

Learning hands on

Resource Center provides product samples for potential buyers

this is “more than just a space to ‘show’ what we sell and install,” says Linda J. Vos Graham, president of Vos Glass. “We wanted a place where anyone can research and learn about the various glazing solutions, make selections and even pick up products and schedule services with ease.” Vos Graham opened the company’s Resource Center May 11 at the company’s headquarters in Grand Rapids.

Vos Graham borrowed the marketing concept from other construction industries, such as plumbing, and adapted it to the needs of glass consumers.

Architects, designers, contractors and their customers can stop, see and touch architectural and decorative glass and related metals and plastics. It features hundreds of glass products and samples displayed in lighted stands, glass shower and tub displays, glass sinks and vanities, mirrors and automo-

tive glass. One wall houses aluminum framing systems and hardware. The center also includes an automotive glass facility.

Outside, a sculpture with interchangeable glass and metal components allows guests to view samples in natural light.

A triangular vestibule inside the center has three types of automatic doors. Other glass products have been integrated into the waiting area, including patterned panels defining the space and a coffee table that displays different edge work. Film-laminated glass panels feature some of the commercial projects of the company on a window wall.

Customer-service pods feature bases of crushed glass and art-glass form dividers. A wall sculpture at the entryway, created by Echo Etching Inc. of Grand Rapids, Mich., offers shape-cut pieces of



abrasive-blasted, annealed glass and repeats techniques used on the pod dividers. Nearly every surface takes on a function, displaying products or demonstrating their application.

The process

"The resource concept evolved from a desire to enhance the competitive edge and position as a valued resource to customers," says Vos Graham. "In doing so, we also wanted to create an efficient, functional workspace and environment for our staff.

"In the planning stages, we met with employees, suppliers, the contractor and architect to study the feasibility of each idea," Vos Graham says. "We eliminated the budget-busters and finessed the ones we thought had the greatest potential. We also asked customers what would appeal to them. The sculpture idea evolved from an architect's desire to view glass outdoors and in natural light.

"This process can take months to create and build while the course of daily business must go on," Vos Graham says. "Have a good operating plan so that you can function effectively during construction. And safety is a priority. Have the appropriate signage and barriers. Reroute traffic and move services to temporary stations as necessary to ensure that employees and customers are protected.

"Involve your employees in the design for their respective departments," Vos Graham says. "They understand customers' needs, perhaps better than anyone, and can offer great insight. You will have a better facility when it's finished."

Following three months of planning, construction began in January. By March, the center was functional and in April, the décor was completed.

Technology's reach

Technology extends the interactive approach via flat-screen monitors and computer stations for reference to Internet sites and other information. Guests can review and print out materials in color. "We created our own electronic glass and glazing library to help refine the search process," Vos Graham says. "We have large digital product catalogs for windows, mirrors and other products and a large digital photo library of projects that show actual applications and installations. We also use and provide our guests with many of our suppliers' brochures, samples and charts."

Vos Graham encourages contractors to think of Vos Glass first when looking for products and refer building owners and homeowners to the center. Specifiers can consult glass experts at the center to help meet Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design criteria, she says.

Extensive marketing

Francis Marketing of Grand Rapids, Mich., developed the marketing plan for the center. "We selected a marketing firm that specializes in business-to-business communication and also happens to have a portfolio of work with construction and construction-related clients," Vos Graham says. "Its professionals helped us position the center, develop the appropriate messaging to the targeted professionals and trades. Our audiences are both analytical and creative personalities by nature. We are marketing the center, yet we are also marketing a business concept and a model that requires modification in behaviors. We are positioning the center as a destination. It is a knowledge center and labora-

Company profile

Vos Glass Resource Center

Established in 1982, the full-service glass company provides products and services for commercial, residential and automotive applications

Owner: Linda J. Vos Graham, president

Top managers: John J. Merryweather, vice president; Barbara J. Vos, secretary-treasurer

Gross sales: \$6 million to \$10 million a year

Locations: One plant and Resource Center

Employees: 50

Connections:


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tory with access to virtually every option in glass and glass-related products where guests can search resources for ideas and tap the knowledge of expert consultants. In doing so, we had to distance ourselves as far away from a 'showroom' as possible. The word is no longer in our vocabulary."

The agency developed a direct-mail campaign that promotes the center experience. Visuals show babies and children using "supernatural" abilities to build elaborate structures from blocks, toys and sand, and links that ability to the prospect's innate talent, ingenuity and creativity.

"We have had interest and a steady stream of traffic from professionals," Vos Graham says. "They come in looking for one glazing solution and leave with many more ideas and ways to use glass and mirrors in their projects." The May 11 opening was attended by 400 people, she says.

"The Resource Center is a place to go for ideas and inspiration," says Jill Makinen, interior designer with DTS & Winkelmann Architects of Grand Rapids. 

Workstation pods at Vos Glass feature crushed glass bases. Abrasive-blasted, annealed glass panels are used to separate the workstations.



The partners

Linda Vos Graham, president of Vos Glass in Grand Rapids, Mich., says "Our partnership with suppliers in the Resource Center is informal in nature, although our companies have enjoyed longstanding formal relationships doing business together for many years. We recommend and use their products, working with them on many projects in the West Michigan area.

"The Resource Center puts [its] products in the very forefront of the influencers and decision makers who are specing and recommending glass and glass-related products," Vos Graham says. "Because many of these products are integrated into the actual design of the center, guests see our partners' products demonstrated in life-size, working models in their real-world applications."

The partners include:

- Automatic Door Service, Grand Rapids, Mich.
- Echo Etching Inc., Grand Rapids, Mich.
- CMI Architectural Products, Minneapolis
www.cmiarch.com
- Oldcastle Glass, Burnips, Mich.
www.oldcastleglass.com
- Pilkington North America, Toledo
www.pilkington.com
- Gerkin Windows & Doors, Sioux City, Iowa
www.gerkin.com
- GlasSource, Grand Haven, Mich.
www.glasssource.net (under construction)
- Glass & Mirror Craft Industries Inc., Wixom, Mich.
www.glassandmirrorcraft.com
- Guardian Industries Corp., Auburn Hills, Mich.
www.guardian.com
- Kawneer North America, Atlanta
www.kawneer.com
- Sobotec Ltd., Specialty Wall Systems,
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
www.sobotec.com
- 3-Form, Salt Lake City, Utah
www.3-form.com
- Tubelite Inc., Reed City, Mich.
www.tubeliteinc.com
- Van Dam Iron Works Inc., Grand Rapids, Mich.
www.vdiw.net
- Viracon Inc., Owatonna, Minn.
www.viracon.com
- DTS & Winkelmann Architects,
Grand Rapids, Mich.
www.dtswinkelmann.com