestals for different heights. Our system offers all the heights in one unit.

**Sprung:** It took us a few years to create a partnership with the pedestal system manufacturer we preferred. By that time a lot of systems had hit the market, but most of the companies weren't stocking the system yet. It can be challenging to



Steve Sprung (c.) at the RTC booth at a Coverings show with retired NTCA Training Director Mark Heinlein (l.) and NTCA Technical Trainer Robb Roderick.



Bill Russo (r.) shows the RTC tool merchandiser to the late Steve Slutzah at TSP 2012 in Indian Wells, California

### Trowel Brush Edge Cleaning Tool

The Trowel Brush Edge Cleaning Tool offers a safe, quick, and easy solution for cleaning trowels, effectively eliminating the issues of shredded sponges and cut fingers. Its stiff nylon bristles are designed to agitate material left behind on the tool, saving both time and money compared to traditional methods. By keeping your hands at a safe distance from sharp notches, it provides superior control while preventing injury. Additionally, the tool features an integrated scraper to tackle stubborn debris and ensure a thorough clean all the way to the spine.



### WrinGo sponge machine

The WrinGo sponge machine from RTC reduces hand fatigue and carpal tunnel risk by providing a consistently damp sponge for grout cleaning. Its patented squirrel cage and nylon rollers remove sediment and excess water to prevent pigment washout. Durable and efficient, this stainless steel machine fits standard buckets, includes a 25' cord, and features an integrated safety switch to lower labor costs.





The current RTC sales force.

inventory some of these systems when they might have lines that have 25, 30, 35 different height pedestals, depending on what you need.

The product that we were looking at solved all of that because it was modular. You only needed that one size. How do I as a dealer stock, you know, 60 different SKUs? How much warehouse space do I have? So, I said, let's let this ride for a year, let people start feeling some of those pinch points.

By the time we worked out the relationship with this manufacturer, we brought it in under their brand name and started distributing it across the U.S.

**Well, congratulations on 25 years of success, and clearly you have developed a team focused on helping you achieve your goals.**

**Russo:** Thank you so much. We have supported NTCA and the industry shows like Coverings and Tile Solutions Plus, and your training events whenever we can. We are

poised to support a growing distributor customer base and look forward to servicing them with exceptional support and service. **TL**





# NTCA honors stellar craftsmanship **IN COMMERCIAL AND RESIDENTIAL SECTORS**

*By Lesley Goddin, Editorial Director and Senior Writer, and Elena Grant, Publisher*

**T**his year's NTCA Tile Setter Craftsperson of the Year Awards were announced at the Tile Solutions Plus Conference in November. The awards recognize two outstanding professionals for their exceptional craftsmanship, leadership, and commitment to the trade.

Will Richardet of Richardet Floor Covering was honored as the 2025 Commercial Tile Setter Craftsperson of the Year and Mark Christensen of Tarkus Tile, Inc. was named the Residential Tile Setter Craftsperson of the Year. Both honorees will be formally recognized this month at the Ambassador Reception on January 26, 2026, during The International Surface Event (TISE) in Las Vegas.

## **Commercial Tile Setter Craftsperson of the Year: Will Richardet**

Will Richardet began his career at Richardet Floor Covering while still in high school. Today, as a journeyman installer, he has successfully managed hundreds of commercial projects, consistently meeting budgets and exceeding client expectations. Known for his creativity, attention to detail, and problem-solving skills, Richardet is always eager to learn about new tools and products. When the right tool doesn't exist, he creates one—he holds a patent for an adjustable screed that improves both efficiency and precision on the job.

Todd Huber, COO of Richardet Floor Covering, calls Richardet a dedicated mentor who enjoys working with apprentices, often telling them, "Training is like climbing a ladder. You take one rung at a time." Huber noted that no matter where an apprentice is on the ladder, Richardet meets them at their level, helping them progress toward

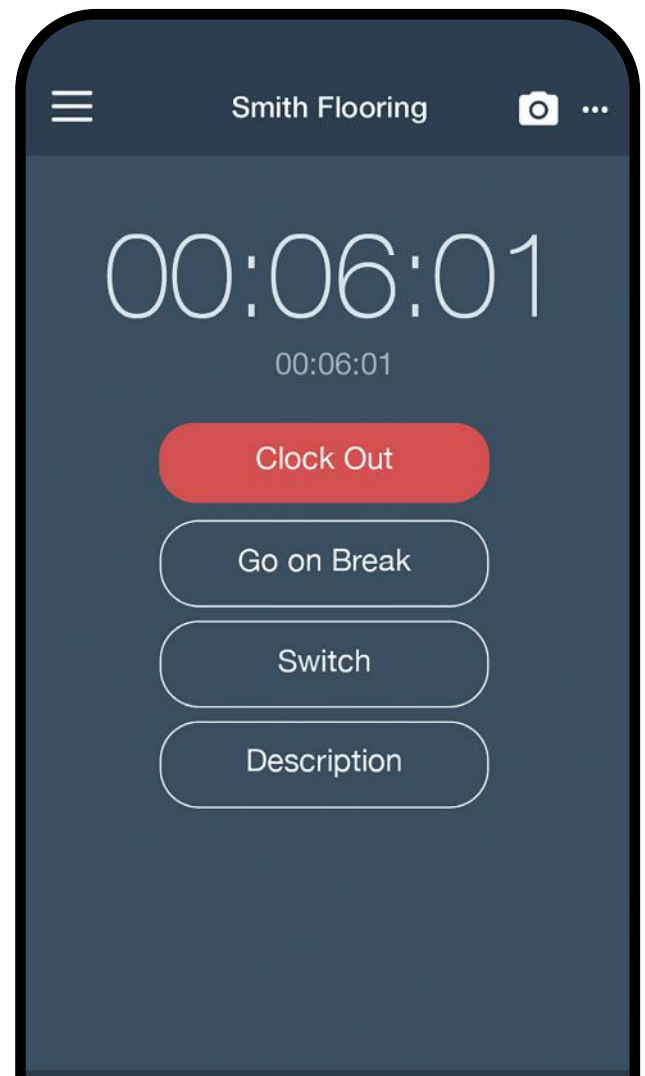
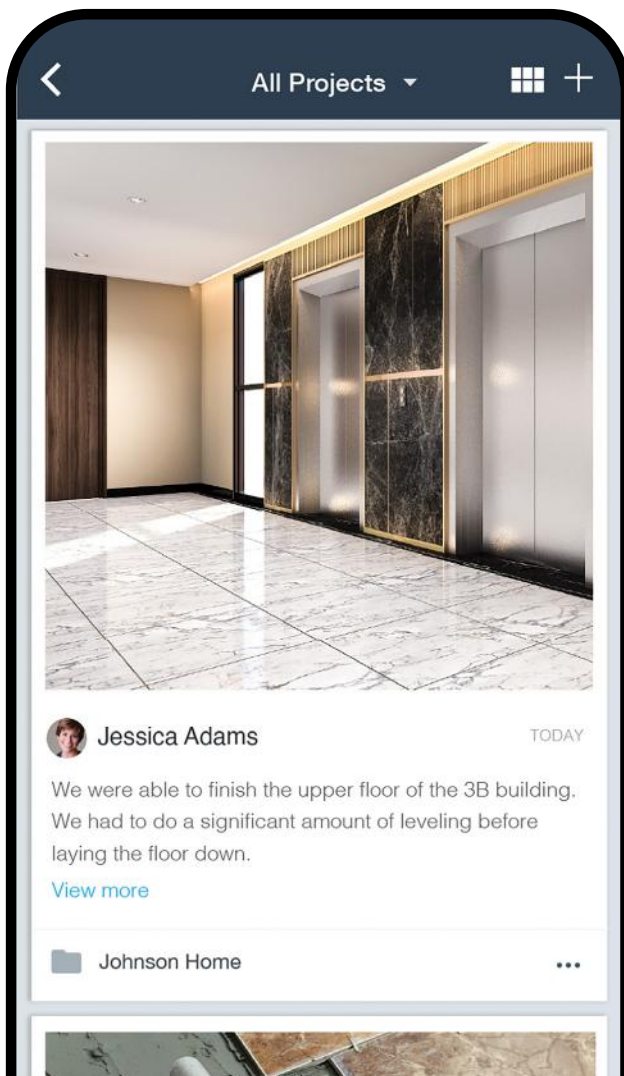
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becoming journeyman tile setters. He also actively supports local workforce development initiatives.

Richardet said, “My foundation is rooted in hard work, attention to detail, and a dedication to producing quality results that stand the test of time. Being a craftsman means taking pride in doing things the right way, even when no one’s watching, and also knowing that every project, big or small, represents me long after I’ve left the site.”

He advises budding craftspeople to stay curious, humble, and ready to learn, even from people who might have less experience. “Don’t be afraid to make mistakes,” he said. “Just make sure you learn from them. Most importantly... care about the work. Show up on time, pay attention to the details, and don’t cut corners. This mindset will take you further than talent alone ever could.”

By focusing on being reliable and producing quality work day after day, respect and opportunities will come naturally, he said. “We’re all still learning. The moment you think you know everything about the trade is the moment your growth stops.”

### Pool project

The tiling phase of this project began with Richardet verifying all grades with the shotcrete provider to ensure a flawless final finish. Precise mud-bed preparation enabled the roll-off ledge to sit perfectly level for even waterflow. The 1”x1” mosaic tiles used on the roll-off edges required meticulous cutting and placement to

achieve a smooth, clean arc. Richardet managed every aspect of the project—from layout and materials to scheduling and coordination—while also navigating the added complexity of an integrated water feature.

The completed work was highly successful, satisfying both the contractor and the owner. Building on this and other successful projects, Richardet Floor Covering is working with a leading pool architectural firm to establish industry standards for mud-bed specifications, material selections, waterline band considerations, and L701 requirements to improve pool quality and reduce unnecessary buildup.

### Exterior winery fireplace

This custom exterior fireplace was designed as a seamless architectural focal point for a winery, requiring both structural precision and artistic craftsmanship. Stonework rose continuously from the lower level through the roofline, demanding exact layout and alignment to maintain uninterrupted coursing. Every technical element—substrate prep, anchoring, flashing, material selection, and installation sequencing—was engineered for durability in harsh conditions.

Detailed attention to jointing, bonding patterns, and corners ensured both structural integrity and refined aesthetics. Each stone was intentionally placed to create a natural, cohesive feature. The project set the benchmark for the “Richardet Way,” defining the company’s standard for precision, durability, and design excellence.



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## Residential Craftsperson of the Year: Mark Christensen

With over 25 years of tile setting experience, Mark Christensen first entered the flooring industry helping his father install carpet. In 1999, he shifted his focus exclusively to tile and founded Tarkus Tile, Inc.

Driven by a passion for learning, Christensen continually seeks to improve his craft. In 2010, through in-depth discussions on the John Bridge Forum, he mastered the art of mudwork, a skill he now shares through educational YouTube videos.

Christensen thrives on technical challenges, often taking on the most intricate projects with enthusiasm. His exceptional workmanship has earned him three Coverings Installation & Design (CID) Awards, recognizing excellence in tile installation and design.

“Mark is known for mentoring the next generation,” said Jeff Occhipinti, Owner of NTCA Five-Star Accredited Contractor Columbia River Tile & Stone. “He works alongside his sons, passing down skills and values, and shares his knowledge openly with other installers online and in person. He is honest about his personal journey and challenges, which have inspired many people to keep going and improve their own work.”

Christensen called the tile craft “metaphorical to life” in the opportunities it offers to create something new, learn something new, improve from mistakes, and overcome hardships through meticulous troubleshooting and hard work each day. He said he pours his “heart into trying to create beauty that will stand the test of time.”

He cautions aspiring craftspeople that you can’t rush the process, and advises patience as the process unfolds. “Don’t put your focus on ‘likes’ and followers and awards and recognition—and try not to get caught up in comparison,” he said. “What really matters are the things you do and the way you treat your work and the people around you when nobody is watching.”

He added, “Slow down and put in the work. Take the time to try to improve every day. Build that foundation of skills and knowledge and integrity so strong that it just eventually becomes who you are at the core. You are your brand. The journey is the destination.”

### Indoor spa and steam room

This 2019–2020 project marked a personal and professional turning point, pushing Christensen far beyond his comfort zone during eight months of intensive, technically-demanding work. He tackled this project only a year into recovery from addiction, and his confidence was



tenuous. “I had something to prove to myself,” he said of the project that continually took him out of his comfort zone and produced small victories and failures.

He and his sons floated and tiled over 3,500 sq. ft. of walls—primarily a large indoor pool and steam room finished with 24”x48” tile. The project’s daily challenges, hard work, and steady progress restored his skills, strengthened his business, and profoundly reshaped the course of his life.

### Mid-century Modern bath renovation

This bathroom from a 2023 mid-century modern renovation is one of Christensen’s all-time favorites. “I love geeking out on detailed mud prep work, and this one was all mud walls and floor,” he said. He slowed down and poured his time into prep, having fun making “it as nice as I could.” He said this fun and gratifying project “encompassed everything I love about this craft.” **TL**





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# Laying the foundations FOR SUCCESS THROUGH SUBSTRATE PREP

By Scott Carothers,  
Academic Director, CTEF



**M**any folks, including some tile installers, believe that properly preparing the substrate is a waste of time and money. However, substrate prep, when properly completed, can actually allow the project to be completed in less time while yielding superior quality and less aggravation.



A 10' straightedge reveals a large low spot on a concrete floor.

## Tools of the trade

Straight edges have been the go-to tools for determining and establishing a flat—and possibly a level—substrate on horizontal substrates. However, the lasers available today offer a faster and more accurate method to determine the required plane. On vertical substrates, a straightedge will determine the flatness of the wall. When a straightedge is used in combination with a level, a plumb wall can be achieved.

## Substrate conditions

The Substrate Requirements section of the *Tile Council of North America (TCNA) Handbook* decrees that for ceramic tile installations, the maximum allowable floor

member live load and concentrated load deflection for framed floor system shall not exceed  $L/360$ , where “L” is the clear span length of the supporting member per applicable building code. For natural-stone tile installations, the maximum allowable floor member live load and concentrated loads deflection for wood framed floor systems shall not exceed  $L/720$ .

The next consideration to be made when viewing the substrate is determining if any contaminants are present. This list may include a host of items, which we will investigate.

- Existing tile (well bonded or questionable)
- Remaining thinset after the tile removal
- Adhesive residue and existing asbestos-laden vinyl tile
- Paint
- Curing compound, wax or other coating products

**Existing tile:** Previously installed ceramic tile that is well bonded to the substrate can be successfully covered with new tile if the face is clean—meaning no surface contaminants—and flat. However, always consult the mortar manufacturer for suitability and recommendations.

How do you determine if the existing ceramic or porcelain tile is well bonded to the substrate? An easy test can be completed by tapping on the face of the tile with a tapping tool, a smooth metal object, or a golf ball. If there is a tonal difference between solid and hollow sounding areas, further investigation is needed since some waterproofing, crack isolation, or uncoupling membranes may exhibit a different tone when tapped. However, this tone differential does not indicate a lack of bond. To be certain if a tonal difference indicates an unbonded tile, a destructive test of removing a tile may be needed.



On a properly prepared tile floor, troweled-on patch can flatten the substrate to ready it for new tile.

**Remaining thinset after tile removal:** The removal of old thin-set mortar can be a challenge. If the mortar is well bonded and there are no height restrictions, the use of a troweled-on patch or an ANSI A118.16 Flowable Hydraulic Cement Underlayment (FHCU), with the appropriate primer, can provide a flat substrate. If the thinset must be removed, various grinding equipment options should be investigated. If grinding is the selected option, always follow the Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s (OSHA) guidelines for controlling dust and protecting everyone on the site.



Tapping on the surface of the tile can reveal unbonded tile. Alternatively, it could be a membrane that yields a different tone. Photo courtesy of Dragonfly Tile & Stone Works, Inc.

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**Keraflex Membrane Mortar** is designed for use as a mortar over and, when appropriate, under uncoupling, crack-isolation, sound-reduction and waterproofing membranes.

For more information about MAPEI's Keraflex® Membrane Mortar, scan to visit or contact your local sales representative.



*Old thinset can safely be removed when using the correct tools to control the dust created in the process.*

### **Adhesive residue/asbestos-laden vinyl tiles:**

Old adhesive (latex or cut-back) residue can be removed by wet scraping to minimize dust. Always check with the adhesive manufacturer to determine the base of the adhesive prior to removing it. Certain old adhesives, specifically cut-back, contain asbestos that, if encountered, should be removed by a qualified, licensed, and insured contractor. Also, if the adhesive is removed by another contractor, be certain that the substrate will allow a proper bond with the setting material. Some contractors use solvents or strippers to remove the



*A Flowable Hydraulic Cement Underlayment (FHCU) applied over the appropriate primer can provide an acceptably flat floor.*



[&]



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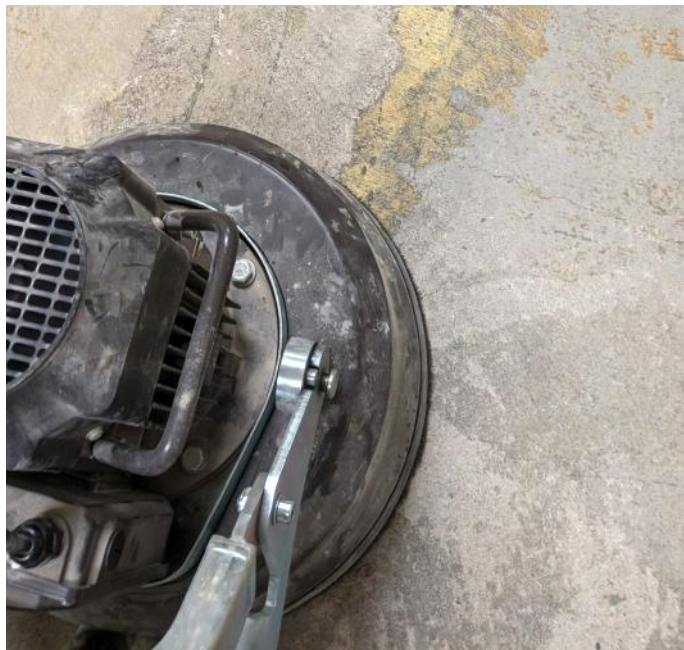
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Using acceptable grinding practices, old latex adhesive can be successfully removed to allow a substrate that is ready for new tile. Photo courtesy of Nichols Tile and Terrazzo, Inc.

adhesive, which may eliminate the residue but could leave an invisible coating that will inhibit the thinset from bonding to the substrate. Use the water drop test to be certain that the substrate will accept moisture and provide an adequate bond.

**Paint:** Existing paint can be tricky. Some mortar manufacturers may allow their thinset to be applied over paint, but be extremely careful. The thinset may bond to the paint, but the bond of the paint to the substrate is questionable. The best method here is to completely remove the paint by shot blasting or bead blasting. Using solvents or strippers to remove the paint is not acceptable.

**Curing compounds, wax, or other coating products:** Do not use acid to clean or prep a concrete substrate—ever! Acids provide inconsistent results and have little effect on most sealers, coatings, curing compounds, adhesives, oil, or grease.

Additionally, if acid is selected to “clean” the concrete and is rinsed twice with clear water, the problem is only beginning. When the rinse water evaporates, it leaves the acid crystals on the surface, and they will reactivate when they encounter water. That water could be another rinse, but most likely it will be water mixed with thin-set mortar. The re-energized acid will begin to compromise the mortar and lead to a potential failure.



Rather than removing the existing tile, proper prep work allows for a tile-over-tile installation when utilizing the manufacturer’s recommendations.

### Substrate corrections

Checking the substrate for flatness, both horizontal and vertical, is critical to success. Depending on the tile size, the flatness requirements differ.

- Per ANSI A108.02-4.2.1, “For tiles with all edges shorter than 15” (0.38 m), the substrate shall have a maximum allowable variation of 1/4” in 10’ (6 mm in 3 m).”
- ANSI A108.02-4.2.2 states, “For tiles with at least one edge 15” (0.38 m) or longer, the substrate shall have a maximum permissible variation of 1/8” in 10’ (3 mm in 3 m).”

If the substrate does not meet these requirements, a troweled-on patch may be sufficient, but if the horizontal surface requires extensive areas of repair, the use of an ANSI A118.16 FHCU with the appropriate primer applied prior to the substrate can provide excellent results.

When the specifications call for the substrate to be flat and level, the use of an FHCU with primer will do an excellent job. To ensure the level plane, use hot glue to fasten the clip of a lippage control system to the substrate. Set up a laser at the desired height, and use diagonal pliers to cut the clips at the proper elevation. The FHCU is then flowed to the top of the clip.

This list, although not completely comprehensive, will yield satisfactory results and save time. Think about it before taking shortcuts. **TL**

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Visit [www.tile-assn.com/page/NTCA\\_apprenticeship\\_guidelines](http://www.tile-assn.com/page/NTCA_apprenticeship_guidelines) for more info.



# ASK THE EXPERTS

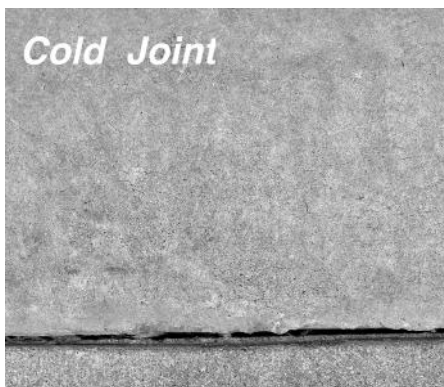
Ask the Experts Q&As are culled from member inquiries to NTCA's Technical Team. To become a member and make use of personal, targeted answers from NTCA's Technical Team to your installation questions, contact Jim Olson at [jim@tile-assn.com](mailto:jim@tile-assn.com).



## Understanding JOINTS and CRACKS LEADS TO EFFECTIVE TREATMENT



Saw Cut



Cold Joint



Shrinkage Crack

### QUESTION

I am a member of the NTCA and recently looked at a tile installation project in an older home. The previous flooring had already been removed, and I noticed several cracks in the concrete slab along with a few other joints. I'm not sure if these are saw cuts, cold joints, shrinkage cracks, or something else.

My initial thought was to use a crack-isolation membrane, but I'm not sure if that is enough or if there are other considerations I should be looking at before I proceed. Can you please advise?

### ANSWER

Thank you for your question—this is a common situation, and it's good that you are slowing down to evaluate the slab before installing tile. Understanding

the type of crack or joint is essential because not all slab movement can be treated the same way, and the wrong assumption can lead to a failure under your installation.

Cracks and joints fall into several categories, each with different requirements:

- **Control (saw-cut) joints:** These are planned and intentionally cut to control shrinkage cracking.
- **Cold joints:** Places where two concrete pours meet and are not monolithic. Cold joints are considered structural joints.
- **Shrinkage cracks:** Typically random, narrow cracks that result from curing stresses.
- **Structural/active cracks:** Cracks that exhibit vertical displacement, separation, or widening over time.

(Definitions of these terms can be found on page 438 of the *2025 TCNA Handbook*.)



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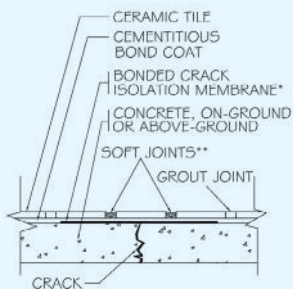
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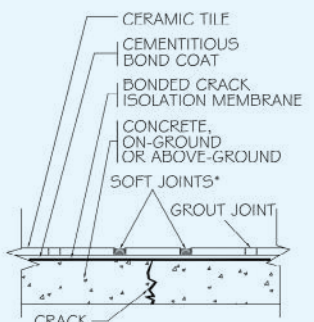
**F125-Partial-25**

- On- or Above-Ground Concrete
- Crack Isolation Membrane (Partial Coverage)
- Ceramic Tile



**F125-Full-25**

- On- or Above-Ground Concrete
- Crack Isolation Membrane (Full Coverage)
- Ceramic Tile



**Provide a movement-joint plan**

Regardless of slab condition, the installation must include field movement joints per TCNA EJ171, which requires:

- Movement joints at all perimeters and transitions.
- Movement joints through the tile above all structural and control joints in the slab.
- Interior field joints every 25' and every 12' for interior tilework exposed to direct sunlight.

Before deciding on a tile method, determine whether what you're looking at is non-structural shrinkage cracking or a structural joint that must be honored through the tile.

**Requirements for joints per ANSI and TCNA**

ANSI A108 and the *TCNA Handbook* are clear on this point. *2025 TCNA Handbook*, Page 43:

"All expansion, control, construction, cold, saw-cut, isolation, contraction, and seismic joints in the structure should continue through the tile work, including such joints at vertical surfaces. If a proprietary crack isolation membrane is specified over a saw-cut joint to relocate a movement joint, contrary to EJ 171, the tile contractor is not responsible for cracking in the grout joints or tile over the saw cut, provided the tile, membrane, and other materials were installed correctly. This includes curling and/or deformation of the concrete occurring after the installation of the membrane."

**Evaluate for vertical movement**

A quick assessment with a straightedge can reveal vertical displacement. Any crack with vertical movement falls into the "structural" category and cannot be tiled over, even when using a membrane.

**Consider a crack-isolation membrane (when appropriate)**

If the cracks are confirmed to be non-structural, a crack-isolation membrane listed to ANSI A118.12 may be appropriate. Membranes can help address in-plane (horizontal) movement, but cannot handle vertical shear or structural separation.

Please take a look at *TCNA Handbook* Method F125.

Before moving forward:

- Correctly identify whether the slab contains shrinkage cracks, saw cuts/control joints, or cold joints.
- Honor all structural and control joints through the tile work—these cannot be bridged.
- Use an ANSI A118.12 crack-isolation membrane only for non-moving cracks.
- Consult the manufacturer of the crack-isolation membrane and follow their instructions.
- Implement movement joints per TCNA EJ171.

If there is any uncertainty about whether a crack is active or structural, perform additional evaluation or recommend that your client consult a structural engineer. **TL**



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Joe Lundgren is a globally recognized product and marketing expert in the ceramic and stone worldwide markets. His specialty is Business Development, Product Management, and Marketing.

Joe has developed his expertise in strategic planning, new product development, and marketing strategy for North America during his 27 year career at Dal-Tile, a subsidiary of Mohawk Industries.

Joe has extensive experience in multiple sales channels including distribution and Home Centers.

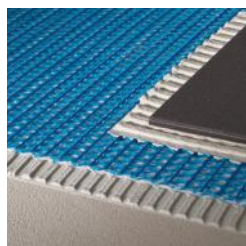
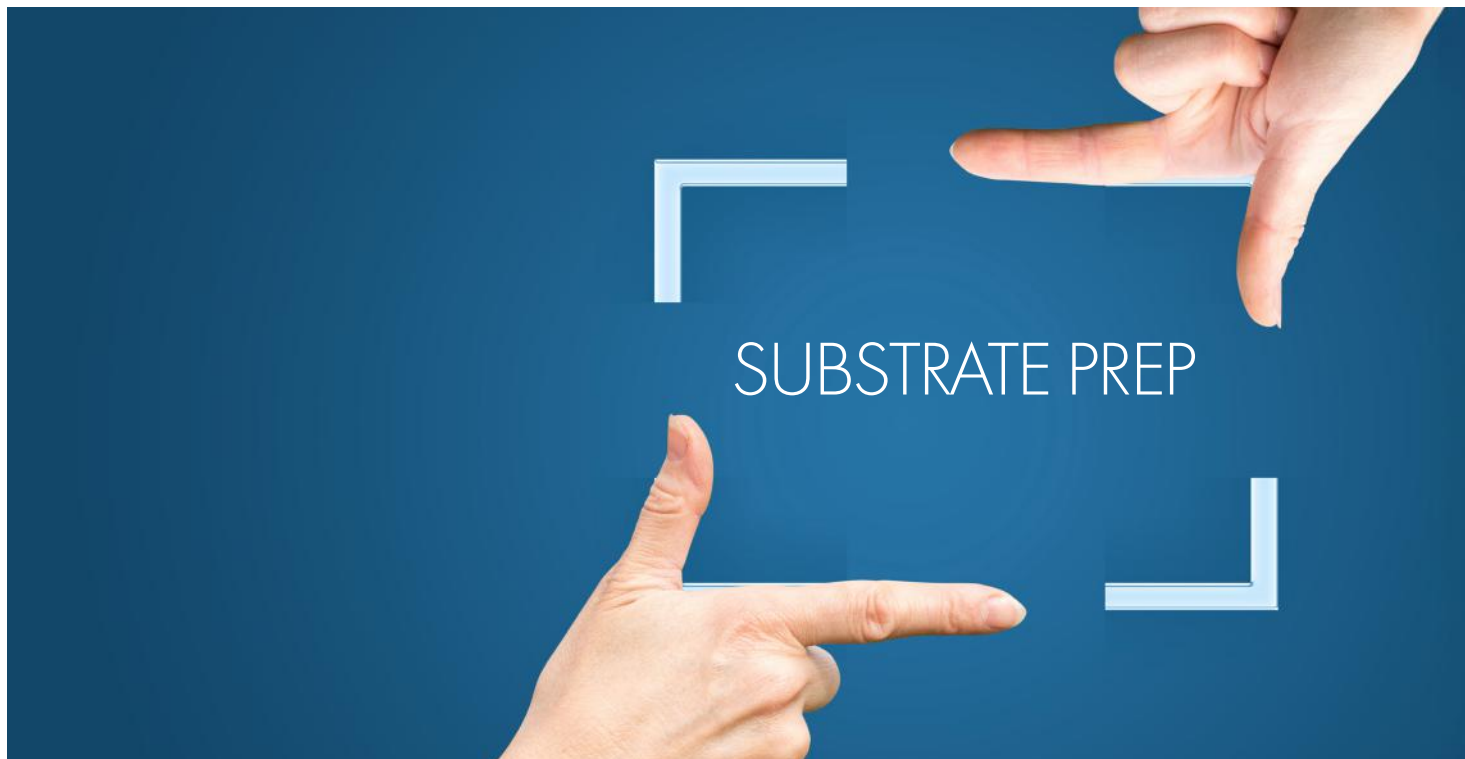
Additionally, Joe represents the Tile Council of North America (TCNA) for its testing laboratories, which has Joe at the epicenter of the industry for all new initiatives.

Please contact Joe Lundgren for a free consultation proposal!

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**Blanke**

Blanke PERMAT is an innovative reinforcement underlayment that provides reinforcement protection and adds support to wood substrates. It reduces deflection and provides greater compression and tensile strength compared to plastic roll

products. Blanke PERMAT reinforces wood substrate with a 1/8"-thick mat that is lightweight and easy to cut and install. There are no size restrictions with Blanke PERMAT, and the company offers a 10-year warranty against deflection.



**Custom Building Products**

TechLevel-WSF SLU is a high-flow, fiber-reinforced calcium aluminate cement-based, self-leveling underlayment that eliminates the need for reinforcing lath over plywood and OSB on interior wood framed subfloors. It produces a smooth, level substrate ready for the

installation of most floor coverings. Formulated using Controlled Cure Technology™, TechLevel-WSF SLU helps eliminate installation problems caused by the free moisture found in traditional underlayment. And with its low-prep formula, just sweep, prime and pour—no sandblasting required on acceptable surfaces. It exceeds TCNA and ASTM requirements for ceramic tile floors and is compatible with most radiant heating systems. It offers high strength for 1/4" to 1.5" nominal pours.



**LATICRETE**

HYDRO BAN® 1 is an industry first from LATICRETE, redefining waterproofing with its innovative, single-coat, trowel-applied formula. It's engineered for both waterproofing and crack isolation, allowing contractors to work faster.

The trowel serves as a built-in thickness guide, removing the guesswork and minimizing application stress. HYDRO BAN 1's color-changing cure indicator gives instant visual confirmation when the membrane is ready for flood testing—in as little as two hours after it cures.



**EMAC**

The EMAC® Color Touch Collection elevates ceramic tiling and floor transitions with sleek aluminum profiles designed for 5/16"–1/2" tile thickness. Available in eight on-trend shades across the Nature® and Tech® palettes, each profile

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Coverings 2026



NTCA



Ceramics of Italy



Arizona Tile



Daltile

Joe Comitale, Executive Vice President of **M-D Products** and President of its Professional Flooring division, M-D PRO, and Canadian Consumer division, M-D Canada, retired December 31, 2025, after 48 years in the industry...**Houzz Pro** introduced a Contracts tool for faster, smarter project agreements in one place...The National Kitchen and Bath Association (**NKBA**) released its 2026 Bath Trends Report, noting that the evolution of bathroom technology marks an upcoming shift emerging in the home...**The Tile Heritage Foundation** moved its collection to Anderson, S.C., and started a new chapter that includes hiring Karim Motawi as Executive Director of Development...**Florim USA** achieved B Corp certification, the only U.S. industrial-scale porcelain tile manufacturer with this achievement...**Coverings 2026**—taking place at the Las Vegas Convention Center March 30-April 2—opened event registration and announced the keynote with award-winning actor and humanitarian Gary Sinise...**NTCA** honored Martin Brookes of Fireclay Tile with the 2025 Ring of Honor Award...The 2025 Fall/Winter **Ceramics of Italy** Trend Report showcased cutting-edge technology and bold new designs displayed at Cersaie and BDNY shows...**Arizona Tile** expanded its Della Terra® Quartz and natural stone collections...**Daltile** expanded its Luminique ceramic tile line, adding a myriad of textural designs and color to infuse spaces with energy and depth.

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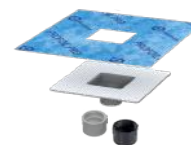
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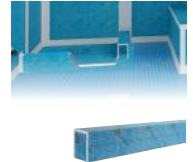
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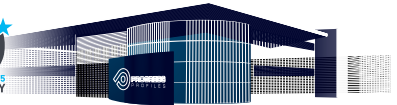


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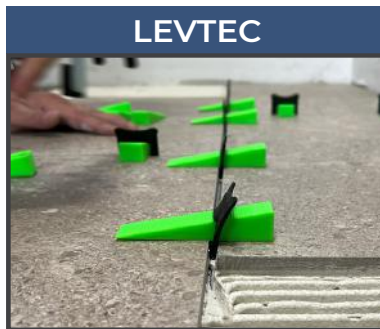
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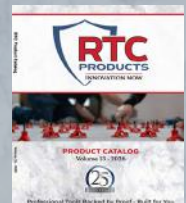
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