News Release

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June 25, 2020

FGIA Virtual Summer Conference Hosts Panel Discussion on Managing Manufacturing Operations, Customer Connections Through COVID-19

SCHAUMBURG, IL – The Fenestration and Glazing Industry Alliance (FGIA) hosted a panel discussion entitled, “Managing Manufacturing Operations and Customer Connections Through the COVID-19 Crisis” during the FGIA Virtual Summer Conference. The panel, moderated by Danny Smith, Vice President, Principal and Industry Advisory at [Ceridian](https://www.ceridian.com/), featured five U.S. and Canadian members who discussed ideas implemented by their companies to protect their workforce and manage day-to-day operations under various COVID-19 restrictions, including what they learned along the way.

Panelists included:

* Lisa Bergeron, Director of Business Development and Regulatory Affairs at [JELD-WEN](https://www.jeld-wen.com/en-us)
* Richard Braunstein, Vice President, Research and Development at [Oldcastle BuildingEnvelope](https://obe.com/)
* Jeff Jackson, President and Chief Executive Officer at [PGT Innovations](https://pgtinnovations.com/)
* Greg Lambas, Senior Director of Window and Casework Development at [Katerra](https://www.katerra.com/)
* Matt Nuss, Vice President of Operations at [Vitrum Glass Group](https://www.vitrum.ca/)

Smith started out with some opening thoughts, noting that a staggered government response has led to a staggered recovery on all levels. He encouraged businesses to work with their local governments on getting themselves designated as “essential” businesses if they had not already done so and suggested making concrete, yet flexible, plans for the future.

“We must pivot from continuity to agility,” said Smith. “Our actions now will make or break us.”

The discussion was broken into two parts: Part One asked panelists about current operations, posing questions such as what the status of their workforces is in terms of morale, health and recruitment or furloughs. Smith also asked about lessons learned, best practices and what panelists’ biggest challenges have been. Part Two asked panelists about the future and what they saw for their operations and the industry down the road. Questions included: What are expected long term impacts for the workforce? What changes have you made that you expect to be permanent? Where are opportunities down the road?

**Current Operations**

Smith asked companies whether they had furloughed employees and where they stood today.

“The construction side stayed busy,” said Nuss. “We are now recruiting people, although it has been a financial challenge due to furloughing, and we are trying to incentivize recruits.”

Smith asked also about morale and the status of the workforce.

“We are a large organization, but the company was really quick to act in restricting travel and putting in safety measures in all facilities,” said Lambas. “But there's always kind of a downside. It's hard when your job is relegated to video. The cooperative environment is lost, but we are utilizing instant messaging tools. Morale is pretty good.”

Lambas added that one nice touch has been that some employees will dress to match Zoom backgrounds, such as wearing a winter parka with a mountain-themed backdrop.

Smith asked for lessons learned.

“We used concise, timely communication with suppliers and business partners around the world,” said Bergeron. “Everyone is in different stages. Early on, we initiated a complete travel ban to keep associates safe. Due to emergency relief for employees, we are struggling to get some labor as well. Other challenges have been social distancing and making sure our employees feel safe, as safe as they would be at home.”

Bergeron advised participants to not underestimate employees' concerns.

“People are scared and they need reassurances employers are focusing on their safety,” she said. She also advised that companies turn to their associations. For example, FGIA has created a [COVID-19 resources dashboard](https://aamanet.org/pages/covid-19-resources) for its members.

Braunstein acknowledged a reduction in activity and said his company’s first concern was employee safety. He also emphasized the importance of being on the offensive where possible.

“We asked, is there anything positive to do? We developed a whole line of COVID-related security products. It felt great to be positively engaged,” he said.

**The Future**

Smith asked panelists to “get out the crystal ball” and say what the industry might expect down the road.

“A high level of sanitary measures will remain our standard,” said Bergeron. “In a post-COVID world, we must accept employees will be absent if they have flu-like symptoms. And that's a good thing.”

Lambas agreed, adding his company is planning to begin returning to some of their offices as early as July, and that those spaces are already incorporating post-COVID changes. He foresaw a reduction in non-essential travel but noted that this decision has the benefit of being cost-effective, too.

“There are multiple drivers here,” he said. “With the things that make sense and prove to be safe and cost-effective, there's no reason those things should not remain permanent changes.”

Jackson said he supports working from home in cases where it makes sense but said 80 percent of his workforce is building windows and doors, servicing products or on the road in trucks. To accommodate, he said the company will continue to make plants as safe as possible.

“We will always be sanitizing,” said Jackson. “It's also important for executives to be in the plants with our folks. We will expand office space in the short term to help facilitate distancing.”

Nuss stressed the need to let employees know their work is recognized and valued.

“Those who have to come to work to build our products, I want to make sure they understand they are valued and show we are solving their problems,” he said.

He added he plans to set a good example for future practices in the office.

“Be consistent in messaging and safety precautions,” he said. “I won't be shaking hands with people. Visits will take a lot of planning; you can't just do it tomorrow. And, maybe [host] one customer [on a] visit, not seven.”

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