



Case History

Saint-Gobain / Norton Company: Higgins Grinding Technology Center

The Challenge

Buyers and users of abrasives products often look upon them as commodities, purchasing them on the basis of price rather than considering them as part of a manufacturing process that can be measured with real-time data.

Norton Company, manufacturer of a well-known brand of abrasive products, faces the challenge of competing with smaller companies that sell abrasives into various niche markets, primarily on the basis of price. There also is a major, large-company competitor that has depth, but not breadth, of product. Norton Company needs to sell against both the price points of the niche players and the well-known, but limited products of its biggest competitor.

The Objectives:

- Create awareness of Saint-Gobain's (i.e. the Norton, Winter and Universal brands) technical capabilities to help move abrasives purchasing decisions away from a product focus to a performance orientation, by demonstrating that the technology of grinding and finishing add value to the manufacturing process.
- Present the 30,000 sq. ft. Higgins Grinding Technology Center (unique among abrasives manufacturers) as a resource for technology integration, by showcasing its highly -experienced research and technology staff.
- Increase sales to large accounts through contact with people who have a higher level of responsibility than the typical sales contacts.
- Develop partnerships with key customers, by positioning the Saint -Gobain research and technology team as problem-solvers.
- Develop closer relationships with universities, to help foster technology transfers and aid in recruitment of R&D staff.

The Strategies:

To help move abrasives purchasing decisions away from a product focus to a performance orientation, Norton Company and its agency, Ryan Wellnitz & Associates, organized a Grinding Technology Forum to showcase the Higgins Grinding Technology Center as a resource for technology integration. The fully subscribed event (100 customers and prospects) enabled Norton to directly reach its primary target audience: major, large-volume users of engineered abrasives for technical applications.

Pre-event public relations activities focused on direct contact with the target list of invitees (vice presidents of operations or engineering, R&D or technology managers, plant managers, division presidents or general managers at large, multinational companies, and even CEOs of mid-size companies with significant grinding operations). Invitations were extended in-person by the sales force and also were conveyed to selected attendees at the Saint-Gobain booth at the International Manufacturing Technology Show (the premiere industry event) seven weeks before the Grinding Technology Forum. Agency planned and conducted a luncheon briefing about the Forum for trade editors who attended IMTS, held in Chicago in early September, and produced the presentation given by Dr. K. Subramanian, Director of the Higgins Grinding Technology Center.

Day-of-event activities included an announcement released over Business Wire, highlighting the objectives of the event, industry and university participants, and the keynote speaker from Harvard Business School. Agency prepared "Proceedings" notebook for all participants, several of the presentations delivered by the Saint-Gobain speakers, and press materials for trade editors who attended.

Post-event public relations activities included development of abstracts from the presentations and transmittal of this document to all trade editors, offering them the full Proceedings book and/or bylined articles by the Grinding Technology Forum speakers.

The Results

- The event resulted in at least four immediate sales opportunities.
- The Grinding Technology Forum was fully-subscribed, with a waiting list.
- A representative from a major Japanese machine tool builder who attended the Forum requested an appointment to try the Field Instrumentation System (FIS — presented at the Forum) with their equipment.
- A top 10 U.S. company set up a visit by a Norton Company applications engineer to evaluate a new product against a competitor's; their manufacturing process will be measured by a proprietary performance mapping process developed by Norton and described at the event.
- Executives from two companies requested on-site visits by HGTC staff to conduct real-time diagnostics of their manufacturing processes with the proprietary FIS system.
- Three members of the Norton Company sales force called the marketing communications department to convey their thanks for a value-added event that they expected would result in additional business for them.
- Two people employed by the major competitor sent separate e-mail messages to the agency, inquiring whether Saint-Gobain planned to sponsor another Forum and asking for registration information. (We chose to ignore these messages.)
- Editorial coverage of the event — but, more important, the presentations — continued throughout the following year, given the continuing requests the agency and client received for bylined articles and expert comment.
- Editors who attended the event indicated that the material presented would help shape their articles, and they continue to request additional bylined articles (print and online) from the Saint-Gobain divisions.
- Editors who could not attend the event continue to call for articles, and they continue to seek information on the new Scepter™ product demonstrated at the Forum.
- University officials who participated continue to work with Saint-Gobain on technology transfers, and they recommend their most able graduates as candidates for staff positions at the Higgins Center and the various company divisions.