

Mohawk's Sustainability Transformation

BY MIKENNA PIEROTTI

BELIEVING IN BETTER



Mohawk's Lichen collection has a net-positive impact on the environment.

Few companies can boast a commitment to pushing the envelope as long and enduring as **Mohawk**. For nearly 140 years, this leading flooring company, the world's largest, has made transformation one of its top priorities. This willingness to look to the future for everything from design to cultural trends has allowed Mohawk to grow into a family of brands offering global customers more than 30 flooring options and hundreds of high quality, eco-friendly products—from residential carpet to commercial tile. At Mohawk, sustainability is more than a marketing tactic, it's imbedded in their culture. But until recently, while the company was adept at walking the walk, talking the talk—promoting and articulating their vision—wasn't given the attention it needed.

BELIEVING IS DOING

Enter **George Bandy, Jr.**, a veteran of the sustainability realm for over 20 years. He's been chairman of the board for the USGBC, head of sustainability at **Interface**, and sustainability officer

for the **University of Texas Health Science Center** in Houston. When he came on as vice president for sustainability at Mohawk in July 2016, he immediately saw what Mohawk was doing right—and what it could do better. "Often, because of their size, sustainability attributes were just things they knew they *needed* to do," Bandy says. "They were leading in the marketplace they were in, but it wasn't really in a comprehensive format you can deliver with a message."

In order to become not only a leader in sustainability but also a source of inspiration in the marketplace, Bandy knew Mohawk had to learn to connect the disparate dots of the sustainability initiatives they were already investing in—design, transparency, and innovation—and corral them all under a new narrative. That narrative became known as "Believe in Better."

"Believing in Better" is a mindset that everyone has a role to play in getting better around sustainability together," Bandy says. "We can compete on other things—design, cost, texture, color, performance, delivery, service, operational excellence—

PHOTO: COURTESY OF MOHAWK

we can compete on those platforms, but in terms of the environmental aspect, it's not OK for us to privatize the wealth and socialize the risk.”

Rather than simply focusing on their numbers, of which Mohawk boasts some great ones—like the 5.5 billion plastic bottles and plastic bottle caps they’ve recycled into residential products or the more than 500 Red List-free products they’re going to market with—this flooring giant is looking to promote a new mindset. “How do we make the world better? How do we make the people who work for us better? How do we create a better place for us to exist and contribute? How do we filter and foster that in a way that our customers begin to see us as a better partner to do business with? ‘Believing in Better’ is about thinking holistically about the value that we leave rather than the mark that we make,” Bandy says.

And it all starts with pulling back the curtain on their truly innovative, and conversation-provoking designs.



MAKING MOTHER NATURE SMILE

Perhaps no better symbol of Mohawk’s evolving design exists than the company’s 2017 **NeoCon** showroom, which won the company three “Best of NeoCon” awards, including one for its innovative **Lichen Collection**, a new modular plank carpet system that marries biophilic design (in perfect mimicry of natural forms and colors—bright greens, oranges, and rich grays that literally pop off the floor) and sustainability. Lichen became



the first flooring product to earn the **International Living Future Institute’s Living Product Challenge Petal Certification** and has a net-positive impact on the environment and communities.

Bandy says this collection is just one example of how Mohawk is leading the charge in merging inspiring design and green technology. “We were looking to create a beautiful design that also speaks to what designers are looking for, that has the color palettes people are resonating with, but at the same time doesn’t lose the sustainability value and how that is implemented as part of the process.”

As vice president of sustainability, it’s been Bandy’s job to make sure that holistic approach becomes imbedded in what the company does, how they think, and how others think of them—as a company that isn’t just working to protect the Earth we have today, but one aspiring to make it better. “I like to say we are creating the type of flooring that makes Mother Nature smile,” he says.

And in this marketplace, transparency is critical to that process. In addition to using the Declare Label on quite a few of their products, Mohawk is taking transparency to a whole new level, opening up both its products’ performance and its manufacturing processes to public scrutiny,

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MOHAWK

including how the people who make their products are treated. “We want the people who make our products to be healthy and well, not just the products that come out,” Bandy says. From opening healthy life centers for employees to use to bringing in nurse practitioners to treat workers at their facilities, they’re betting on the idea that healthy workers make better products. “Our customers, especially the millennials, are asking for that type of transparency,” he says.

This mindset also feeds back into their research and development in new ways. Bandy describes their R&D team like brothers and sisters, constantly challenging each other and feeding off every corner of the company, its many partners, and hundreds of products. “For example, we can learn something about stability from hard surfaces, we can learn something about acoustical value from soft surfaces, we can learn something from our residential brands about comfort. We talk to each other, not just across the platforms that you see, but in ways you don’t.”

That system of cross-pollination has led to some revolutionary products, from products with an inherent acoustical inner layer construction that eliminates the need for underlayment, which

reduces cost and installation time, to a new form of enhanced resilient tile (formerly known as Luxury Vinyl Tile) that doesn’t contain vinyl or PVC, soon to be released.

TOWARD THE FUTURE

Beautiful designs and innovations aside, Mohawk’s focus on changing the conversation is one of their most unique aspects. “We are touching folks in a different way in order to create a mindset, plant a seed. That’s a little bit different than just talking about what we are able to accomplish.”

Rather than “sticking our chest out,” Bandy says Mohawk is sharing and inviting customers, partners, and communities to become extensions of the Mohawk “Believe in Better” story. That includes the end-users of their products—real people. “We have begun to look beyond to see the person who catches the bus to work and has to be in that space. If we can create a space where you feel better inside than you did outside, where people are more innovative and creative at work than they are outside, that’s the goal,” Bandy says. “That’s where creativity is born.” **gb&d**



VP of Sustainability
George Bandy,
Jr. takes a holistic
approach at
Mohawk.