

Like that famous box of chocolates, you never know what you are going to find when you walk through the door of a distributorship. True, Chicago Contractor Supply's (CCS) website mentioned concrete forming supplies and hinted at rebar fabrication capabilities, but sometimes reality is a bigger surprise than you expected.

CCS vice president Leigh Hamm manages the supply side operations of the five-branch distribution business and has been with CCS since 1978. CCS president Ray Bartholomae was the president of Symons.

"We aren't really a typical STAFDA house," Hamm begins by way of introduction. "I consider a STAFDA house primarily a fastener and tool house, and although we do sell some fastener lines, including Simpson Strong-Tie, we're a concrete supply house."

This is in part due to the concrete market emphasis of CCS's parent company. Owner Tom Fahey focuses on SureBuilt Metals & Manufacturing, which produces concrete forms and accessories. SureBuilt is based in nearby Bellwood, Illinois, and occupies a 320,000 square foot manufacturing facility there. The Bellwood facility also houses some functions for CCS, including its marketing and HR departments.

CCS serves a roughly 200-mile radius of Chicago from its home-office branch in Naperville. Four other branches are located in Huntley and Bellwood, Illinois, Merrillville, Indiana, and Pewaukee, Wisconsin. The company's delivery territory is much wider, thanks in part to a couple of its more "atypical for STAFDA" capabilities.

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PHOTO: MARTIKA GARTMAN

WELL FORTIFIED

CHICAGO CONTRACTOR'S SUPPLY
BUILDS WITH FORMING AND REBAR

"WE'VE BEEN A SPHERE ONE MEMBER FOR SEVEN YEARS. THEY'RE A GREAT ORGANIZATION. SPHERE ONE HAS QUALITY VENDORS AND WE TRY TO SUPPORT THEM."

LEIGH HAMM,
VICE PRESIDENT



“ONE OF OUR FIRST REQUIREMENTS OF ANY VENDOR IS THAT THEY BELONG TO STAFDA, SPHERE ONE OR SOME BUYING GROUP.”

KEITH DIEHL, INSIDE COUNTER SALES & PURCHASING

“One of the unique things we do is hydraulic self-rising cores and forms for high-rise buildings. When you build the spine of a building and the elevator shafts, they hydraulically lift from floor to floor. We have quite a bit invested in those and they are a big part of our business. So, including the forming equipment, rental is a very significant portion of our business, in the range of 10 to 15 percent. But again, we are mainly a sales company.”

Also, as a concrete house, CCS only carries power tool brands that are preferred by concrete contractors, mainly Bosch and Metabo.

“Power tools aren’t a major category for us,” Hamm says. “Other distributors in our markets specialize in power tools and we don’t feel like we need to sell that cheap. If we can’t make a margin and we really don’t see the need to go after that business, then we will just carry the tools our customers use, like Bosch hammers and Metabo grinders.”

CCS lists tool repair on its website too, but that, Hamm explains, pertains largely to the company’s own truck and rental fleet.

“We do some outside repairs,” he says. “If we sell it, we’ll service it, but I try to keep our repair shop basically for us. I’ve got a fleet of 20 trucks and we service those. Plus, we service our regular rental equipment.”

From the street, the Naperville branch looks smaller than it is.

“We actually have 70,000 feet under roof here,” Hamm says. “We have 5,000 feet in the showroom. Merrillville and Huntley both have about 2,000-square-foot showrooms and Bellwood has a very small showroom.”

CCS owns its facilities in Naperville, nearby Bellwood and Huntley and rents buildings for its newer Merrillville, Indiana, and Pewaukee, Wisconsin, branches.

RELIABLE SOURCES

Inside counter sales and purchasing associate Keith Diehl has been with CCS for 15 years. Self-described as part jack-of-all-trades and part Sherlock Holmes, Diehl does purchasing, maintains customer relationships, provides technical information and sleuths out new and special products. Every time, he has two main starting points.

The main CCS store in Naperville, Illinois, is a 6,000-square-foot open-concept layout with a heavy emphasis on concrete tools, accessories and chemicals — with a few lasers and power tools for good measure.

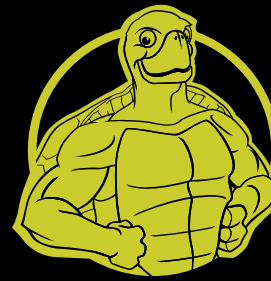


“When we’re looking at new products or lines, we tend to stay with STAFDA and Sphere One vendors,” Diehl explained. “One of our first requirements of any vendor is that they belong to STAFDA, Sphere One or some buying group. We used to use a lot of catalogs and phone calls, but now I would say 85 percent of my actual purchasing is via email and internet.”

Purchasing manager Pete Colwell, one of the newest members of the CCS team, has been with the company for just two years. His backstory includes work with construction manufacturers and distributors. Colwell also subscribes to the “STAFDA or Sphere One” general qualifier for sourcing new products and vendors.

“The STAFDA Directory is an excellent resource, but I do most everything else by internet or email. Sphere One is fast because they put it all on one page, so if you need to look up something quick or remember a certain vendor, it saves a lot of time, especially in this industry where you’re sometimes trying to do several things at once.

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by Tom Hammel

"Before I came here, they had purchasing managers who did their own thing and may not have focused as much on STAFDA or Sphere One vendors. Keith and I try to work on the same page and utilize key resources like STAFDA and Sphere One as much as possible."

"We've been a Sphere One member for seven years," Hamm adds. "They're a great organization. We initially joined because we sold collated fasteners, which we no longer sell. For a while we were kind of a fish out of water in Sphere One, but now they're moving into concrete more, which is a better fit for us. Sphere One has quality vendors and we try to support them."

Other than commercial concrete supply sales, waterproofing and forming rentals, CCS is also involved in metro Chicago residential building, which is back to booming in the western and northwestern suburbs. CCS supplies several subcontractors who build basements for production homebuilders, including their rebar.

"We supply a lot of custom builders too. There are quite a few custom homes going up, and because they are generally one-offs, they need to be designed individually. It's not unusual to put a 20,000- or 30,000-square-foot home in on the North shore."

"KEITH AND I TRY TO STAY ON THE SAME PAGE AND UTILIZE KEY RESOURCES LIKE STAFDA AND SPHERE ONE AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE."

PETE COLWELL, PURCHASING MANAGER

RAISING THE BAR

In addition to forming equipment rentals, CCS offers rebar fabrication, a lot of rebar.

"Rebar fabrication is a big service for us, but in the rebar business, being a small guy when a lot of your competition is owned by companies like Nucor or Gerdau means you need to have an advantage to compete," Hamm notes. "Ours is our fab shop and our facility in Bellwood. We move a lot of rebar through here; some jobs go into the hundreds of tons."

Because the Naperville store is so close to the Bellwood facility, the CCS team is able to turn around special orders quickly, another advantage against larger, slower competitors.

"Sometimes we get orders just because we do things that no one else does," Hamm explains. "We recently got an order because we have rebar threading capacity in Bellwood. Everyone else was weeks out, but we could do it overnight."

That said, having a large metal manufacturer in the corporate family isn't all a bed of roses. As it is in all families, sometimes the big brother can be a bit obstreperous.

"Just because we are part of the same company, that doesn't get us any preferential treatment from them," Leigh says. "SureBuiT treats us like any other dealer. They mark up to us just like they mark up everybody else. Quite frankly, they treat us worse than some others — because they can!" he says and laughs.

On the question of domestic or imported rebar, Hamm says the

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CHICAGO CONTRACTOR'S SUPPLY AT A GLANCE

FOUNDED: 1976

OWNERSHIP: Privately held

HEADQUARTERS: Naperville, Ill.

BRANCHES: Bellwood, Huntley and Naperville, Ill.; Merrillville, Ind.; Pewaukee, Wis.

SISTER COMPANIES: SureBuiT Metals & Manufacturing, American Formliners Inc.

STAFF: 75 (in CCS branches only)

MARKETS: Construction equipment and forming rentals and repair; rebar estimating and fabrication



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Back-breaking work no more, CCS does it right with automated shears and benders, enabling its fab shop team to handle hundreds of tons of bar per job. Some individual jobs go to 800 tons or more and CCS estimators work on 10 to 20 jobs simultaneously.

market dictates the choice. To meet various demands, CCS works with specific domestic suppliers when jobs call for it, but the company also imports rebar, often by the half- or full-barge load — 800 or 1,600 tons. To manage those quantities, CCS uses aSa Rebar Estimating Software for its estimating work.

Rebar operations manager Mike Schmidt heads up the company's busy rebar division. On any given day, Schmidt and his team of three full-time estimators will be working on 10 to 20 projects. Some of those jobs are completed in one pass, while others will take up to eight months of work. The amount of rebar per job can range from one ton to 800 tons or more.

"So far this year, we have done over 230 estimating jobs for different customers," Schmidt says.

"We'll get plans in from one of our customers, estimate it for them and send the quotes in," he explains. "If we are awarded the job, then I send it out to an independent detailer who creates a shop drawing, which tells where all the rebar is placed in that

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MIKE SCHMIDT, REBAR DIVISION OPERATIONS MANAGER

foundation. We send that in for approval. Once it's approved, and the customer releases it, we send it to the fabrication shop."

The detailer's bar list may cover an entire job or just part of one. That information goes to Schmidt in the form of control code that he imports into the computer system, which then prints out tags and a bar list. The bar list goes to the shop and tells the workers what to make. They fab the order and it is loaded and shipped to the job.

Schmidt's fab shop is 20,000 square feet. Four cranes handle the heavy lifting for bar that comes in

through one set of bays, is sent to the workstations, which include shear lines, automatic and manual benders and bundling and staging areas by another set of bays for shipping.

Although much of the rebar is used locally, Schmidt and his team also ship to locations such as North Dakota and Pennsylvania. Freight costs, Schmidt says, are the only obstacle to CCS being able to ship rebar anywhere in the United States.

With the rebar operation in full swing and a revived construction market in Chicagoland, Hamm smiles when asked about growth opportunities. The company's



newest branch, an acquisition, is less than three years old.

"That's always on the table," Hamm says. "Anything new right now would probably be a green-field operation, but we are always open to possibilities. So yes, we could see expanding a little further out." CS

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