

# APPLICATOR

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**29** 5 Minutes With: Lester Hensley  
By Abbie Stutzer

## 945 GREEN STREET PROJECT

**FIXER UPPER DONE RIGHT:  
Comprehensive Restoration  
for Historic San Francisco  
High Rise**



# Lester Hensley

## EMSEAL and SWR Institute

BY ABBIE STUTZER

Lester Hensley

Photo by: Derek Speed Photography

**L**ester Hensley talks with *Applicator* about his years of experience in the industry.

**Applicator:** You graduated in '87, and started working at EMSEAL in '90 -- where did you work during those in-between years?

**Lester Hensley:** I worked for an organizational development-consulting firm and then for the City of Boston's Economic Development and Industrial Corporation (EDIC).

**Applicator:** Did you always know that you were going to work in the industry?

**LH:** Not at all. There was nothing at my college career services office on "expansion joints," or specified construction products for that matter that I can recall. I got into the industry through a family relationship. Family friends of ours from South Africa had started EMSEAL in the 1950s and moved it to Toronto in 1979. They set up a U.S. company based in Stamford, Connecticut. In 1990, my dad and I were asked by our friend to take over the U.S. operation. I started with the firm in August that year and dad joined me in December. Between the holidays and New Years, we moved the company up to Westborough, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston. Twenty-five years later, here we are -- with three facilities (two in Toronto and one in Westborough).

**Applicator:** Tell us about your start at EMSEAL.

**LH:** Initially my title was national sales manager, but, by necessity, my role was always broader than that as EMSEAL was just beginning to establish its reputation in the market. The specified construction products industry is generally quite skeptical of new technologies. This is a good thing because we're talking about the built environment, and safety and performance concerns are paramount in architects and engineers' minds. So, in addition to selling, building, and maintaining a rep force, and expanding distribution channels, I got involved in analyzing and improving our process and our product. This led to roles in organization development and product development. Based on feedback from the marketplace and on our own observations, we identified numerous opportunities for new or improved products.

Building on the success of each iteration or new product release, we grew the company and added layers of service, sales, manufacturing, and support personnel. This allowed me to increasingly focus on R&D and product innovation. With the promotion of Dan O'Hayer to president in 2014, my role today as CEO centers on product development, strategic marketing, and intellectual property strategy.

**Applicator:** What do you most enjoy about your work at EMSEAL?

**LH:** At EMSEAL, we believe in a more durable, reliable, energy efficient and safe-built environment. We contribute

to the realization of this goal by offering innovative expansion joint and sealant products that work. We believe that far too much is wasted throwing good money at bad design and the installation of products that are not thoroughly conceived, detailed, and communicated. We believe that in partnership with like-minded architects, engineers, general contractors, and waterproofing and restoration contractors, it is possible to deliver watertight, lowest-total-cost-of-ownership structures to property owners. The most satisfying part of my work is when this is realized. With thorough collaboration, we can deliver a project that makes the owner happy, minimizes conflict, and allows all parties to make a profit that is not eroded by callbacks, failures, or complaints.

I love the connection my work gives me to the rest of the world -- to popular and sports culture, and to the architecture and engineering of structures everywhere. I love watching a football game knowing that our product sealed the joints at Gillette, or Lambeau, Levi's, Marlins, The Tide, or the Badgers. I love going to NYC and looking up at the 600 windows of the Empire State Building, all sealed by us in partnership with others. My family thinks I'm nuts, but they continue to endure my excitement and incessant photographing of them crossing airport expansion joints in Nashville, Tampa, Barcelona, or Heathrow, or wait in the lobby shaking their heads as I run around MOMA or the

Guggenheim to inspect COLRSEAL in the walls. And I love driving my car over every bridge and parking deck hearing that satisfying “ga-dunk” as the tires cross the joint knowing that each rumble represents an opportunity.

**Applicator:** Where would you like to see EMSEAL go in the next five years? Where do you see your career going?

**LH:** EMSEAL has never been content to follow. Our R&D mantra is “Innovate, Don’t Imitate.” This means that we are never content just to repeat or copy what is already on the market. It also means that we are respectful of the intellectual property of others and are inspired by those around us who are also pushing the envelope through their new ideas. Continuous improvement in process, product and our people derives from a culture in which we are willing to self-reflect and rise to the challenges brought to us by new expectations of performance from our ever-evolving industry. We are always looking for ways to improve our existing products and to invent new ones. We embrace change, and in doing so, create opportunities for expansion. Over the next five years, I expect to see EMSEAL’s leadership role in expansion joint and sealant technology recognized globally. I would like to see continued growth while preserving the values on which we were founded.

**Applicator:** How has the industry changed over the years?

**LH:** Building science is ever evolving. As a result, the construction industry is a dynamic and exciting place to work. The emergence of sustainability as a benchmark for design and construction is a good example of a movement that has driven great changes in our field. In addition, world events shape our industry all the time. The events of September 11th, 2001, have had repercussions on our industry in numerous ways as we reflect on life-safety requirements

and even the human-health implications of material composition. The earthquakes in Haiti and Chile five years ago provided a backdrop against which to further consider seismic design standards globally, and hurricane Sandy underscored the need to focus on the resiliency of products and the built environment in general.

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Our industry has also seen the roll up through acquisition of many firms in the architectural, engineering, building product, distribution and construction company space. This is not altogether a bad thing and comes in inevitable cycles. If there is some cause for concern or caution it would be that a broad trend to conglomeration doesn’t result in a dilution of innovation, creativity, specialization, and a loss of the personal connection between client and vendor.

Finally, technology has transformed our industry. In so many ways our industry is perfectly matched to what digital and communication advances offer. When was the last time you visited “the plan room,” or lugged a massive role of blueprints to your takeoff desk? The power of computation, communication, and collaboration that we hold literally in the palm of our hands is transformational. You can do a shared, digitally photographed, videoed and documented condition survey on a hi-rise or historical structure while hanging on a rope; feed live video of a walkthrough of a parking deck expansion joint

replacement project from the field to the office for problem solving and product selection; simultaneously share a desktop in Boston with a team of stakeholders in Chicago and Abu Dhabi as if you are in the same room. All of the formerly mentioned would have been mind-blowing to consider 25 years ago. CAD, 3-D CAD, BIM and the ability to have these resources available 24/7 on the Internet change the game, too. (I still have a stack of floppy disks of our details on my desk if anyone needs one -- they make a decent coaster.) Also: The ability to crowd-source solutions to problems through discussion threads on social media platforms brings the industry closer all the time. Finally, with the integration of technology with building science and advances -- even in construction method -- have combined to attract an unprecedented level of talent. The pool of candidates willing to embrace a career in construction fields has never been broader or more talented.

**Applicator:** Are there any industry trends that you’re currently embracing at EMSEAL?

**LH:** Motivated by the previously mentioned world events, combined with a recognition that status quo structural expansion joint and sealant products fell short of modern design demands, EMSEAL invented and patented, among others, the single-unit fire and water resistant pre-compressed foam sealant (EMSHIELD), and the non-invasively anchored, watertight and fire-rated seismic plate expansion joint system (SJS). In this way, EMSEAL started a trend toward product technologies that are multi-functional, resilient, and allow for greater design and installation freedom. We continue to innovate along this trend line.

From an information technology standpoint, EMSEAL was an early adopter of tools that facilitate collaboration and customer experience. We continue to embrace breakthroughs that allow for more

cost-effective delivery of solutions and service without compromising quality. In doing so, we have mastered the ability to efficiently deliver lasting solutions to projects domestically and globally.

EMSEAL is also engaged in looking ever forward. To accept the second of two innovation awards in 2014 for our bridge expansion joint sealing solution, I recently attended the TransOvation conference held at Microsoft Headquarters in Washington State. The conference is a facilitated brainstorming session in which 30-year future trends are imagined. Among the mind benders were 3-D printed buildings and bridges, and technology that would reduce -- by 50 percent -- the effect of gravity on vehicles. Imagining what affect these possible realities might have on structural design and other aspects of our industry, as well our company's role in it, is always stimulating.

**Applicator:** How do you approach training at your company?

**LH:** Learning through teaching is at the heart of all training at EMSEAL. Collaborative, situational training of

new hires by more experienced staff is highly effective in shortening the learning curve.

Implementation of an SWR Institute-validated training program is the latest way in which continuous learning is being delivered by EMSEAL to both our market and internally over the last couple of years. It provides a learning opportunity through which we can impart our knowledge while learning from the experience of contractors, designers, distributors, and engineers who attend these sessions held about every six weeks throughout the year. We give our staff the responsibility of teaching portions of both the classroom and hands-on sessions. The validated training program has provided a structured and regular venue in which to ramp up the knowledge of our own technical service and sales staff.

**Applicator:** Tell us about your time with the SWR Institute -- how has it affected how you do business?

**LH:** SWR Institute has been invaluable in providing knowledge about the broader industry. In order to effectively deliver services and

products to make a difference, one needs to understand building science more generally and appreciate the context in which our products and company perform. Beyond knowledge, the SWR Institute has provided a venue to develop a network through fellowship, a place to introduce new products and technology, and a forum to learn about the positives and negatives of our products from contractors and designers. It took me a few years, but I realized that to get value from the SWR Institute, you have to get involved and give back. My years as co-chair of the program planning committee and subsequent service on the Board of Directors, combined with giving full and showcase presentations was the time over which my deepest bonds were formed with other members. I was able to contribute to the organization through some of my ideas and talents and benefit from the talents, camaraderie, and appreciation of others. I encourage anyone who is looking to maximize their benefit from the SWR Institute to get involved beyond just attending the meetings. •

## WINTER 2015 APPLICATOR AD INDEX

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