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## Stepping Stone

M S International's stonework showroom in crowded Orange County gives dealers the room they need to help buyers envision what good landscaping can do.

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By Joe Bousquin

At a time when many dealers see slowing sales ahead, Sonny Kapoor of M S International (MSI), sees opportunity. That's because his market, centered around landscaping and exterior home improvement, should be ready to pop if history is any indicator. "Landscaping lags housing, so after every housing boom, typically there's a landscaping boom," says Kapoor, vice president of the natural stone distributor.

Indeed, six-unit, \$200 million MSI couldn't have picked a more fitting time or place to launch its natural landscaping stone showroom. Located south of Los Angeles in the heart of Orange County, where the average base price for a new home is approximately \$850,000, MSI's 2,500-square-foot outdoor showroom is full of premium landscape stone products. Completed this year with an investment of \$250,000, MSI uses the showroom to help its dealers sell more stone to their own customers, either by touring the showroom itself or using it as a tool to help dealers to set up their own on-site displays. The showroom gives dealers an opportunity to direct customers to specific products, without having to invest in significant inventory upfront.

"You can't sell off of one stone," says Dave Thoensen, store manager at Santa Monica, Calif.-based Bourget Flagstone Co., a subsidiary of Bourget Bros. Building Materials. "If we don't have it here on the floor, I can send them over to MSI, and they'll come back and place an order with us so that it's a done deal. It's really just an extension of my own showroom."

Kapoor says that's the exact use MSI had in mind when it built the facility. "Stone is not cheap, and the space to display it is not cheap, either," Kapoor says. "You would need to have an inventory of at least \$7 million to \$8 million to supply all of this different stone."

That different stonework includes a custom California gold slate stone fireplace

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The fireplaces, water features, walkways, walls, and other displays at M S International's outdoor showroom showcase a wide breadth of stone types, including California slate, jade white sandstone, and golden white quartzite.

trimmed with polished autumn harmony granite, and a sangria split-faced stone fountain bordered by rose quartz and capped with polished caramel marble. In one display, desert gray and pearl gray sandstone slabs are laid side by side so customers can notice the subtle variations between the two. Multiple water features, surrounded by natural plants and grasses, help complete the showroom's organic, backyard feel.

In addition to being able to visualize how the material looks in context, they can feel it, too. Jack Bremer, owner of Outdoor Décor in San Clemente, Calif., a dealer specializing in landscaping, gardening, and pool design products, has met clients at MSI's showroom to let them touch the stone they may want for their own backyards, something he says is key to closing a sale. "They can walk around in their bare feet and feel the stones underneath them," Bremer says.

For Thoensen, who deals with several stone suppliers at Bourget Flagstone, MSI's showroom stands out above any he's seen. "You want to see travertine? They've got every travertine available. You want to see granite slabs? They've got an area called their premium slabs, with some of the finest granite and marble slabs that you'll see anywhere in the country," Thoensen says.

Taking a cue from MSI, Thoensen has been busy building his own on-site showroom with the help of MSI's designers, who worked at his shop for three weeks setting up custom displays. That facility has helped him boost and close sales, but he says for real impact with his customers, he sends them to MSI's facility. "There's just no way to display everything they have there," Thoensen says. "It's all on the ground there, and it's a great environment." —*Joe Bousquin is a contributing editor for PROSALES.*

### **Vital Statistics**

Company: M S International

Year founded: 1979

Headquarters: Orange, Calif.

Number of locations: 6

Number of employees: 325

2005 gross sales: \$200 million

Pro sales percentage: 40%