



Executive of the Month: Chen, chief operating officer of Crystal Window & Door Systems: The champion of change and improvement

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Crystal Window & Door Systems' champion of change and improvement is Steve Chen. As chief operating officer, Chen constantly challenges his company to outperform other fenestration manufacturers and grow, by embracing innovation. Striving for success while operating in a business environment of constant change is something with which Chen is comfortably familiar.

"I grew up in a household never satisfied with the status quo," said Chen. "My parents and I came from Taiwan when I was a child, and I was always encouraged to work hard, to learn, develop new skills and try new things." In 1990, his father Thomas Chen founded Crystal Window & Door Systems and during summers and school breaks, he gained hands-on experience in making windows in the factory. A Penn State University graduate, Chen formally joined Crystal in 2003.

Crystal is now one of the top 40 window and door manufacturers in North America, with a complete line of energy efficient aluminum and vinyl fenestration products for every building new construction or renovation project. Crystal's windows are featured in such notable properties as Lefrak City, Rockefeller University, Frank Sinatra's former Manhattan penthouse apartment, the historic Bronx BankNote Building, the Sheraton JFK, and Stamford, CT's major new developments at Harbor Point. Growing dramatically the national firm now boasts over 500,000 s/f of manufacturing space in New York, Chicago, St. Louis, and Riverside, CA and ships nearly a half million products annually to 35 states.

A major challenge for Crystal when Chen joined the company was transitioning the family business to a corporate enterprise with the organization and processes necessary to continue its success. "I saw opportunities to use technology to streamline, automate and improve operations and sales, and that's what I focused on," said Chen. His efforts continue to transform the company.

Chen turned his attention first to the sales organization, which had grown from one location in New York City to branch and distribution offices in Allentown, Chicago, Cleveland, and St. Louis. Through computer networking, smart phones, updated website information, teleconferencing and other technology introductions, sales, engineering, production and shipping personnel seamlessly coordinate activities no matter where they're located. "This does not replace our in-person or telephone conversations, but it improves and expedites communications when we are not all in one place."

While most of Crystal's production equipment is automated, Chen saw additional ways for new technology to manage the process. Bar coding now allows every product to be tracked from one end of the factory to the other. Through close coordination with suppliers and customers, new procedures streamline manufacturing to deliver finished products exactly when customers need them, reducing warehousing, handling, and ultimately costs. Implementation of a new

enterprise-wide integrated computer system is underway. "It gives sales personnel the tools to quickly and accurately quote projects because all the information on product sizing, configurations, accessories, options and inventory availability is at their fingertips. Shop drawings and product illustrations can be prepared right from the quote, and production and delivery can be scheduled as well," said Chen.

Chen has introduced many new energy efficient products and upgraded existing ones. Crystal's R&D department utilizes 3-D printers to design new and custom product components before investing in expensive new tooling or ordering extrusions. In addition, in-house computerized window performance testing equipment greatly speeds product development, especially for custom designs and special projects. "This quickly assures that our products and new designs will meet the most rigorous performance standards," said Chen. "Our testing equipment also keeps quality at the forefront with production line sampling and testing."

Under Chen's guidance Crystal now disseminates information to customers via email newsletters as well as Facebook. Crystal also developed installation videos for contractors and dealers and implemented training seminars certified by AAMA, the national fenestration technical organization, and the American Institute of Architects. Much of the information is available on the company's comprehensive website.

Chen brings the same zeal for technology to his work with outside organizations. He is currently president of the Northeast Window & Door Association (NWDA), a regional business trade association serving 100 industry manufacturer and supplier firms. With the NWDA he has championed the enhancement of the association's website with new on-line member features and promoted the use of teleconferencing to better facilitate board meetings.

Despite his demanding schedule and responsibilities, he still finds time for recreation. He is an avid Yankee baseball fan, appreciates performance cars and is a patron of the arts. He serves on the board for Queens Theatre in the Park and the Queens Library Foundation and supports many other cultural institutions. "I love being part of the vibrant borough of Queens," said Chen. He recently married his longtime girlfriend, an attorney who is as hardworking as he is, and they reside in Queens.

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