

October 2025

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Turning Challenges into Opportunities

A FRIEND, MENTOR and titan in the kitchen and bath industry used to quote Warren Buffett during turbulent times, saying, “Only when the tide goes out do you discover who’s been swimming naked.”

As we enter the remaining months of 2025, this year has certainly brought unique conditions, exposing various challenges in a new light and from a different angle. This perspective shift brings the opportunity for brands, showrooms, consultants, designers and service providers to differentiate themselves in the decorative plumbing and hardware space through a new conversation. In addition to our existing place as educators, teaching our clients the difference between a thermostatic or pressure balanced shower valve as we guide them through their project journey, the larger events of the first half of this year highlight our insight into the very nature of the products we work with. And this has grown more important than ever.

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CURRENT ECONOMIC FACTORS

Each year in the kitchen and bath space, there are macro themes that dominate the conversations. The previous five years saw the uncertainty of COVID lockdowns, the rapid recovery of our industry and subsequent supply chain challenges, consolidation, new brands and concepts, etc. The start of 2025 saw global and mixed component sourcing and manufacturing changes in accommodation of the new and developing trade realities facing every sector of the U.S. consumer economy, now and going forward, brought to the fore.

The tariff negotiations President Trump announced on “Liberation Day” in April introduced pricing uncertainty for suppliers, tradespeople, builders and consumers alike. It seems the only certainty through the summer was uncertainty. How much will prices increase? Will these be temporary or permanent? How price sensitive is the direct import market in 2025? Answers to these questions will continue to unfold as the negotiations move forward, but the sourcing origin of many products has come to the center of the discussion.

In a global manufacturing economy, raw materials, components and finished goods are impacted by many cost inputs, including labor,

freight, currency exchange and, now more than ever, taxes and tariffs. Some companies have found ways to mitigate the immediate impact of this summer’s tariffs as negotiations continue at the highest levels. Loading up inventory before and between the waves, accepting short-term margin hits, and retailers resisting increases have all become common fare. Assuming the tariffs remain, these actions are untenable long-term, and production costs grow with the economy. Builders, A+D professionals and showroom consultants specifying projects to be completed in the coming months need to forecast pricing and carefully investigate availability when making brand and product decisions. Brands and professionals open to candidly discussing sourcing and pricing justifications bolster confidence in this decision-making process. Those avoiding the conversation warrant a degree of suspicion and erode trust at a time when it is critical.

REVISITING SAFETY CONCERNS

The start of the second quarter of this year provided something I haven’t seen in my 20-plus years in this space: concerns about unsafe faucets reached the national conversation amid the supply chain topics already being discussed. In May of this year, the House Committee on the Judiciary’s Subcommittee on Intellectual Property heard testimony from Aaron Bores (Fortune Brands – exec. v.p. of product) regarding the dangers of off-label imported faucets sold on Amazon.com. Specifically, a sample of 21 off-label import brands’ faucets was sent to IAPMO, tested and failed the basic standards for safe potable water delivery in the U.S. A long-standing industry standard taken for granted by most consumers came to the forefront of the faucet and shower component purchase discussion in decorative plumbing showrooms and design offices. Brands across the plumbing sector were put on notice very publicly. Consumers purchasing the lowest price option now do so knowing it poses a health and safety risk.

Inexpensive, uncertified foreign import faucets have been proven unsafe in the lab. This reality casts a shadow of doubt over China and other traditionally low-cost, low-regulation sourcing markets globally. Consumers and sourcing

professionals alike have every reason to be cautious. The need for transparency on sourcing, materials, quality standards and testing is now inescapable. Brands and professionals with an honest and open approach to these topics stand to reassure their clients and customers by restoring the end user’s confidence in our industry.

I recently stayed with a friend in Europe who had just built a beautiful custom home full of attractive, trend-forward plumbing fixtures. As she gave me the grand tour, I remarked on my surprise at how readily available plumbing products that fail basic safety tests are available online from companies with no reputable history or brand resonance. She was quick to share her fear that style and price decisions may have led to unsafe products in her home. These are, after all, products we use to bathe, clean dishes, cook, drink and mix baby formula. Our faucets and fixtures need to meet safety standards that we, as both consumers and professionals, often take for granted. As professionals, we are best suited to take ownership of our conversations and guide our clients and customers to avoid regret, multiplying expenses and, most importantly, health risks.

While the themes dominating 2025 – sourcing provenance, pricing, quality and safety – pose challenges by their very nature, the way that brands and industry professionals engage the subjects can turn a dreaded conversation into an opportunity to instill confidence and define themselves against an always-growing field of competing options. No brand or professional can be everything to everyone, but an openly shared and well-defined identity focused on honest product and transparent sourcing with best practices can help the right client or customer find and engage with confidence. In our decorative plumbing and hardware showrooms, we, as qualified professionals, can guide the decisions our customers make by providing facts, history, personal experiences and wisdom to ensure this new chapter in our industry can be navigated with the highest level of support.

Vik Szemerei is the sr. v.p. of Sales at Kingston and resides in Southern California with his wife and four children. He has been active in the kitchen and bath space for over 20 years with brands like Woodmark, House of Rohl, MTI Baths and Kingston. Supporting all the hard working showrooms and the unique brands they offer for the best homes and projects is a passion for him. He is also on the board for DPHA.

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