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Solid trend

Concrete barriers become weapons against terrorists

Stephanie Hainsfurther

NMBW Contributor

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Concrete planters are no hard sell these days, according to Ron Romero of Materials Inc. "The last three weeks have been amazing," he said in a late August interview. "We're mailing half a dozen catalogs a day all over the country. I even sent one to England yesterday. And we just dispatched twenty planters to Queens, New York."

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company's Web site, "Buildings are being designed today to incorporate wider entrances, lobbies, and halls to accommodate security checkpoints and metal detectors, as well as other security components such as

This flurry of sales activity cashes in on the trend toward heightened building and public spaces security since Sept. 11, 2001. According to an article by Romero on the



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reinforced concrete around a building's core." Managers of existing buildings, however, are buying virtually indestructible concrete barriers like planters and posts to place in front of entrances for added security.

Materials Inc., a Bernalillo company that makes precast concrete barriers and street furniture, is grabbing this business solely through its Web site (www.materialsinc.com), without additional advertising in print or broadcast media. In the two months since the Web site has been revamped, this local manufacturer has expanded sales within an existing customer base and reached out to new prospects that include municipalities, contractors and military installations.

With fewer than two million people in New Mexico, Materials Inc. has saturated the market here, comments Romero, who is the company's secretary and treasurer. Out-of-state customers are taking up the slack. "We've probably sold 10 times more planters in El Paso than in Albuquerque," he says. "The courthouse in downtown El Paso just bought 15 or so of our largest planters." Other products on offer include bollards (piers originally designed to lash boats to the wharf), park and garden benches, table sets and trashcans.

Romero calls the very recent upturn in business just "the tip of the iceberg" when it comes to security-conscious sales. "We're starting to ship all over the country," he notes. This manufacturer already has standing orders for some of its precast outdoor furniture, like benches and picnic tables, through The U.S. Forest Service in Tennessee, Washington and Oregon, among other states. Local clients are loyal clients, too -- Romero says they have sold thousands of concrete planters, one of their more popular items, to Sandia National Laboratories.

Design features built into the Materials Inc. Web site are responsible for the site's increased visibility to potential customers. "I used some search engine optimization techniques to get them closer to the top of the search engines," remarks Lori Garin, owner of Weaving Web Designs LLC, the firm that upgraded the site. "You can have a beautiful Web site but, if you don't design it with the search engines in mind, it might be beautiful but it won't be found." Garin also redesigned the company's previous Web site to make it more functional and attractive. "The look is more enticing and visually stimulating, and I also coordinated it with the look of the catalog they had," she says.

Clients can access and enter information to request a quote over the Internet, but must call to place an order. Materials Inc. made the decision not to fill orders over the Web site, and Garin concurs. "With a Web site,

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it's always good to have human contact on the other end," she points out.

"It is not necessarily a standard product, and there are other considerations to discuss. It's good to have someone relating to [a customer] on the fulfillment side."

In his recent article, Romero calls concrete planters and their ilk "transparent security," referring to the unremarkable experience of finding a concrete planter or cigarette snuffer or trashcan outside of a public building.

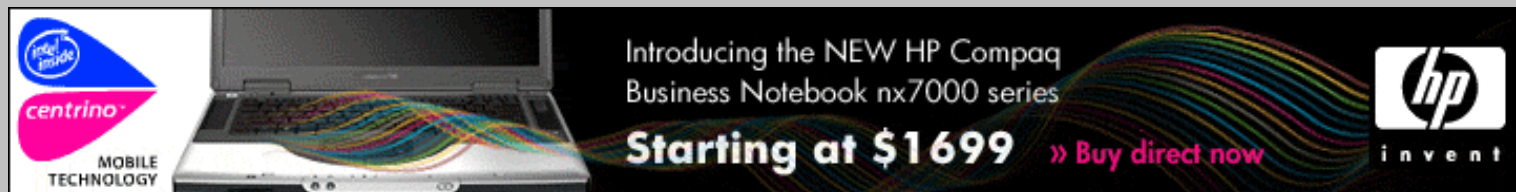
No one thinks anything of a concrete stanchion placed at the edge of a parking lot to keep vehicles off the sidewalk and away from the front doors.

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Is it particularly American to want our security measures to be unobtrusive? "We make highway barriers, too, and they're pretty obtrusive," Romero jokes, but admits that concrete planters filled with flowers are perceived by passersby as architectural embellishments rather than safety barriers.

The company has adopted specifications based on industry standards as set forth by the Architectural Precast Association (www.archprecast.org), of which it is a member. The Association educates design professionals, contractors, architects, manufacturers and others who use precast concrete in building construction.

The precast products that Materials Inc. makes and sells are reinforced with rebar and fiber mesh. The exact impact load that one of these products can bear is unknown. "We've never tested it, but a [concrete] planter that's filled with dirt is definitely going to stop a van," says Romero. The load impact of concrete structures depends upon the hardness of the materials, the reinforcement inside the structure, and the speed at which the structure is impacted. Clients also buy the company's street furniture and then surround them with concrete planters or bollards for additional security.

Customer awareness of security matters has increased their business in unforeseen ways as well. For example, Materials Inc. is working with the city of Santa Fe to install concrete panels at its water pumping stations and fit them with bullet-proof doors made by an out-of-state manufacturer. Protection of the municipal water supply is a primary concern in a world besieged by terrorists.

Normally, production cycles within the company are in a "feast or famine" mode, says Romero.

"When we get busy, we bring in temporary labor, and when it slows down, we have a nucleus of 15,"

he explains. Right now, its workforce is at full capacity to fill the orders

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for security barriers, an indication that business will be booming for the foreseeable future.

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