

By Jeffrey Steele



One on One with Sponga USA's Nick Tsangaris

Founded in 1956, Sponga USA began on the "sponge divers' island" of Calymnos, Greece. Gradually, the increase in international demand for sponges, and the limits to the supply of naturally-occurring sponges, led to the creation of synthetic sponges now supplied by Sponga USA to industries throughout North America. Among the most important fields served by Sponga USA is the tile and stone industry.

Sponga USA president and third-generation owner Nick Tsangaris recently talked with *TileDealer* about his company's history and the differentiators that set his company's products apart from those made by competitors in Asia and elsewhere.

TileDealer: How did SpongaUSA, get started? How did you transition from natural to synthetic sponges?

My great grandfather was a sponge boat captain. Both my grandfather and father became natural sponge traders. In the 1950s my father recognized the opportunity to move from natural sponges to synthetic sponges for a myriad of industries world-wide, such as saddlery, paint, cosmetics, bath, pottery and of course the tile and stone industry.

We built our first manufacturing plant in Calymnos in 1956. The factory has been expanded a number of times since then, but we are still on the same piece of land my father started on.

While we are very much focused on the U.S. tile and stone industry, we supply sponges to at least 25 other countries in virtually all the other industries my father envisioned back in the 1960s. Though he's in his 90s, my father still likes coming to the factory nearly every day. So as you can see, while Sponga USA is relatively "new", our roots are very "old" and deep in the sponge industry.

TD: What are the primary benefits to tile pros of your company's sponges?

We have several things going for us in that regard. First and foremost is quality. Our Premium Grout Sponges are made of a high quality, exclusive polyester base material designed specifically for the tile and stone industry.

We utilize a proprietary "gas explosion" or "thermal" reticulation process to create the optimal number of open cells, while assuring highest level of durability. The reticulation process involves the placement of a "base bun of foam" in a very large vacuum pressure vessel. The vessel is evacuated and filled with an explosive gas mixture. The gas is ignited and a controlled flame front passes

through the foam. To use an analogy, think of the base material as if it were a French window pane. With gas explosion reticulation, we break all the glass to make it porous, but the wood frames are not affected. The benefit of gas explosion reticulation process is a smooth, clean polish sponge cell which provides the maximum absorption, retention and release of water and sand for faster and better grout clean-up. Domestic sponge manufacturers and most of the Asian sponge manufacturers utilize a chemical dip reticulation process.

Continuing with my French window pane analogy with the chemical dip reticulation process, the chemical cannot differentiate between glass and wood. The chemical attacks the entire base material, so a trade off or compromise must occur between opening up enough pores and weakening the sponge. In addition to being less porous and less durable, chemical dip reticulation also tends to be harder.

Sponga USA's gas reticulated sponges can be both soft and strong. We have posted test results on our website, www.spongausa.com, detailing our superior comparative water absorption and release. New independent test results are just being completed that further validate our superior water absorption and release, but also demonstrate the superior strength and durability of our sponges.

TD: We know you've added other products; how did your line evolve?

For years we only sold our Premium Sponge for virtually every type of job. But as cementitious grout formulas evolved with latex additives, not only were the grouts stronger and more durable,

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but the installation clean-up got a little more difficult. That's when we developed our Scrubber Sponge. We were the first manufacturer to bond a white scrubbing pad on one side of a premium sponge. With the Scrubber Sponge you have the most absorptive and most durable sponge on one side and an abrasive scrubbing pad on the other side.

This is especially helpful when and if grout gets a little dried on the surface of the tile or stone surface. The abrasive pad will not harm or scratch the tile or stone surface. Another evolution was the growing popularity of epoxy grouts. Part of the reason for



increased use of epoxy grouts is that they are much easier to work with, than [they were] when they were first introduced. But they are still a little more difficult to clean-up than cementitious grouts.

Our Epoxy Grout Sponge is designed to be much more abrasive than even the white scrub pad we bond to our scrubber sponge. Our epoxy sponges will still not scratch or harm the surface of tile or stone, but they do a great job of cleaning epoxy grout from the surface of the tile. The sponge itself also cleans up well for multiple uses.

[Given] my partner Rick Baldini's background in the sealer business, he really likes our Sealer Sponge. We designed it to be very dense and highly absorptive so it will hold a lot of sealer, which helps make the sealing project go faster.

The sponge itself is very smooth so when used with a coating sealer, it minimizes any surface bubbles or fish-eyes. Our Sealer Sponge works equally as well with water, solvent or acrylic based sealers.

For a long-time we resisted introducing a lower-priced chemical reticulated sponge like the domestic and Asian manufacturers. But we realized that there could be an opportunity for our "Cadillac" and "Chevrolet" sponges...so we introduced our Economy Sponges. They work well and are very competitively priced. We still sell significantly more of our Premium Sponges, but we have both versions available to meet more of the market demands.

In most cases, the initial purchase price of, say, our Premium Grout sponges is going to be a few cents more than other sponges. But over the years, quality contractors have recognized and appreciate how much better our sponges perform.

And with better performing sponges, the job of cleaning newly-installed grout is both easier and faster. Not to mention

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that SpongaUSA sponges are more durable and longer lasting. So while the initial purchase price might be slightly higher, SpongaUSA provides much more value as they work better and last longer.

TD: There probably is a great deal even the most experienced tile pros don't know about gaining the maximum from your products. Correct?

We undertook a number of initiatives to address that issue. We would like to think that our website will help a lot ... But we do not think the website alone will be enough. After a number of prototypes and with lots of input from customers, we created a display system that we think will do a great job of communicating our sponge offering. Retail One came up with an eye-catching corrugated display that helps distributor showroom personnel as well as contractors determine the...right sponge for every job! They also developed feature and benefit cards that are attached to each of the displays. The system affords us the opportunity to print our customers' logos right on the cards to help personalize the displays.

But probably the coolest feature of the display system is that it's modular. Our customers can use a 1/2-round display 39 inches high by 42 inches wide by 22 in depth [that] holds approximately 274 sponges. Or they can use two displays back to back as a full round system.

We still have available the more traditional wire rack and sign that we find works well in warehouse locations.

TD: How does the economy of Greece impact your company?

The reality is that Greece is going through some very difficult times right now, as are number of other countries...including the U.S. I personally believe our political leaders are trying to do the best they can to overcome the effects of our historical socialistic policies. I also believe that the majority of the Greek citizens understand that things had to change and for the



most part they are willing to endure some of the requisite sacrifices. On our little island of Calymnos we are a bit insulated from some of the things you see in the news regarding Athens.

At our factory, our employees are very hard working; take great pride in the quality of their craftsmanship and have been with us for a number of years. The average tenure of our employees at the factory is around 25 years not counting my father and some are even second generation.

TD: Anything else that's new you'd like to add?

We like to think we listen to our customers and adjust our product offerings accordingly. We have a

great distributor customer in Southern Florida, D&B Tile, and they asked us to come up with bags that hold multiple sponges. We now offer our Premium Extras Large Sponges in multi-pack bags of 3 or 12.

We thought it would be "cuter" to put the sponges in bags that look like scuba diver bags. We are so glad we listened to D&B Tile, as they now buy several bales of the 12-piece multi-pack sponges on a regular basis.

We also have other customers that like the multi-packs for their large contractors. We had a couple of other customers, Tiles International in New York and Mid-America Tile in Illinois, that liked both our Sealer and Epoxy Sponges, but they

found that the volume is not as great as our Premium Grout Sponge.

They asked if we could provide both products in smaller quantity bales. So we created mini-bales of 100 sponges each for both products. We are now selling the mini-bales to a number of customers. It really helps the "turn and earn" equation.

There are a few sales territories still available for quality independent reps, so if what we discussed here about SpongaUSA is of interest to any of your rep readers, we would like them to contact us. Also, we had a great showing at Total Solution Plus last November and plan participating again in 2012! **TD**

SPECIAL EDITION SPONGA USA

"THE WORLD'S GREATEST GROUT SPONGES"

MADE IN GREECE



Volume 0002

WINTER 2012

FREE

The Busted Myth, Part 2... CAN SOMETHING SOFT BE STRONG?

At about the same time in history when the Greek Philosophers Plato and Socrates were laying the foundation of Western Philosophy on the streets of Athens... and no doubt setting in motion the future development of the "World's Greatest Grout Sponge",



... another Philosopher, Lao Tzu, wrote: "Water is fluid, soft, and yielding. But water will wear away rock, which is rigid and cannot yield. As a rule, whatever is fluid, soft, and yielding will overcome whatever is rigid and hard. *This is another paradox: what is soft is strong.*"

We think it is no coincidence (okay, maybe that's a bit of a stretch) that some of the world's greatest Philosophers understood the competitive advantage of the "World's Greatest Grout Sponges"... *they are soft and strong!*

SpongaUSA Sponges are constructed from the "gas explosion reticulation" process

The results are sponges that are proven to be more porous than today's standard sponges.

Magnified view of a gas reticulated sponge surface to show porosity



Visit our website: www.spongaUSA.com for lab test results.

SPONGA USA
"THE WORLD'S GREATEST GROUT SPONGES"

For more information
call or visit our website:

www.SpongaUSA.com or call 949-766-5105