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Serious Materials to Green the Empire State Building

Kevin Surace, winner of *Inc.*'s 2009 Entrepreneur of the Year award, talks about winning a multi-million dollar contract to replace all the windows in New York's most iconic building.

By Leigh Buchanan | Mar 4, 2010

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If the client will not go to the production site, the production site will go to the client.

So declared Kevin Surace, *Inc.* Magazine's 2009 Entrepreneur of the Year. And with that ingenious bit of problem-solving Surace landed his company's highest-profile job to date: a contract to make energy-efficient all 6,514 windows—roughly 26,000 panes of glass—in the Empire State Building. To do the job, Serious Materials, a manufacturer of sustainable windows and drywall based in Silicon Valley, will establish a production site in 5,000 square feet on the building's fifth floor. There, 30 to 40 employees will work through the nights until the job is finished in December.

The Empire State Building contract has been two years in the making. In 2007, Anthony Malkin, whose family owns the structure and whose real-estate investment firm manages it, announced a plan to reduce the skyscraper's energy use 38 percent by 2013, saving \$4.4 million in the process. Windows would play a big part. But Malkin, who had had new, dual-pane windows installed as recently as the 1990s, hated the idea of simply throwing all that glass away. Surace argued for reuse: Serious Materials has a process that transforms old glass into super-insulating glass four times more efficient than most energy-efficient windows. However removing the panes, trucking them to one of the company's factories, processing them and bringing them back would be enormously time and labor-consuming. And then, of course, glass breaks. Glass transported around the country can break a lot.

Then Robert Clarke, a project manager whose windows company Serious Materials acquired in 2008, came up with the notion of a temporary on-site production line. "We'd just be bringing windows down the elevator and then bringing them back up as a new high-R value product," says Surace, referring to a measurement for insulation. "It was a brilliant idea—completely

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unconventional."

The deal was announced yesterday and Surace is arranging the transportation of several tons of machinery—some of it from Serious Materials' plants, some bought new—to the project site. Necessary equipment includes glass washers, film stretchers and rollers, and ovens. The company plans to hire local workers and train them in its processes.

"Serious Materials competed with the most prominent manufacturers and service providers for a key component of our program to make our energy savings goals a reality," said Malkin in a statement. "Their expertise and ingenuity at competitive standards won them the job. When the total project is done, we will have happier tenants, a more comfortable environment in all seasons, and long-term energy and cost savings." (The general contractor handling the project has asked subcontractors, including Serious Materials, not to discuss the specifics of their bids. The total cost of the Empire State Building refurbishment is budgeted at \$13.2 million.)

"We've never reused glass in such a large project or put in a remote work site," says Surace. "But I see no reason you couldn't just pick up [the production site] and put it in another building. The Empire State Building was built in 1931. If we can do it there we can do it anywhere."

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EcoXperience 03/05/2010 09:29 AM

It is great news to see a green startup like Serious Materials winning a bid with such magnitude/visibility. I've been following Serious Materials and Kevin Surace for a while now, and all of the press that they've received has conveyed great things about this company and their culture. I will be interested to see how they are able to manage the operations and quality assurance aspects of the remote factory, and see this as a great opportunity as a case study for this work approach. Also, the gears are already turning on how the equipment could be scaled down to allow a "mobile factory" concept. With the growing government

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incentives and energy-saving cost reductions that this technology provides, it's only a matter of time before other building owners/managers elect to implement similar retrofits. Exciting news and best of luck to Serious Materials on delivering this project!

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