

What's Happening in the Screening Industry

With the business climate improving, there's new optimism along with a few challenges, according to SMA

by Frank S. Fitzgerald

The window screen manufacturing industry appears cautiously optimistic as it starts to bounce back from the general economic climate of 1991, which sent it reeling in tandem with the general home and commercial building decline. I feel justified in throwing away the word cautious, however, as the projected increase in the repair and remodeling business creates a more optimistic outlook for our industry.

Industry leaders have told me that the last four months have shown a gradual business increase and they predict 13 to 15 percent growth in screen sales for 1992. Hopefully, it will be a much higher percentage as we move into 1993. The reasons for their optimism are much the same as in other businesses: the presidential election year, interest rate fluctuation, and construction improvement.

This optimism echoes the general building picture. Construction industry indices indicate that, starting early this year, the recovery of the housing market has lifted the current rate of residential building 40 percent above the January 1991 low. All this recovery has been in single-family building, probably the most lucrative market for the window screen manufacturers. Favorable interest rates and the prospect of a tax credit for first-time home buyers will keep the one-family housing recovery going through 1992, economists forecast.

The reason for my added optimism is that today there are 7 million owner-occupied homes, 1 million vacant housing units, and 8 million occupied rental units in need of repair and that the rental property owners and homeowners already know what improvements they want to make.

What will those improvements be? Certainly not all these homes will install new windows, but most certainly all or most of them will replace window screens since this is a simple and inexpensive thing to do. The decade of the '90s will involve the rebuilding of American homes and by the end of the decade, the R&R market will be larger than the new residential construction market. All this bodes well for the screen manufacturing industry.

Innovative things have happened in our industry through the years and will continue to happen. Before the 1970s, all screening was metal and most of it was aluminum; then came fiberglass, which soon captured much of the market. Today about 70 percent of the screening made is fiberglass and 30 percent aluminum. The fiberglass market share may increase in the years to come, but there will always be aluminum screens because of some geographic preferences.

While aluminum screening is usually black or natural color, charcoal seems to be the preferred color in fiberglass. However, fiberglass screens also come in decorator colors, so in addition to their function of letting light and fresh air in and keeping insects out, they can be considered a decorative device on a home like shutters, blinds, or draperies.

Another development in the screening industry has been the introduction of solar screening, designed to reduce the amount of solar heat entering a building. Made of either aluminum or vinyl, solar screens received a shot in the arm during the energy crunch in the late 1970s. Today they are again growing in popularity.

We face some new challenges. The range of colors is still growing, making inventory difficult. Fewer colors and fewer frame designs would simplify inventories. The increasing demands for special sizes and different colors contribute to the increased cost of being in the replacement market. This trend is having an impact on the "mom-and-pop" screen shop clients of our industry versus the large window makers.

While most screens are made by large screen manufacturers for large window producers, an awful lot are manufactured by the mom and pop operations which purchase screen components from our industry and assemble the screens to the customer's individual specifications. Home builders usually use ready-made stock screens such as those available at lumber yards, but people remodeling their homes or even building from scratch may want to use screens for specific decorative use.

This is where the small, custom screen distributor comes in, building screens according to the customer's specifications. While I do not know what percentage of SMA's members cater to this mom-and-pop market or in which area the growth is, there are these two areas of production and marketing among SMA's members—making the finished screen to sell to window manufacturers, lumber yards, developers, and other large accounts and making the components to supply to glass shops and other smaller clients and leaving the assembly to them.

With a flourishing and well established industry came the formation of the Screen Manufacturers Association in 1955.



Warning labels may not relieve manufacturers from liability suits, but the industry sees an obligation to do as much as possible to prevent children from falling out of windows.

SMA started the industry program for standards and specifications by developing Commercial Standards through the U.S. Department of Commerce, the National Bureau of Standards, the American Society for Testing and Materials and

finally through the American National Standards Institute. Today there are seven SMA developed and sponsored American National Standards.

Safety issues

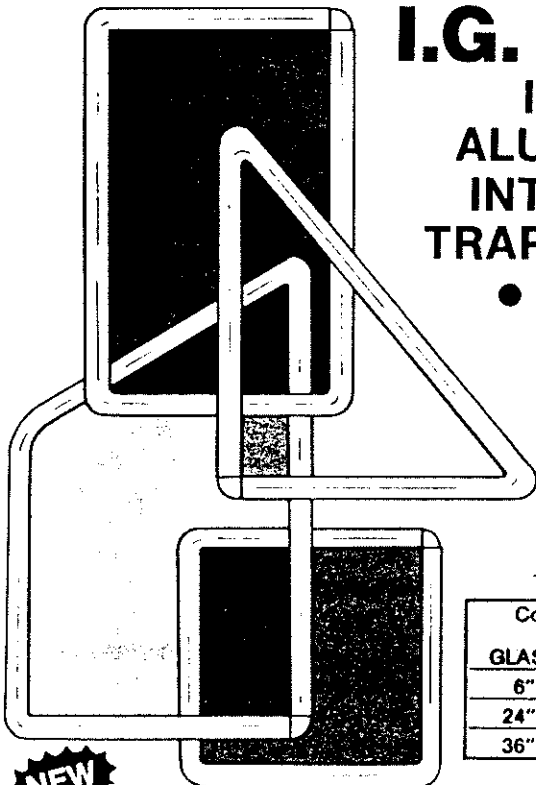
SMA has been involved with window screen safety for some time, and since 1985 a warning label has been available to association members to attach to the screens. The label is one of the efforts by the industry to inform the consumer that a screen is meant to keep insects out not children in.

Our organization has been concerned with the issue of children falling out of windows since 1984, and in 1985, conducted its first "Kids Can't Fly" conference. The conference involved screen manufacturers, attorneys, architects, product design engineers, and others concerned with children falling from open windows. The conference was repeated in 1990. The American Society of Association Executives awarded SMA its prestigious Associations Advance America award for this program.

Also in 1985, SMA and the National Safety Council communicated the home safety message by publishing a consumer education brochure known as Humpty Dumpty. The message, based on the 1985 conference, was also included in a brochure, Protect Your Child, published by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. Through the years, SMA's

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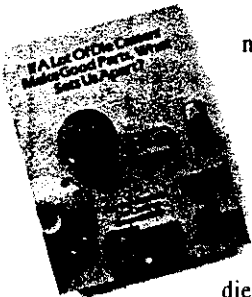
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safety message has also been promoted through Home Improvement Time, a widely circulated newspaper supplement.

More than 40 million windows are produced each year. More than 15 million currently feature warning labels, which is affixed to the window screens and to the shipping cartons. Recently SMA redesigned the label including a pictogram of a child falling out of a window and the message "Screen will not stop child from falling out the window. Keep child away from open window." It is expected that the industry will replace the old label with the new and also use it in all its promotional materials.

Warning labels are not a major factor in product liability law suits, because just as many human factor "experts" will testify to their effectiveness as not. We as an industry, however, have an obligation to consumers to do everything we can to keep children from falling out of windows. We have always known that screens were not meant to keep children in and, for some time, assumed that everyone knew that too. Apparently they don't, as evidenced by the many product liability suits brought against industry members.

Of course, when a child is killed or injured in a fall from a window, it is a tragedy. But in today's climate, even though someone was negligent and left the child alone, the family sues everyone in sight. This includes the building owner, the building contractor, architect, window manufacturer, screen manufacturer, screen distributor, and installer.

Eventually the case comes to the one who has the deep pockets, and more often than not, it is the manufacturer of the window screen. Because the other entities in the line don't have much insurance or any money, SMA's members end up paying. Many of our larger members carry \$1 million liability and some \$5 million umbrella insurance and thus are natural targets for the suits.

The screening industry has resolved since 1985 not to settle out-of-court and has been winning cases either by directed verdict or in jury trials. Of course, in some cases the insurance companies make the decision and may settle over the screen manufacturers' objection.

The screen manufacturing industry wants the precedent of winning and hopes that setting that precedent will make the law suits go away and not come back. We have been winning and someday I hope there will no longer be any product liability suits brought against the screen manufacturers. And people will realize the true role an insect screen plays... and remember that kids can't fly. [E]

Frank S. Fitzgerald, executive vice president/technical director of the Screen Manufacturers Association in Chicago, has been associated with the screen and fenestration industries for 45 years. He was with Adams Engineering Co. until 1960 and served as executive vice president, technical director, and secretary of the Architectural Aluminum Manufacturers Association until 1973. A certified association executive, he is also executive secretary of the Door Operator & Remote Controls Manufacturers Association.

