

# TileDealer

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## One-on-Two...

*with Barry Culkin & Roger Questel*

**“I knew this material was an important innovation in the world of interior decoration.”**

**By Jeffrey Steele**

As one of the world’s leading manufacturers of decorative tile, Rutland, Vermont-based Questech Corporation has carved out an enviable place in the tile industry. The firm’s fascinating success story is chiefly the result of efforts by two men: company founder, chairman and creative director Roger Questel, and president/CEO Barry Culkin.

Roger Questel launched his career as a sculptor in the late 1980s, carving works of art out of wood and later metal in a New York City studio. Finding solid metal too heavy and expensive, he set out to find an alternative material that met his needs.

Not long after, he developed a revolutionary process for casting beautiful metal objects at a fraction of the weight and cost of solid metal. That set the stage for Questech Corporation, and the tile industry’s first mass-produced cast metal tiles.

Barry Culkin, who had been president of Boston Whaler and head of Reebok’s U.S. operations, was recruited more than a decade ago to serve as president and CEO, help find a way to manage the company’s increasingly complex operations and lead Questech Corporation into new markets. Culkin has shepherded the company to a fivefold increase in sales, and into a 70,000-square-foot state-of-the-art headquarters facility where 100 employees produce cast metal, cast stone and natural stone tiles.

Questel and Culkin recently granted a unique “One-on-Two” interview with TileDealer to discuss how Questech metal was invented, the way in which the company embraced tile making, the secrets of its successful distribution and new product development and what’s ahead for Questech Corporation in the coming years.

**TileDealer:** For those who may not be familiar with Questech, please give us an introduction to the company.

**Culkin:** Questech is a company that prides itself on providing innovative new ideas and superior design to the tile industry—or as we call it “Artistry and Imagination.” Our company was the first to bring premium, lightweight cast metal tiles to the market on a national scale. And with the help of our customers, we created the category. Today, we are very much the leader in the decorative tile market, not just with metal tiles, but also with decorative cast stone and accessories



*Barry Culkin & Roger Questel*

that are beautifully designed, easy to care for, and domestically produced, which allows us to deliver superior levels of delivery and service.

We’ve evidently done a good job in a relatively short period of time, because it’s hard to go in to a tile store today and not find a Questech product.

**TileDealer:** It must have been difficult for a small metal tile company to establish wide-spread distribution so quickly. How did you do it?

**Questel:** From the moment we started, we always had the best customers. Before we were in the tile business, Questech was a visual merchandising company. We created beautiful premium metal signs and merchandising for the top brands in the world—like Harley Davidson, Absolut Vodka, and Timberland.

These companies were attracted to our product because we provided them with brand identity signage in a material that reflected and reinforced their image. When we became a tile company, it was also the best brands that recognized that we could provide beautiful metal tile that would complement their lines.

My invention garnered a lot of attention—it received recognition in the book *The Rolex Award for Innovation*, in important newspaper articles, and from the Smithsonian's Cooper Hewitt Museum, into which Questech metal was inducted.

My very first Questech customer was Radio City Music Hall, for which I created tile and trim. I knew this material was an important innovation in the world of interior decoration and I was also aware of the potential it had as a business.

In order for Questech to reach its potential, I knew that I needed a counterpart with the experience and skills to grow the company into a successful enterprise. Barry was a successful executive who had been president of Boston Whaler and a senior vice-president for Reebok. Barry and I were introduced on a snowy day in December and immediately experienced the kind of chemistry necessary to establish a long term partnership—as well as forge a real friendship.

**TileDealer:** How did you make the transition to tile?

**Questel:** When I invented Questech metal, I realized that it presented a great tile design opportunity. Never before had premium metals like bronze and pewter been as easy to design with, work with or care for as it had now. And the medium of metal seemed to be a perfect decorative complement to the kitchen and bath—a fact that is evident today with the popularity of metal hardware, appliances and faucets and fixtures. But Barry was the one to recognize and understand that the tile business could drive the economic engine for the company.

Essentially, he saw visual merchandising for what it was—a custom products business. He knew that we needed to make products that could be sold day in and day out, so that we could expand our sales to a much greater degree, and be more consistently profitable.

**TileDealer:** Barry, what did you see in Questech to make you leave big business for what essentially was a start-up company?

**Culkin:** I recognized immediately that Questech metal was a “change the competitive landscape” technology. In other words, I saw a beautiful material that had the potential to provide a dramatic difference in the marketplace. I didn't know yet which market was the right one, but I was determined to move us from a custom shop to a branded company that produced and distributed standard product lines. We looked at a lot of different businesses to enter, but it turns out that Roger's first Questech job—tile for Radio City Music Hall—was not going to be the last.

**TileDealer:** You said that you invented Questech metal. How did that happen?

**Questel:** I ran into the same issue that, for centuries, artists and sculptors have had to face—that casting premium metal is an expensive and difficult medium to work in. I started my career as a wood sculptor in New York City, and eventually was being commissioned to sculpt works of art for clients like Orson Welles, the Gettys and Ralph Lauren. But I was also determined to design sculpture that could be sold in the best galleries in the city. I had created a series of large sculpted wooden bowls with fascinating design features that I thought would be perfect to cast in bronze for the art galleries. I quickly discovered that a bronze casting would be prohibitively expensive and much too heavy as a tabletop piece. My frustration led me on a journey that ultimately brought me to invent Questech—a patented process to cast premium metal that was a fraction of the weight and cost of traditional metal casting.

**TileDealer:** What changes did you make?

**Culkin:** A great product can't manufacture and sell itself—it needs great people to do that. So from my first day on the job, I began to build a first class organization. Together we determined that tile was where we could best leverage our technology and superior design capability.

**TileDealer:** What led you to bring Barry in?

**Questel:** From the beginning, Questech was exciting and successful.

Simultaneously, we made significant upgrades to manufacturing, moving from a labor-intensive operation, to what today is a highly sophisticated, fully-automated manufacturing process that ensures high levels of product quality and service. We also began the important work of building a brand identity, and developing our distribution channels. Both of these objectives require us to be vigilant about ensuring that our product lines provide real revenue growth for our customers. We do that through great products that make a real difference, supported by superior marketing and service.

**TileDealer:** What's New and Exciting?

**Culkin:** We recently introduced our next "landscape-changing" technology. It's called Q-Seal, which is the world's first permanent natural stone sealer.

This product is exciting because it has the potential to forever change the way stone is sold. Q-Seal is baked on in the factory, not painted on like ordinary sealers, and we guarantee that it never needs to be resealed. It's also superior to ordinary sealers because it has an ingredient called Ultra-Fresh that fights odor and stain-causing mold, and it's chemical resistant, so you can use ordinary household cleaners.

Customers who buy our tumbled marble never have to worry about water, stains, resealing or buying special stone cleaners.

**TileDealer:** What do you see happening in next 5 years?

**Questel:** We have many more ideas in various stages of product and technical development. This approach gives us great results because all of the innovations compete against each other, allowing the best ideas, like Q-Seal, to rise to the top. In other words, we don't launch a so-so product idea just because it's what we have; instead, we get to choose the idea that has the best chance to provide significant revenue for our company and our customers.

I guess the short answer is that I see a lot of growth for Questech and our customers over the next five years, and the next and the next. ♦

## Sources:

Roger Questel, Chairman and Creative Director  
Barry Culkin, President/CEO  
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