



Striving to remain the fabricator of choice
by Alexis Fisher
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For a company founded in the garage of its original owner, it is apparent that Top Master, Inc. of Kansas City, KS, has led a successful path — now operating fabricating facilities that total more than 100,000 square feet. Over the years, the company has continued to thrive through expansion, investments and excellent customer service.



Formed in 1984, Top Master originally provided solid surface countertops to kitchen dealers, builders and remodelers throughout the Kansas City Metro area. “We quickly became known as a company that offered top-quality products and superior customer service, and expanded our services to the commercial industry,” said Manager of the Commercial Division, Mike Varone.<

Operating fabrication facilities that total more than 100,000 square feet, Top Master of Kansas City, KS, grew from a garage shop through expanding, investing and excellent customer service.



Slabs are processed on two CNC stoneworking centers from Northwood Machine Manufacturing Co. of Louisville, KY. The machines are equipped with vacuum pods from Blick Industries of Laguna Beach, CA.

Besides expanding its client sector, which is comprised of 70 percent residential work and 30 percent commercial, Top Master — an Artisan Group member — additionally moved into stone processing, which currently makes up 60 percent of its market. This includes Artisan Stone Collection granite and marble, along with Saratoga Soapstone. Additionally, it fabricates engineered stone, such as Silestone, HanStone, CaesarStone.LG Viateria, Radianz, Vetrazzo from Polycor and IceStone. With the ability to fabricate 1,000 square feet of stone and 1,200 square feet of solid surface a day, the company can produce anything from kitchen countertops, vanities and bar tops to stone and solid surface cladding and complicated commercial design work.

Top Master's biggest advancement in recent times, however, has been the conversion of its templating and fabrication process from manual to automated. "We've become more efficient through automation in our production lines and more sophisticated in our approach," said Stone Shop Manager Dale Jordan. "In this economy, you have to produce more product for less money."

Equipment and investments

Top Master's main facility in Kansas City, KS, is about 60,000 square feet, which primarily houses its solid surface warehouse, corporate office and showroom. Its separate granite shop is 30,000 square feet, and the company has an additional 15,000-square-foot facility in Wichita, KS, which houses an installation facility and showroom.



Equipment for Top Master includes a NW-257 high-tech dual-table SawJet from Northwood Machine Manufacturing Co. of Louisville, KY, which aids in producing curves and complex work. The SawJet utilizes a waterjet pump and cutting nozzle from KMT Waterjet

Additional equipment includes a Northwood NW-257 high-tech dual-table SawJet, which aids in producing curves and complex work.

Systems of Baxter Springs, KS. For advanced edge processing, two Northwood 158EDS CNC stoneworking centers are in place, which utilize ADI tools from GranQuartz of Tucker, GA, as well as tools from and Tyrolit of Italy. The CNC machines are equipped with vacuum pods from Blick Industries of Laguna Beach, CA.

Slabs are additionally cut by four HTO-1B bridge saws from Marmo Meccanica of Italy, and flat edgework is completed with the help of two LCV 711 flat edge-polishing machines and four LCT 522 vertical polishing machines also from Marmo Meccanica. A Pro-Edge III automated edging machine from Park Industries of St. Cloud, MN, also helps with edgework, and material is maneuvered throughout the shops using vacuum lifters from Anver Corp. of Hudson, MA.



The company most recently added Proliner digital templating units from Prodim USA of Vero Beach, FL, for digital templating. “The accuracy and the speed of this new equipment has been a definite time and money saver,” said Michael Combest, Continuous Improvement Manager. “In order to survive in the current marketplace and stay ahead of the competition, Top Master knew that by making such an investment, it would make us the most capable and cost-effective solid surface and stone fabricator in the region.”

The Northwood SawJet utilizes a waterjet pump and cutting nozzle from KMT Waterjet Systems of Baxter Springs, KS.

Moreover, the company uses the Slabsmith™ system from Northwood

Designs, Inc. of Antwerp, NY. The system was designed as both a manufacturing aid and sales tool. A digital photo of the slab is taken, and the system’s Perfect Match™ module is for optimized nesting of the various parts. The system allows the user to quickly and easily manipulate the nest for the best results, and users can watch the results in real time as the nest changes. A picture of the finished countertop can be created for customer approval, and a DXF file of the nest can be exported for manufacturing.

Jobs and inventory are managed through JobTracker software from Moraware of Reno, NV, and the company has also recently invested in updating its vehicle and shipping fleet.

Along with the aid of technology, Top Master reports that the dedication of its employees has helped combat the current economic conditions and the challenge of increased competition.

Devotion to great service

Top Master currently employs 170 individuals, many of which take the extra step to ensure what the company calls “overall great service.” “We do everything we can to maintain that status,” said Chief Operating Officer, Dan Richardson. “On the residential side, if customers have problems, we take care of them. For us, we’ve chosen to get a little deeper in partnerships with Lowe’s, Home Depot, etc. We’ve taken a much larger market share of those companies than anybody else. Those are the forefront of [our] remodel work.”



Material is maneuvered throughout the shops using vacuum lifters from Anver Corp. of Hudson, MA.

“All of our employees are proactive with having face time with customers and developing relationships so they feel comfortable,” added Varone.

Because a large amount of Top Master’s employees have been with the company for more than a decade — rising from entry level — many are able to excel at every facet of fabrication and installation, according to Combest. The company also welcomes new employees to its business, but it has a stringent hiring process.

“We are always excited to hire people that can bring new ideas and innovation to the company,” said Richardson. “But we do not take the decision to hire the right person lightly. The hiring process is pretty intense; we do not make our decision solely on whether the candidate has specific industry experience. We look at each candidate’s worth of integrity, honesty, ability to communicate, and the ability and willingness to learn our trade. In addition, we put our new hires through a lengthy series of post-screening tests that help to ensure the safety of our employees and customers.

“Our training program is more like an apprenticeship,” he continued. “There is some form of class training, but the most valuable training we offer is hands-on job training. Our craftsmanship leaders, also referred to as the artists of the company, take pride in training the new hires.”

Getting its market share



Templating is done using the Proliner digital templating system from Prodim USA of Vero Beach (an example of which is pictured).

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Throughout the Continental U.S., work has been completed for such franchises as Applebee's, McAlister's Deli, Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, Denny's, Chuck E. Cheese, McDonald's, Smash Burger, TCBY, KFC, Fuddrucker's, Burger King, Arby's, Blanc Burger, Taco Johns, Flying J's, QT, Schlotzky's, Pancho's and Carlos O'Kelly's.

Ongoing projects that Top Master has recently been awarded are the TD Ameritrade Park Omaha in Omaha, NE, which will house the NCAA Division I Men's College Baseball World Series, the Kansas City Wizards MLS stadium for soccer, Hendrick's Memorial Hospital in Abilene, TX, and with three phases of the Richard Bolling Federal Building in downtown Kansas City, MO, being completed, Top Master has just been awarded phase four.

According to Varone, Top Master anticipates continuing to provide top-of-the-line products and services to its customers. It also strives to be an employer of choice and wants to continue growing through expansion into other markets.

Top Master's residential work covers all of Kansas. It additionally has customers in Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri, Oklahoma and Illinois. "We have work that has gone as far as Japan and all over North America for our customers — because they are in different markets as well," said Varone.

The company recently completed work for Children's Mercy Hospital in Kansas City, MO, Barnes-Jewish Hospital in St. Louis, MO, Scott Air Force Base in Belleville, IL, Mercy West Lakes Hospital in Des Moines, IA, Kansas University Medical Center in Kansas City, MO, the Kansas City Chiefs' training facility and offices in Kansas City, MO, Garmin World Headquarters in Olathe, KS, and Denver Children's Hospital in Denver, CO.

Top Master, Inc. is part of the Artisan Group, a national organization of independent granite fabricators that have joined together to offer the Artisan Stone™ Collection, the first and only brand of granite wholly owned by Artisan Group, which has a comprehensive lifetime warranty. The group also offers Heritage Wood™ countertops and Kohler sinks and faucets.



Top Master is one of Artisan Group's founding members. "Being part of the Artisan Group has given us national exposure through their extensive marketing, PR and advertising efforts," said Mike Kaufmann, President of Top Master, Inc. "Their upper-end products and warranties have afforded us the opportunity to cater an upper-end customer as well as bring variety of product choices across the board."

Group members average more than 20 years of fabrication experience in the countertop industry. Moreover, all Artisan Group members have achieved — or have begun the process to achieve — full accreditation with the Marble Institute of America. The group is among the first granite fabricators in the world to be working towards this distinction. Artisan Group also provides a complete line of granite care products including: Firstline™ Sealer, Firstline™ Clean & Restore and Firstline™ Shine.

Top Master, Inc.

Kansas City, KS

Type of work: A range of products in stone and solid surface for the commercial and residential community

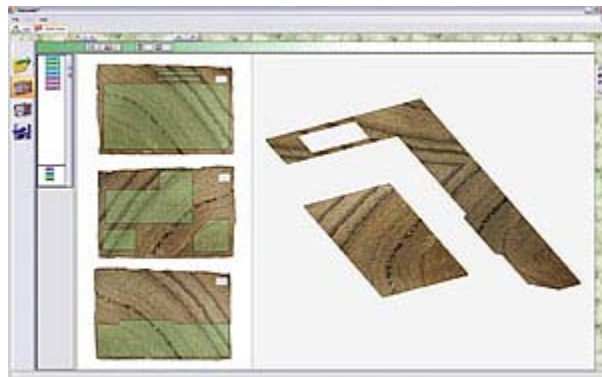
Machinery and equipment: two 158EDS CNC stoneworking centers and a NW-257 high tech, dual-table SawJet — all from Northwood Machine Manufacturing Co. of Louisville, KY; a waterjet pump and cutting nozzle for the SawJet from KMT Waterjet Systems of Baxter Springs, KS; ADI CNC tooling from GranQuartz of Tucker, GA; CNC tooling from Tyrolit of Italy; CNC vacuum pods from Blick Industries of Laguna Beach, CA; four HTO-1B bridge saws, two LCV 711 flat edge-polishing machines and four LCT 522 vertical polishing machines — all from Marmo Meccanica of Italy; a Park Pro-Edge III automated edging machine from Park Industries of St. Cloud, MN; a vacuum lifter from Anver Corp. of Hudson, MA; a Slabsmith™ nesting system from Northwood Designs, Inc. of Antwerp, NY; Proliner digital templating system from Prodim USA of Vero Beach, FL; JobTracker software from Moraware of Reno, NV; and vehicle and shipping fleet

Number of Employees: 170

Production Rate: Ability to fabricate 1,000 square feet of stone and 1,200 square feet of solid surface a day



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The company utilizes Moraware's JobTracker software to help manage jobs and inventory (an example of which is pictured).



A range of color selections can be found in Top Master's showroom, with displays of engineered stone from companies, including Silestone, HanStone, CaesarStone quartz surfacing, LG Viateria, Radianz, Vetrazzo from Polycor and IceStone.



Top Master recently completed front reception and bar area work for Studio Movie Grill, which features DuPont Zodiaq.