

WGPA EXPO-WEST 2008 WINNERS

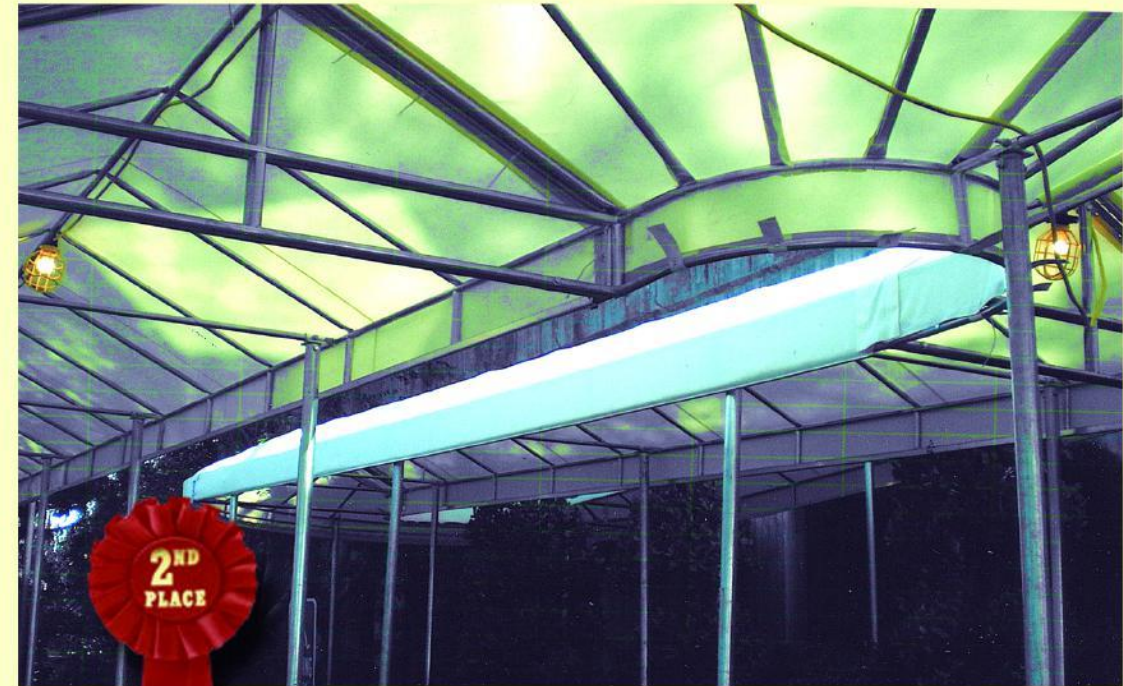


"STATER BROS. CORPORATE HQ"
AR Industries
Fontana, Calif.



Commercial canopies

"DAVIES MEDICAL CENTER"
Gianola Canvas Products
Sausalito, Calif.



"NEWPORT COAST RECREATION CENTER"
Newport Awning Co.
Santa Ana, Calif.



Tacoma Tent & Awning's Olympic Tent division keeps coming up with grand new ideas to thrill its tough-to-please customers.

Tentabilizing concepts



Company president Scott Sutherland (left), vice president of sales James Langston

Every year it's something new.

Which is precisely why Tacoma, Wash.-based Olympic Tent and its parent company – Tacoma Tent & Awning – have enjoyed such remarkable growth, time after time.

"To keep our customers satisfied and coming back for more, we keep adding innovation to our product lineup," says president and owner Scott Sutherland.

"Innovation is prized by our customers because it helps maintain their leadership position by improving their efficiency and the quality of the product, and that can for them spell the difference between success or failure."

Sutherland points with pride to the company's legacy of being "the first in the U.S. to offer slide-in tops, slide-in walls and gable ends to standard frame tents. Doing so helped change the appearance of tents to something closer to an actual structure," he says.

Building a better tent

Knowing the direction that innovation should take is seldom clear, but Olympic Tent illuminates the path by collecting extensive input from customers concerning things they like and dislike in a tent.

"We see our customers as, in effect, partners with us in the innovation process," Scott explains. "We couldn't be successful at it without their contributions to the effort."

Something customers can count on them not doing at Olympic Tent is looking for ways to skimp on quality.

"Our goal is to build a better tent that goes up faster and requires fewer people to do it, is stronger and safer, is cleaner looking and quieter on the inside, and is available for purchase when needed – not six weeks or six months after the fact," Scott asserts. "We feel

our efforts to achieve this goal actually saves the customer more money in the long run because of the greater value it promises to deliver."

Expansion mode

Olympic Tent's headquarters fills an airy 24,000-square-foot building in an historic district on the north side of Tacoma (Scott lives within easy walking distance of the facility; on his daily stroll to and from work he passes an array of creativity-inspiring sights, including restored old homes and shops, tree-lined streets and spectacular views of Commencement Bay).

The company employs 50 specialists in all aspects of tent and awning production, sales and customer support. The lights are turned on at 4 a.m. each business day and remain lit until 11 at night.

"If a customer has an event coming up and realizes he needs one extra tent, we're going to be right there to make sure that extra tent is available," Scott assures.

Meanwhile, growth is pressing Scott to consider opening a satellite office and manufacturing warehouse somewhere in the southeastern U.S. in order to more efficiently and economically serve the large number of Tacoma Tent & Awning customers scattered throughout that region, as well up the Atlantic Seaboard.

Making economic sense

Started 70 years ago as a family-owned business, Tacoma Tent & Awning was purchased by Scott's parents in 1971. He, in turn, bought it from them 15 years later (Scott celebrated 20 years as owner this past August)

"The shop had run into financial troubles and my parents were going to liquidate," recounts Scott, who was enrolled in law school at the time. "I felt I could make a go of this business, so I asked them to sell it to me."

THE BIG CHILL

*Polar Shades Sun Control
has the entire country singing,
'Baby, it's cold inside.'*

Contrary to the popular catch-phrase, it's absolutely untrue that what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas. And that's a good thing because, right now, thousands and thousands of homeowners across the country would be sweltering in their overheated

dwellings had Polar Shades Sun Control remained within the city limits of Las Vegas where the quality-minded maker of retractable shades and sun screens started and is based.

"Awnings are beautiful and elegant, and they extend your living space. But there are situations where you need a more complete barrier against sunlight to prevent unwanted thermal heating of interior spaces – and that's where shades and screens come in," says company founder and president Steve Mevius. "Many consumers prefer shades to awnings because shades can block even the lowest-angled sunlight from hitting a win-

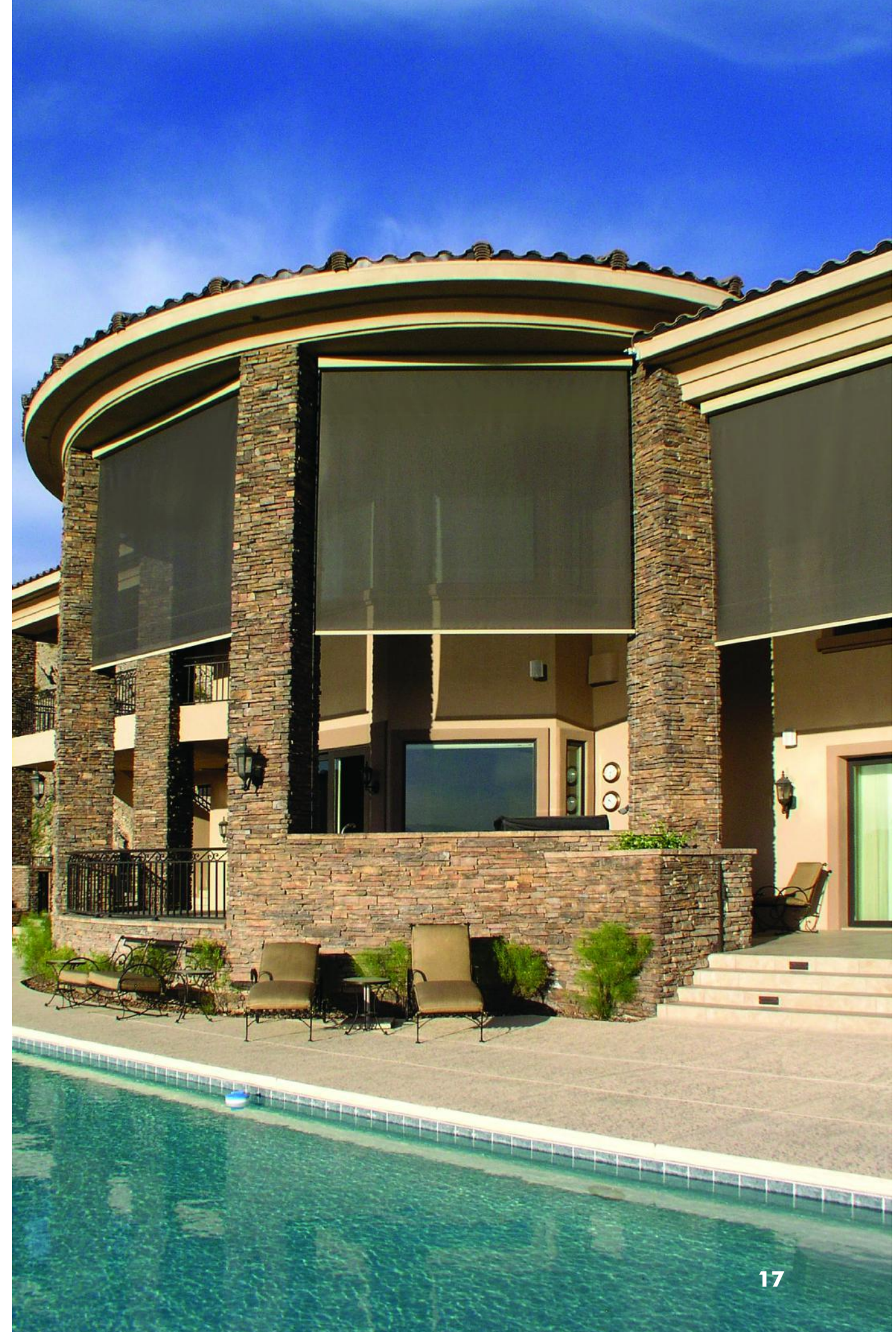
dow while still allowing a view of the outside."

'NEVER SAY NEVER'

Polar Shades are offered for custom applications only, and are available through a dealer network stretching coast to coast (in Las Vegas, the company sells direct-to-consumers at its retail store).

"We're also in a partnership with Eclipse Awnings in which we manufacture shades for that company's dealers," adds Steve.

Polar Shades is guided by the philosophy of never saying never. "We're a very customer-service-oriented company," Steve explains. "We support our dealers in ways





Headquarters of Polar Shades Sun Control.

unlike anything anybody did when I first got started with this business. Our goal is to do whatever it takes to help our dealers be successful with these products – their problems are our problems.”

The company operates from an attractive, 9,000-plus-square-foot facility that has ceilings rising 25 feet tall.

“We’ve been in this building only a few months now and already were talking about needing even more space because of our continuing strong growth,” Steve says with a chuckle.

THOROUGHLY TESTED

Those high ceilings permit indoor use of assembly racks that tower 20 feet in the air.

“We put completed shades on these racks to test them at their full height,” Steve tells. “We feel this is the only way to properly test product before it goes out our door.”

Meanwhile, the manufacturing area is outfitted with a 10-foot by 24-foot automated Gerber cutting table and a number of state-of-the-art radio-frequency welding systems.

Because shades and screens are the kind of product shoppers need to see and touch, Polar Shades Sun Control maintains a heavily visited showroom and participates in as many home-and-garden and

home-improvement shows as possible.

To a lesser degree, the company acquaints consumers with its products through advertising in glossy magazines devoted to architecture and the good life. Dealers engage in their own local marketing outreaches, which Polar Shades enthusiastically supports with brochures and other point-of-sale materials as well as co-op advertising dollars.

HOME-GROWN SOLUTION

Steve started Polar Shades in 1995 after finding it impossible to cost-effectively cool down his own Las Vegas home with air conditioning alone.

“I looked into using solar screens as a solution, so I contacted several companies that installed them to see what they had to offer,” he remembers.

After looking over those firms’ products and proposals, Steve came to the conclusion they were peddling low-quality, over-priced wares.

“I thought to myself that I could make a better solar shade than any of those I was shown,” says Steve, at the time a manager for American Airlines with no background in the industrial fabrics biz, but a lifelong home-improvements enthusiast who knew his way around drawing boards and tool racks.

Accordingly, Steve hunkered down in his garage and crafted a sun blocker more to his liking. He then installed his handiwork himself.

SIDELINE TO MAINLINE

The next thing Steve knew, he was besieged with requests from family, neighbors and friends to make solar shades for them too, so attractive and effective was the solution he devised.

Recognizing there was income-generating potential in all of this, Steve secured a business license

and started Polar Shades Sun Control as a sideline.

Less than five years later, Steve’s endeavor had mushroomed beyond the ability of his garage to contain it. At that juncture, he moved into a 2,000-square-foot facility in another part of town. He remained there only for a year before needing to step up to still-larger quarters.

“Because I was still working at the airline, I could only come in to the shop at the end of the day or on my days off,” says Steve, indicating that he entrusted the company the rest of the time to his father, Art Mevius (who continues on to this day as the company’s operations manager).

In 2002, Steve took early retirement from American so that he could concentrate on Polar Shades.

FLYING HIGH

Over the years, Steve broadened his product line to include several types of retractable shades.

Until 2004, the company made its products from off-the-shelf hardware. That year, it began using hardware and extrusions made in-house.

“Other than the motors and fabrics, every piece of the product is something we designed and fabricated right here from our own dies and processes,” says Steve. “We do good work here. That’s something I’m extremely proud about.”

AN ‘ICE PLACE TO LIVE

A recent project by Polar Shades Sun Control through its Las Vegas retail operation involved installation of exceptionally large exterior shades at a local mansion (see photo, Page 17).

The sheer size of the shades, coupled with the location of the home – nestled on a hill – made this quite a challenging project.

“The shades measured 23 feet in length by 22 feet in height,” says company president Steve Mevius.

To install these enormous shades, Polar Shades first had to make special soffit-mount brackets that could be tap-drilled into the home’s steel I-beam studding.

Moreover, the slope of the terrain was steep enough that ladders could not be used in the installation process.

“We had to go in with scaffolding and jack stands,” says Steve. “We spent one full day doing nothing but assembling scaffolds.”

Once the scaffolding was in place, installation stretched across another full day and on into half of one more.

“The size of the shades coupled with the steel studding made this a somewhat longer installation than normal,” he says, adding that Polar Shades assigned a four-man crew to this project.

“The completed project looks amazing, and the homeowner was thoroughly delighted,” Steve reports.