

A Renewed

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FOCUS

In February 2008, Topcon Corp. and Sokkia Co. Ltd. joined forces to create the world's largest supplier of surveying instruments. Combined, the two firms had more than 160 years of experience in the surveying market—an impressive history. Both companies committed to continuing “business as usual ... with no change in brand or distribution network.” But a few months later, the stock market crashed, the economy entered a severe recession, and the surveying and con-

Sokkia brand would disappear as Topcon sought to realign its organization with the changing market conditions. Others surmised that equipment dealers would be treated unfairly and that customers would be left without support.

“The reality is that none of that is true—we’re absolutely committed to both brands and the surveying market,” said Topcon Positioning Systems President and CEO Ray O’Connor. To prove it, the company reorganized in June 2009 to form a new business unit that will allow both the Topcon and Sokkia brands to renew their focus on the technology needs of surveying professionals.

“That’s where we think the responsibility of the manufacturer is,” O’Connor said, “to take the information from the field and the customers (the experts in the subject matter), digest it, filter it and match it with technology capability—and produce instruments that will make their lives easier. That’s the focus of the company, and it drives all of our sales and engineering.”

Meeting Market Needs

While the recession has made it difficult for many surveying and mapping firms to invest in new technology, it has also heightened the need to increase productivity and efficiency. “There’s been a huge change in how surveying is done in the market as it relates to civil engineering and construction,” O’Connor said. “Driving stakes in the ground for construction projects is going away. To me, that change is inevitable because the way it’s being done today is much more productive. The surveyors who are progressive and accepting of that change and jump into managing the data on those projects ... are finding work in that area. The other part of the surveying business that’s changing quite a bit is the as-built surveys, which are using laser scanning ... to give owners the ability to better manage their assets.”

Topcon and Sokkia are seeking to bridge the gap between need and affordability by maximizing their

TPS President and CEO Ray O’Connor talks about his vision for the Topcon and Sokkia brands following the creation of a new survey business unit in June.



O’Connor (left) with Mark Contino, vice president of product marketing for all five of Topcon’s business units.

struction markets experienced a fundamental change in approach. Where work was once plentiful, firms began scrambling to stay afloat. Projects came to a screeching halt, and demand for new equipment dwindled as companies rushed to reign in their expenses.

It wasn’t long before rumors about the Topcon and Sokkia merger began to circulate. Some people speculated that Sokkia was bankrupt and that the

synergies. “We have the opportunity to stop doing things that both companies were doing to compete and free up engineering resources to work on new ideas and devices that are revolutionary in the business,” O’Connor said. “At the same time, we’ll continue to make Sokkia and Topcon instruments at a lower cost with higher accuracy and longer distances and ranges that will meet the mainstream of the market and get a big group of engineers from the market on a new generation of products.”

For example, he noted that a laser scanner two years ago cost about \$150,000 and was complex to operate because it required external computers, cables and heavy batteries. Today, scanners such as the Topcon GLS-1000 are in the \$80,000 price range and operate more like total stations. O’Connor said he expects to see continued progress in the effort to bring the price of scanners more in line with what the market can support on a broad scale. Technology for mapping has also advanced with mobile devices such as Topcon’s IP-S2 making it possible to map linear features to a high level of accuracy.

“Technology is changing rapidly,” O’Connor said. At the same time, “the budgets the states have are getting smaller and smaller, especially in a recession when the tax base is disappearing. But they still have to do work—they still have to maintain the traffic system, the highway system and all the infrastructure—so they have to find ways to cut their costs. I see nothing but upside for the surveying and engineering firms that use some of this technology to get that done.”

Educating End Users

As technology has advanced, it has created a need for more education and training to use the newest equipment and software to its fullest potential. However, state-funded schools and universities with surveying programs are increasingly strapped for funds and find it difficult to pay for the latest state-of-the-art technology.

Here, too, Topcon is working to fill the need. Through the company’s Educational Partnership Program (EPP), which was launched in 2005, Topcon has supplied surveying equipment to more than 500



New products such as the IP-S2 Mobile Mapping System are designed to help firms expand their services and capture new business.

institutions around the world. “We work with educational institutions that have an accredited program and supply them equipment at a very reasonable cost—or even no cost in cases where they can’t afford it—to make sure that they have up-to-date equipment,” O’Connor said. “We also have a rollout program, where the equipment can change on an annual basis to make sure they’re teaching students on the newest instruments and not on technology from 20 or 30 years ago.”

In addition, the company is also reaching out to current users of its products to make sure they understand how to use the latest advances to increase their competitive edge in the market. “In cases where we have new technology and we’re changing the processes and procedures that are used in the field, we will bring key customers and key engineers from those firms into one of our training facilities and educate them on new ways to accomplish what they were doing before in a shorter period of time,” O’Connor explained. The company has three test sites around the world—one in Livermore, Calif.; another in Concordia, Italy; and a third in Australia—which it uses for this purpose. Topcon also conducts Technology Roadshows in partnership with its distributors to bring educational seminars and hands-on demonstrations to locations that are convenient for users.

Through these and other training initiatives, O’Connor said “people are starting to see that they can [approach their work] in a different way and, with new instruments, provide services to the municipalities, companies, states and other clients to help them manage their assets.”

Taking the Long View

The past year has been challenging for everyone, and manufacturers have not been immune to the effects of the recession. Like many companies, Topcon has had to cut some staff and scale back where possible to maintain a healthy bottom line. Still, O’Connor isn’t discouraged. On the contrary, he remains optimistic that the surveying profession holds a significant amount of potential. “I hear a lot of people talk about surveying being a dying trade, that it’s not as needed anymore,” O’Connor said. “But I would say to you that surveying is a growing trade, and that the expertise [provided by surveyors] is required.

“We need highways that operate 100 percent of the time with no potholes or repairs because they manage it with all that information in real time. That wasn’t available before. To take an optical total station and go out and survey a highway to get all the points and information you need would once take months, if not years. Today, you’re building [databases while] flying down the highway. It’s really changed. I’m very excited about the surveying business.”

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