

Augie Chavez

Gecko SSS, San Antonio, TX

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Fabricator Gecko SSS has a number of things that makes it stand out from the crowd, from its focus on commercial work and specialty projects to its unique shop setting and philosophy toward its crew.

Founded in San Antonio, Texas, in the summer of 2005 by Augie Chavez, who serves as president, the business has come a long way since its inception.

In 2005, Chavez had been in the industry already for 21 years and had plenty of fabrication experience. He acted when he saw a void in the commercial work arena that other fabricators apparently didn't want to fill (business was booming in that time frame and businesses could be more selective). "It didn't take long to gain traction and make a name for our company as a commercial fabricator," said Chavez. "Six months after our conception, we were asked to fabricate for Lowe's."

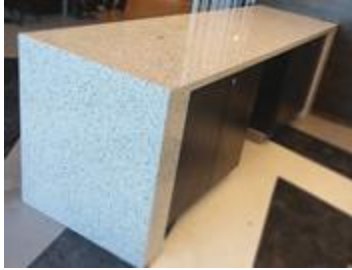
The company decided to take on the box store work to see where it would lead, but continued to focus mainly on commercial jobs, which takes it all over the state of Texas (which is no small task). "We started off doing one product line in solid surface in three Lowe's stores, but since then we have grown it into several product lines in solid surface, quartz and granite and we handle 21 stores," explained Chavez. However, this only comprises 30 percent of the company's business, with 65 percent in the commercial segment and the remainder being specialty work. "The Lowe's work provides us with a constant flow of jobs that helps fill in the gaps in our commercial projects," he added.

Today the company has 17 employees and runs through 80 to 100 slabs of quartz, another 80 to 100 sheets of solid surface and 20 or 25 slabs of granite a month. That said, the numbers fluctuate between which materials are dominant, based demand in the market. A single large commercial project can mean the use of one material increases drastically. For instance, in 2015 it seemed quartz surfacing was the major seller, while this year kicked off with a large amount of solid surface work on the books. Either way, the road to this kind of business was one less traveled by.

Chavez was born in Mexico in the early '60s and at the age of 5 immigrated to the United States with his family, transplanting to East Los Angeles. After graduating from high school, he headed to the University of California in Santa Barbara where he was introduced to the countertop industry when he took a summer job between semesters at a solid surface fabrication shop. He continued working that job until he moved to Texas.

There, he quickly found a job at another fabrication shop, where he worked until he felt he was ready to go into business for himself and that was when he opened GECKO Solid Surface Solutions. "Having had an education in electrical engineering and business along with my experience in this industry, I took the leap and have not looked back," Chavez recalled. "We fabricated solid surface for the first couple of years, but when we were able to have a shop with the room to get a bridge saw, we started fabricating quartz, granite and recycled glass counters."

ISFA FABRICATOR PROFILE: GECKO SSS Augie Chavez has come a long way since immigrating to the United States at the age of 5. He now runs GECKO SSS, a commercial surfacing operation that covers all of Texas.



Caption: The company also expanded into quartz surfacing, granite and recycled glass surfaces, and quartz projects, like this table, amount for around 40 percent of the company's work.



Caption: The roots of the company are in solid surface, and this commercial sink project is proof that the skill level at the company is well developed.



Caption: The fact that GECKO's facility is run largely on solar power is a testament to its dedication to operating in an environmentally sound manner. The company is also in the process of putting in a rainwater collection system to conserve water used in the stone fabrication process.



Caption: GECKO's 18,500-sq.-ft. shop runs on high-end equipment and because the company doesn't focus on residential work, all of the space can be dedicated to material throughput.



The company purchased an 18,500-sq.-ft. building in 2013, and has an array of high-end fabrication equipment, but before moving into the new facility, the company invested in one piece of technology that almost no fabricator does, and it has paid off in a big way. "Before moving in we had solar panels installed," explained Chavez. "I felt it was not just good business sense but also a social responsibility. And because the sun shines most of the time in San Antonio, our shop's electric bill is less than my personal house, which also uses solar power, most of the time."

The equipment at the company's disposal is a veritable checklist of key technology and includes a Striebig panel saw, a Star V-groover, a Saw Stop table saw, a Pinske

thermoforming oven, a Schultz Form vacuum table and a custom-made CNC router on the solid surface side. When it comes to processing the hard and shiny materials, the company utilizes a Sasso 5-axis bridge saw, a MAKO bridge saw, Sasso Bull 126 edge machine, a Fab King fabrication center and a small CNC machine for sink cutouts. The facility has an overhead crane to help manipulate the inventory, and the company has even installed cranes on a couple of its flatbed trucks to help with the off-loading of stone tops on the jobsite.

Furthermore, the company is in the process of designing a system to catch rainwater to use in running the stone fabrication machinery and expects it will be fully operational by the end of the summer.

Although starting out primarily working with solid surface, the company's growth into hard surfacing products has been a good move. "Having all of the products at our disposal makes it easier for our clients to have one fabricator to meet the needs for all of their projects," explained Chavez. "To accomplish this, though, the majority of our employees are cross-trained to fabricate and install both solid surface and stone."

This means the company must invest a lot in its crew, which Chavez feels is what helps set the business apart from other companies. "We are like family," he said. "We have taught our employees that every project is important and every top that leaves our facility matters. Through the years, they have taken on my attitude that nothing is difficult; it's just a new challenge. Everyone from the office to the shop is always in team mode."

When asked what the No. 1 factor to the company's success is, Chavez replied, "Have fun, be good at what you do and treat everyone with respect. Figure out what's important to you, follow through and your company will reflect those ideals."

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