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Teragren: Leading the Way in Eco-Friendly Manufacturing

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Long before “green” became a buzz word and green products grew in consumer demand, one Bainbridge Island couple saw eco-friendly building as the way of the future. David and Ann Knight, owners of Teragren, wanted to invest their time and money into something that would both have value and give back to the planet — and in 1994, that idea gave start to a company that manufactures fine bamboo flooring and other bamboo products.

“I remember in the late ‘90s and even early 2000s. We’d call up architects and they didn’t know what we were talking about; they weren’t interested,” David Knight said. “Green wasn’t on the radar for anyone.”

But that didn’t deter the couple, who were avid environmentalists. The company (which had a different original name) started out the usual route: In the garage, with just the couple and another partner. After becoming majority shareholders in 2001, the Knights embarked on a vigorous expansion path, and today the company is a leading manufacturer of bamboo flooring, panels and veneers.

Bamboo is considered a renewable resource and the company’s traditional and strand bamboo panels help reduce the dependence on timber. The moso bamboo used for the products is among the hardest bamboo species and to achieve the best durability characteristics, the company requires it to be harvested when it’s between five and a half and six years old. The plants are harvested sustainably, leaving behind the roots and new shoots.

The products have earned various green certifications and have been used in such notable buildings as the Environmental Protection Agency’s regional headquarters (with LEED’s Gold Award) and the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry’s Smart Home.

Teragren’s proprietary manufacturing adhesive emits less formaldehyde than allowed by U.S., Japanese and European standards (in fact, it emits almost no formaldehyde), and the factory finish is solvent-free and water-based.



But it's not just the products that make Teragren a sustainable company. David said they started off with the so-called triple bottom line in mind: being an environmentally, socially and economically responsible business. "We took a whole different approach to incorporating the environment into the business and also looking at the social justice aspect," he said.

Teragren walks the talk. Its Bainbridge Island headquarters are carbon-neutral (and they're working on becoming carbon-negative), and its manufacturing plant in China adheres to strict Japanese, U.S. and European environmental guidelines. The company has worked with its manufacturing partner for more than a decade, and is not simply an importer — it has ownership rights in the manufacturing plant, being able to control and guarantee the quality of products (and working conditions) at the one million-square-foot facility. Teragren employs 25 people on Bainbridge and 700 in China and each location has a research and development department.

Teragren's manufacturing process has evolved over time. Ann notes the company's bamboo is about 25 percent harder than oak, and its Synergy™ strand flooring is 154 percent harder than red oak, using a process that fuses bamboo fibers with an adhesive that is environmentally safe. For this product, high-density sheets are created under extreme pressure using state-of-the-art equipment, then cut and milled into planks.

"All bamboo flooring may look the same, but it doesn't perform the same," Ann said.

They have their products independently tested by various labs. One of their products, for example, was rated as the top by Consumer Reports; their factories have also been independently tested for the presence of 78 toxins (none were above maximum limits, and many weren't present at all). The products are sold at about 4,500 specialty flooring companies in the United States and Canada.

The company's success didn't go unnoticed. Inc. named it one of 5,000 fastest-growing companies in the country in 2007, and the prior year selected Teragren as one of 50 eco-friendly, cutting-edge companies. David M. Knight, who is the CEO and president, has been recognized as a leader in the green economy movement and is involved with various environmental organizations and projects.

Ann, who is executive vice president, is credited with developing and marketing the company's brand, which is among the reasons behind Teragren's success.

David said one of the most satisfying aspects of Teragren is the validation of the business model. "People recognize that what we're doing is really building a 21st century company," he said. "We've been a leader in the bamboo industry from day one, but we're also leaders in how a business should be run."