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FrameMax makes building a snap

By: PATRICK WRIGHT - Staff Writer

Anyone who has ever built a model airplane would understand the formula behind the success of FrameMax.

The Poway-based company makes parts for building house frames, and labels each piece for final construction. Builders only have to fit the pieces together according to the assembly instructions to create the frame for their new abode.

Phil Ellis, the company's chief executive officer, said ease of building is the technique's major advantage.

"It's like putting a Lego set together," he said. "It's just joining the dots."

FrameMax's patented "build-by-numbers" approach to homebuilding reduces the building materials and time needed to erect a house. The company's steel-framing system cuts the use of wood by 90 percent while using an average of 65 percent recycled materials ---- an important consideration, since the average, wood-framed home uses about an acre of trees.

It has helped the company grow to a \$50 million construction firm in a decade, with sales soaring 300 percent in the past six months.

For many construction firms, building is a two-step process. An architect designs the structure and a builder gets the supplies. Both the drawings and materials are brought to the physical site for the final structure. Any changes in construction must happen on-site, causing potential delays and increasing labor or material costs.

FrameMax's process sends computer-designed parts to a machine that produces the necessary parts, obviating most on-site construction changes.

Recently, Carlsbad's Grand Pacific Resorts chose FrameMax to provide the building skeletons for several buildings in its \$5.1 million, 56-acre hotel and condominium complex in the city of Carlsbad. The 10-year project consists of three hotels and 27 villa-type timeshare condominiums. Builders plan to start construction in November.

Bruce Zelenka, project director, said Grand Pacific Resorts chose FrameMax for its reputation and cost savings compared to other companies and building techniques.

"The property insurance (alone) will cost one-third the price if we used wood," he said. "That could save us \$100,000 per year."

FrameMax started as an idea Ellis had while building in New Zealand. The 53-year-old retired computer programmer couldn't believe the costs associated with creating his dream home. He used his computer programming skills to create a new way to design and then build steel frames based on project needs. He relocated to Poway about four years ago.

The company's framing process starts with computer-designed parts meant to connect the floor, walls and roof based on project specifications and local building codes. Then the designs are sent to FrameMax's steel-frame-making machines for final production. Once the machine produces the pieces, the computer creates a layout plan for final assembly.

Workers at the construction site simply follow directions and create the structure in half the time needed for usual building, according to a company release.

CEO Ellis said he is surprised to see himself move from a computer programmer to a home builder, but the switch has been a positive one.

"It's more rewarding," he said. "You can see something being built."

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