

PAVING the Way

With a focus on innovation and excellent customer experience, Sunstate Cement is leading the cement industry with a dedicated and loyal team behind it.

Images courtesy of Sunstate Cement

Sunstate Cement is continuously innovating and investing in its products and services to ensure it provides a seamless customer experience. As one of Australia's leading manufacturers and suppliers of high-quality cement products, Sunstate Cement has recently completed an \$85-million expansion program, dramatically increasing the company's capability to supply bulk and bagged cement product to 1.5 million tonnes per year.

Rajeev Ramankutty, General Manager of Sunstate Cement, spoke to *The CEO Magazine* about the company's dedication to innovation, its loyal team of longstanding employees and other stakeholders, and its focus on value-addition.

***The CEO Magazine:* What led you to become general manager of Sunstate Cement?**

Rajeev: I have been working in the building materials sector for the past 16 years with a large

multinational company in different parts of the world. I decided to come back to Australia for family reasons and jumped at the opportunity to come to Sunstate because I tremendously enjoyed working in this sector. Additionally, after many years with an MNC, I wanted to work in a smaller business where I had the opportunity to make a difference to all the stakeholders in the business—from our employee teams to our customers, suppliers, and everyone else involved. That was really the primary reason.

One of the greatest things for me was that I walked in here in January of this year and I found it to be a very welcoming, friendly, and warm place. It's like being in a family. The majority of people here have had a long association with the business. Sunstate has been here for more than 30 years, and some of the people have been here for three decades, while others have been around for more than 10 years. It's quite a stable workforce from that perspective. They have retained the culture over those years, so it has quite

a family feel to it. It's more intimate, if you like.

How has the business developed since you joined in January and over the past few years as well?

In terms of volumes and profits, Sunstate, like many other businesses, has been affected by the GFC and its fallout. Currently, we are recovering from that, and would like to think that the worst is behind us. I'm a firm believer in making sure that you're an innovative business and that you have a continuous-improvement mentality ingrained into the organisation.

Those are my two main focus areas, in addition to making sure that we have a customer-focused outlook. You have to put the customer at the centre of everything you do, and you do it through innovation, whether it's product innovation or service innovation.

Cement is a very old commodity. There is a common perception that it's just a grey powder and that >

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there's not much one can do with it and everyone makes the same cement. To me, that's all the more reason why you should be innovative because if you are a me-too product and a me-too player in the market, then you're not going to be able to stand out, especially when there is a lot of choice available for customers.

How do you encourage innovation at Sunstate?

Initially, I have to sell the idea that we can actually innovate in terms of products and services, even though cement has been made since Roman times. There are still aspects that you can take and enhance, particularly in terms of the customer experience.

For me, it's not about developing the next-generation product or the next big thing; it's about the entire

spectrum of the customer experience. From the time the customer first gets in contact with Sunstate, they should feel that they want to do business with us. We want them to hear that we view it as a privilege to serve them. Like every other business, after a period of time, complacency can set in, so we need to be constantly pushing ourselves. These days, there's a lot of choice out there, both domestically and from imports, so you need to be carving out a niche for yourself in the marketplace.

For Sunstate, its size and intimacy converts into a very personal experience for the customer, so we would like to think that that's a journey we're on at the moment where the customer feels very special when they deal with us. Whether they have a technical issue or a service issue, we want to give them that concentrated attention that they require. They should feel that their problem is being addressed as a matter of priority.

In terms of innovation, there are a number of key things that we're focusing on. Innovation doesn't happen overnight, so when you talk about products, it's about ones with less embodied carbon or ones that are designed for specific market niches. There are a number of areas where you can innovate, but you have to have that belief that you can innovate.

How did Sunstate Cement undertake its recent \$85-million expansion program? What was involved in that?

At the time when the shareholders decided to invest, we were sold out. It made perfect sense to increase milling and storage capacity. So a majority of the investment was focused on a new cement mill and associated storage and handling equipment.

We are very reliant on an efficient supply chain for the success of our business, as we import most of our

raw materials. A key component of that \$85-million expansion was improving our facilities to efficiently handle these imports. We're right on the water on the Brisbane River, but our facilities for dealing with importing materials weren't great. Quite a lot of investment was focused on the unloading and transportation systems from the ships to make it more environmentally compliant and more efficient. We now have really efficient unloading and handling systems, and that was a big part of that expansion program.

How do you work with Sea Corporation, Qube, and other strategic partners?

We have very longstanding relationships with our key suppliers. We've got partners like Sea Corporation and Qube who provide us with the logistics and supply-chain ability to deliver products from as far away as Japan and China efficiently and cost effectively. We're quite reliant on

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those relationships working very efficiently and smoothly. The key thing is that we value each other's businesses with a very high regard.

Where do you see Sunstate Cement going in the future?

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business that has got the customer at the heart of everything we do. We need to continuously innovate, improve, and value-add to the services and products that we provide to our customers. That's the only way that we can ensure that we remain profitable and that we can continue to invest in the business to make it future-proof. That's the future I see for Sunstate. ●

"As Sunstate Cement's exclusive shipbrokers and agents, it has been a pleasure to facilitate the expansion of their bulk imports into Brisbane. We enjoy working closely with the team and we hope to continue to do so for many years to come." - Sam Thompson, Chartering Manager, Seacorp



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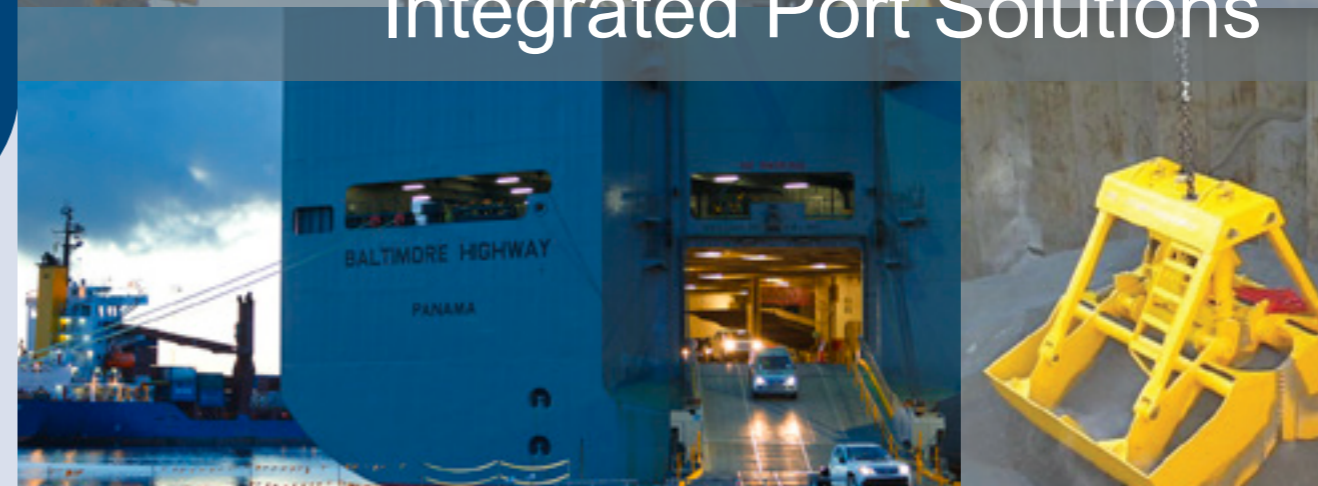
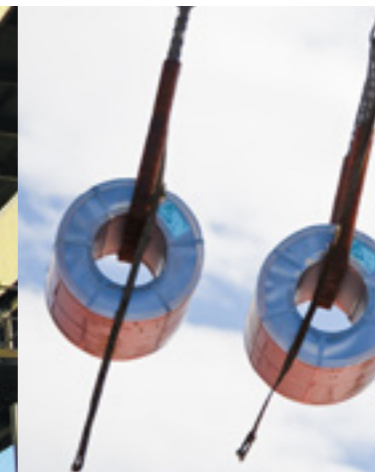


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