

# Professional Remodeler

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APRIL 2006

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**How to  
Qualify Leads**

**New Ideas  
from Next Gen  
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JoLynn Johnson, President  
Crystal Kitchen Center



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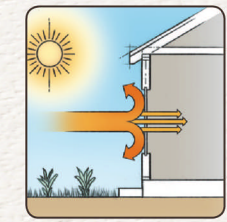


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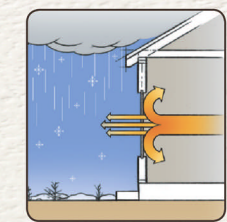


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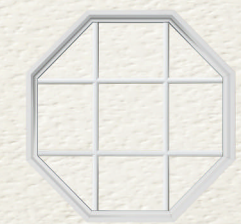
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VOLUME 10 NUMBER 4

### ON THE COVER:

**JoLynn Johnson, president of Crystal Kitchen Center near Minneapolis, grew the business from a cabinet company that worked with new builders to a thriving design/build remodeling firm with a 4,400-square-foot showroom.**

*Photo by Steve Wait*



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The growing kitchen and bath industry demands that remodelers elevate their game. *By Kimberly Sweet, Editor*

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A phased schedule allowed Earl King to triple the size of this restaurant in five months while closing it to business for just seven weeks. *By Wendy A. Jordan, Senior Contributing Editor*

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## Get Associated

If you're not a member of one of the two trade associations that directly serve the remodeling industry, you're missing out on beneficial resources that can help differentiate your business from the competition. At the bare minimum, I'd suggest you



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join either NARI or the NAHB Remodelers Council today.

An even better idea would be to join both associations and take advantage of the unique programs that each one offers its members.

It's been argued by more than a few people that the remodeling industry is actually done a disservice by the existence of two trade associations, with each one effectively undermining the authority and relevance of the other.

These detractors would have you believe that both associations are weak because the membership count in neither organization is above 8,000, while the industry totals more than 370,000 firms. Even further, they would like you to believe that by eliminating one association, the other would grow stronger and thus provide better leadership industrywide.

Not only do I believe this assertion to be false, I would point out that the existence of two associations has created a fairly intense competition for new members. This competitive environment forces the leaders of these organizations to continuously try to upgrade the number and quality of

their services and member benefits.

I would take this a step further and suggest that having two associations also allows the the industry to have greater influence in areas such as government affairs, building codes, product innovation and technology. For remodelers, having two associations provides more opportunities for certification programs, continuing education and peer networking.

At NARI's recent spring board of directors meeting, for instance, the association discussed its plans to add green remodeling certification and universal design certification programs in the not-too-distant future. While the universal design initiative will be similar to the Remodelers Council's Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist designation, by definition it should end up being a more extensive program.

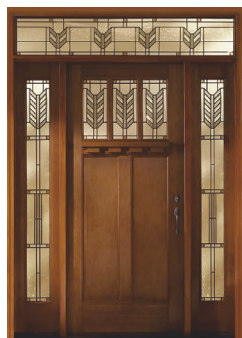
The green remodeling program, however, stands to be the first of its kind in the remodeling industry and is certainly going to raise the bar that much higher in the competition between the two associations.

And isn't that a great situation to be in for the industry? **PR**



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# Finding the Right Fit

Qualifying a lead is crucial to a successful project

**R**eferrals are the bread and butter of the remodeling business, but not all referral leads are created equal. Whether a prospective client finds a contractor via a friend or a phone book, the remodeler has the responsibility of choosing projects that will fit the company's schedule and resources and be most profitable. Jud Molsenbocker asks Tom Lykos and Chuck Russell how they choose their clients.



Tom Lykos, CGR, CAPS, President  
The Lykos Group Inc.

This remodeling firm in Naples, Fla., is in its 16<sup>th</sup> year of business and should close \$5 million in sales in 2006, says co-owner Tom Lykos. The Lykos Group focuses primarily on condominium remodels, but also works on single-family homes. About 90 percent of its projects are residential and 10 percent commercial, with no new construction.

Photo by Bob Thompson

**Jud:** *How do you qualify leads?*

**Tom:** We have what we call a lead sheet. When somebody calls our office, typically our office manager answers the phone. That happens to be my mother. She will go through a quick list of questions that we ask all our sales leads — name, address, phone number, if they're in a single-family home or a condominium. We get a quick definition of the scope of work.

And — something that's very important to us — we ask them where they got our name. If it's from advertising, we know what advertising is working. If it's from a past client or vendor, then we make sure we express our appreciation to that referral source.

We pass that lead on to one of our two salespeople and they get into more detail on the scope of work. They ask about the client's desired schedule and budget. Then we make an appointment. We let the client know on the first phone call what the remodeling process is.

**Chuck:** We have a lead qualification form, but where we differ is I want that initial call to be the initial qualifying call. We have spent a lot of time training our office manager, and she's the only one who takes those calls. She does a pretty extensive question and answer with the client. Some of the things she talks about are the job, financing, budget, time frame. A lot of our qualifying is more on personal and cultural fit than on any other criteria. She does a fantastic job at that. Our form has several red flags that can be checked.

At that point, she passes it on to our sales manager, unless it's something she knows just flat won't work, like if it's on the other side of the state, a do-it-yourselfer or a shopper.

The sales manager fills out the lower

section of the form. He makes the final decision on whether we'll pursue that lead or not. If there are too many red flags when he gets through, then he'll politely refuse to do the job. Otherwise, he passes it off to sales and we continue to qualify throughout the sales process.

During the first meeting, we have a client survey that the salespeople are required to go through to get to know the people better and find out where they're coming from. It's one of the first things he does after the warm-up, get-to-know-you introduction. He tells them in order to service them better, we need to ask them a few questions. By the time he gets there, we've decided geographically it works, and it fits into our schedule. Now we're qualifying fit, personality, culture and budget. By the time you've asked all 11 questions, you have an idea if it's a good fit. We continue qualifying past the first two phone calls right into the actual sales process.

**Jud:** *Do you set priorities on leads? In other words, is it a one, two, three, four system?*

**Chuck:** Yes. When the office manager's finished with it, she gives a 1 to 5 rating on several topics that can be red-flagged — enthusiasm, price-shopping, opinion, detail-oriented, agreeable, realistic. Also geographic location and lead source. So, we do a 1 through 5 grade and that number is the priority she comes up with. The sales manager does the same thing when he reviews it, and the final number is our priority number.

**Tom:** We have a more informal process for that, and we usually do it after the first sales call. The salespeople will come back with their notes on the jobs, we'll look at our current backlog of work and at the location of the project. Then, we make a decision as to whether or not we have an interest in the job.





**Jud Motsenbocker**  
Contributing Editor

**Jud:** *What is the salesman's closing word after this first meeting? At that point you may not do this job.*

**Tom:** Typically, at the end of our first meeting, we are asking the client to commit to a design agreement. That is an analysis of the project in terms of the scope of work, the schedule, the budget. Our goal at the end of the first sales call is to get the design agreement, which for all intents and purposes takes them off the market. Now we start our working relationship. I try to get that commitment from the client as quickly as I can.

We sell 50 to 75 percent of our business during a three- to four-month period every year, so we have to figure out very quickly what jobs we will or won't do. We try to get as many clients to commit to a design contract as quickly as possible. That allows us to build up our backlog for the whole year and still work through the qualifying as well.

**Chuck:** We do it a little differently. We're set up for a two-call close. The first call is a little more qualifying. The sales people have the design budget development contract with them, and it's already got the people's name on it. Probably 20, 30, 40 percent of the time they get their signature. But we focus on a second-call close. I don't want to commit to any kind of contract until that salesman comes back with the survey and he and the sales manager agree that we're going to proceed with this.

**Jud:** *Chuck, how do you set the priorities for that lead?*

**Chuck:** Probably our highest priority is the lead source. Most of our marketing effort is relationship marketing with our past customers, so if the lead source is coming from them, we're going to service that source. We have to keep that momentum going. We have a refer-

ral program with our past customers that's mentioned in our newsletter. We don't want to let anybody down.

Our number two priority would be geographic location. If it's too far out of our area, then we obviously can't do it. We have a network of other contractors that we pass it off to.

Sometimes it's just a feeling. We have red flags about Boeing engineers. They have a terrible reputation to work for. I've always believed that there are diamonds in the rough. We give everybody the benefit of the doubt, and we will really try to service a call, even if it's to make a second call and hand them off to someone else. We don't say just because they don't fit a certain set of numbers that we're done. We spend a little time with everybody who calls.

**Jud:** *Tom, how do you prioritize calls?*

**Tom:** We take the referral source as our primary deciding factor. Past clients are automatic. Most of our work is by referral, and they're a big referral source for us, so anything they want us to do, we find a way to get it done. When we get a lead from a past client, we consider that a pretty solid lead. It's almost like the client has to do something to make me *not* want to work for them.

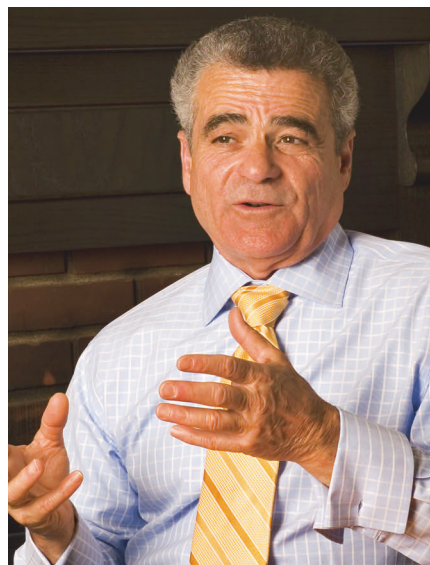
The second thing is the job type. Unfortunately, because most of our clients are part-time residents, they typically don't know who else to call. They might call us for handyman work or a single-trade project. If a past client has referred us to somebody who needs to have a room painted, we're not going to take that job and manage it — we'll refer them to someone who does painting.

We work in a pretty small geographical area, so location isn't a factor.

**Jud:** *Do you accept any job when the client specifically wants you?*

**Tom:** Yes, if it's a referral from a past client. If it's a condominium building we do a lot of work in, we won't necessarily take that job hands down, but we'll certainly consider it a qualified lead and give it a high priority. If the lead was out of a magazine, we probably wouldn't take that job.

**Chuck:** Generally, we would consider it a very high priority job if someone says, "We want you to do our kitchen, and we're not talking to anyone else."



Chuck Russell, CGR, CAPS, President  
**Westhill Inc.**

Located in Woodinville, Wash., near Seattle, Westhill has been in business for 32 years and employs between 30 and 35 works depending on the season. In 2006, Russell plans to do about \$7 million in design/build remodeling volume. The company also builds a custom home or two each year.

*Photo by Gary Benson/Getty Images*



Past clients have our trust and confidence, so they deserve our best effort. We're ready to help them even if we have to disqualify someone new who might be a pretty good candidate in order to fit them in. Probably 20 to 25 percent of the jobs we have going at any one time are for past customers. That takes some of the peaks and valleys out of the equation.

For past customers, we do everything. We have a small jobs division, and an in-house architect and design division. We also have painting crews. If it's a past client, I don't care if it's adjusting a door-knob, we'll be out there because I don't want anyone else in my client's houses.

**Jud:** *What other specific questions would you ask?*

**Chuck:** We start out asking about plans and drawings and if they're working with an architect. If they have an architect on board, that's a red flag. We don't often work with other architects, and normally they don't work out that well for us.

We ask if any other companies will be looking at the project. If they say yes, we'll ask who's on their bid list. They need to answer those honestly. They could get half a red flag if there's hedging in the answer. Some of these questions are just to see how open people are. We're a very open company and we want our clients to be the same.

**Tom:** We have three big issues at the beginning of the relationship. One, we ask about schedule. With our part-time residents, everybody wants the work to start when they leave to go back home and want it done by the time they return. It's important that we find out from the client what their expectations are. If somebody calls us in January and wants us to start in February, that's not realistic. If they haven't set their expectations, then we have the opportunity to set them.

Budget's also very important. A lot of people here have a home up north that they've lived in for decades, and they may or may not have had work

done on it. They get a little bit of sticker shock when they find out how much it's going to cost. It's important for us to find out as quick as we can what their expectations are for budget. If they've bought property down here recently, they understand that things are pretty expensive down here compared to up north. That's a good sign.

One thing I hate to hear is when people say, "I remodeled my kitchen 15 years ago for \$17,000." Those clients we know we're not going to be able to work with. If they have a realistic schedule or are open to talk about schedule, or if they're open to a reasonable budget, those are good signs.

We also want to find out if they're familiar with our work. We do work in condominium buildings and typically we find that other residents in the building look in on our project. By the time they call us, they've met our employees, they know the caliber of our work and we're already established with them. Those are really our ideal clients.

**Jud:** *What information do you absolutely have to have, and what would indicate to you what the red flags are?*

**Tom:** Expectations for schedule and budget. If I can't get that information up front, then I know I'm going to have trouble with them later. Those are the two key things before I even go out on the first sales call.

**Chuck:** Time frame or schedule for the project is required. If they don't want to answer or if it seems like it's going to be a problem, then the grade will be lower. Budget information is required. If they don't feel comfortable giving it, it's not something we'd totally throw the lead away over, they would just get a little lower score.

We require at least three phone numbers and an e-mail address. The cell number is a more personal way to get a hold of them. That's a sign that they're serious and ready to talk.

**Jud:** *Give me three or four of your red flags.*

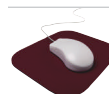
**Tom:** Number one would be an unreasonable expectation of schedule. If they're waiting until the last minute to call us — that means they've already called someone else and for some reason they weren't happy. Now they're reaching for straws to get something done before they leave.

When it comes to budget, if clients are unsure, it doesn't necessarily mean they can't afford it. They might not know how much it will cost. Our salespeople are trained to discuss numbers with people on the first sales phone call. If a client doesn't have a budget in mind, we'll discuss that with them prior to the first on-site visit.

We tell them, "If you can't tell me how much you want to spend, then we can't design a project for you that meets all of your needs at your budget." We tell them, "In a design/build relationship, our job is to get you the most for your money." That's where value engineering comes into play.

**Chuck:** I think the first red flag is the openness of the people that call. It could be about budget, schedule, anything. If they have an architect already on board, that's a flag. If they're having more than two companies review the project, that's a flag. If it goes to three, four or five, that's several flags. Time frame, schedule would be a flag. Budget issues. There are some jobs we don't feel we can do efficiently to make the people happy. You know, do a little over here, a little over there. Those are red flags for us. We call those the scrambled eggs jobs.

Some of the questions we ask refer to when you purchase projects, what do you look for, quality or price? Flags can come out of those questions. **PR**



For more red flags, stories about what happens when you ignore them, and more **Best Practices**, visit

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**Doug Dwyer**  
Contributing Editor

# Escape the Bermuda Triangle

Have you ever experienced emotions running high or out of control in a family business meeting and wondered what happened? You invested time, energy,

heart and skill, but nothing was accomplished because people dug in their heels.

Many family businesses are run on an emotional family structure rather than an agreed-upon business structure. In this situation, business growth can be slowed, stopped or even destroyed.

When my father passed away in December 1994, we had a construction company, seven franchise companies, and a real estate company with apartment complexes, strip malls and single-family homes. Managing the business transition was a great undertaking for our family of six adult children, a former brother-in-law who's like a step-brother, and my mother, who was not active in the business.

We hired many top consultants to help us through this evolution. Bonnie Brown Hartley, president of Transition Dynamics ([www.transitiondynamics-inc.com](http://www.transitiondynamics-inc.com)) in Eugene, Ore., helped us understand the different meanings and responsibilities of our roles as a business owner, family member and manager.

This is where Brown Hartley's Family Business Bermuda Triangle comes into play. The issues of power, love and money make up an inner triangle that can cause major problems if not handled correctly. The outer triangle – planning, communication and relationship management – helps to counteract the potential negative effects of the inner triangle. The three circles represent the manage-

ment system, ownership system and family system. You can't opt out of the family, to which you belong by blood or by marriage. Business ownership is on a percentage basis. Being a manager requires having the drive, talent and

because we understood the Family Bermuda Triangle ahead of time. It can be challenging to make these kind of changes, but it is really the only way to create a true win/win. Change is necessary for healthy growth, both personally and professionally.

Whether you have a family business or are in business with a partner, the same principles apply. Decide who will be president, vice president and department heads. Make sure the skills match

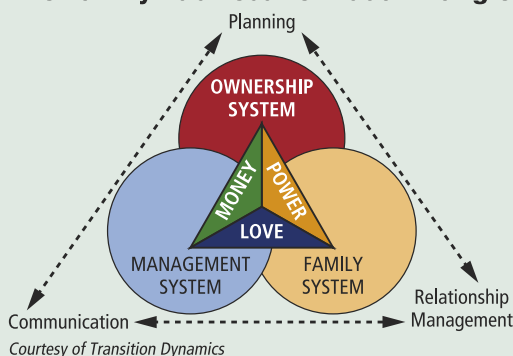
the position. With one person in charge, meetings can be held for all to give input. Then the one chosen to lead can make a final decision. Lack of a clear leader will create duplication of effort and waste in your company and cause it to suffer if not fail. This applies to large and small companies.

One thing to remember when you choose a leader: It is critical that you

respect, honor and stand behind the individual's decisions. He or she will not be perfect – no one is – so let him or her learn from mistakes and in the end you will achieve better results. **PR**

*Doug Dwyer is president and chief stewarding officer of DreamMaker Bath & Kitchen by Worldwide, one of the nation's largest remodeling franchises. He can be reached at [doug.dwyer@dwyergroup.com](mailto:doug.dwyer@dwyergroup.com).*

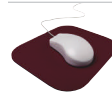
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# Raising the Stakes

Kitchen and bath business demands  
that remodelers elevate their game

By Kimberly Sweet  
*Editor*

**It's a no-brainer:** Every house has at least one kitchen and one bathroom. Homeowners spend a lot of time in these rooms, and they get heavy use. Trends come and go, but kitchens and bathrooms will always be big sources of remodeling business.

The part that's not so obvious – at least, not to homeowners – is how to go about getting a kitchen or bath

remodel done. Perhaps even more so than other types of remodeling, the kitchen and bath market is crowded with competition. Potential clients have the option of beginning their journey at an interior designer, cabinet shop, kitchen or bath designer, plumbing showroom, architect, appliance store or home improvement retailer – let alone a remodeling contractor. And those are just the professional competitors.



**Designers Valerie Stuessi, CKD, JoLynn Johnson and Serena Rebechini-Hilton, CKD, of Crystal Kitchen Center take measurements and design and sell jobs, working with an in-house project manager to prepare estimates and schedules.**

*Photo by Steve Voit*

To win business at a time when consumer interest in kitchen and bath design and products has added the phrase “remodeling porn” to the lexicon, remodelers need to understand design trends, space planning, product differences, customer care and sales presentation at a high level to stay ahead of their clients. That said, there are many ways to structure a remodeling company for kitchen and bath success. Three industry leaders shared their advice with *Professional Remodeler*, allowing us to create this FAQ, which continues online.

JoLynn Johnson, CMKBD, CAPS, president of Crystal Kitchen Center in Crystal, Minn., has been trying to perfect the art and science of the kitchen and bath business since buying her company 12 years ago. Founded in 1975 by Crystal Cabinet Works as a retail outlet, Crystal Kitchen Center (CKC) mainly offered cabinetry to home builders when Johnson acquired the company, with just 20 percent of its business coming from remodeling.

As her homeowner clients began asking for more products, installation and design, Johnson focused the business toward design/build, kitchen/bath remodeling. Now CKC’s average kitchen sale is \$82,000 for a complete package and \$57,000 just for cabinets and counters. Earlier this year CKC moved to an 8,800-square-foot building, half of it occupied by a showroom and the remainder by a selections center, conference room, offices and warehouse space. CKC subcontracts labor.

At Case Design/Remodeling, headquartered in Bethesda, Md., kitchen and bath remodeling is broken out as a separate division of the full-service firm. Associate vice president John Audet serves as general manager of that division, which handles any kitchen/bath jobs that stay within the home’s existing footprint. That adds up to more than 200 jobs annually.

Many of the additions and whole-house remodels that run through Case’s design/build division include kitchens or baths. Audet’s division partners on those projects. Much of the construction is done in house, including plumbing and electrical. As at CKC, the designers at Case double as salespeople.

D&J Kitchen and Baths, located in Sacramento, Calif., operates as an interior-only, design/build kitchen and bath firm. CEO Darius Baker, CR, CKBR, who does the design and sales himself, will take on structural work such

as moving walls or vaulting the ceiling, but leaves additions and whole-house work to other remodelers.

### **Should I have an in-house designer?**

Partnering with a kitchen/bath studio, plumbing showroom or designer is always an option. When Baker started remodeling 21 years ago, he often built from plans created by interior designers, kitchen designers or architects. Too often, he says, they looked pretty but didn’t consider function or lacked complete information.

“My personal preference is to design in house. I’m more of a control freak,” admits Baker. “Who better to build something than the person who conceived it? Who better to have an idea of how to design it within a stated investment figure?”

Audet recommends checking references before working with an outside designer. “You have to know the products and what you’re working with,” he says. “There’s a huge difference between stock cabinetry and a full custom line. If you’re not familiar with it, you can be in trouble.”

### **What kind of training should a kitchen/bath designer have?**

Keeping abreast of trends is the least of the knowledge a designer should have. As Johnson puts it, “You could lose your butt with someone who doesn’t know how to measure down to 1/16 of an inch.”

Three of CKC’s designers, Johnson included, have NKBA credentials. Certification isn’t a must for hiring, but potential design employees need some kind of formal training and a desire to continue their professional devel-

## **The Kitchen/Bath Outlook**

**According to architects**, the market for kitchen and bath remodeling continues to grow. A recent survey of 600 residential architects revealed the following:

- ▶ 30 percent report improving conditions for kitchen/bath remodeling
- ▶ 41 percent report the number of bathrooms per home is increasing
- ▶ 44 percent report the size of residential bathrooms is increasing
- ▶ 25 percent report the number of kitchens per home is increasing (this includes butler’s pantries, outdoor kitchens, beverage centers and the like)
- ▶ 41 percent report the size of residential kitchens is increasing

*Source: February 2006 AIA Home Design Trends Survey*





**Design software allows Serena Rebechini-Hilton to help clients visualize their project. CAD skills are a must for new CKC hires in sales and design.** Photo by Steve Voit

opment. For instance, the company's receptionist has a certificate in kitchen and bath design from a local community college and wants to be a kitchen designer. Johnson plans to have her learn on the job about product lines and pricing and then spend time shadowing Johnson.

Case, too, encourages employees to achieve NARI or NKBA certification. Some of the designers, Audet notes, also have professional backgrounds or academic degrees in interior design.

"That helps them in the customer service end, where you sit down and pick colors," he says.

Baker, who comes from a more typical remodeling background than Audet or Johnson, recommends a range of coursework and practical experience to be sure the designer can address electrical, mechanical, plumbing and code issues as well as space planning, room function and aesthetics. That's why he led the development of NARI's Certified Kitchen and Bath Remodeler program.

#### **How should I charge for design?**

That's right: The question is not whether to charge for design, it's how. Baker used to design on sales calls in prospect's homes. It created buy-in, cemented the relationship and drove sales, he says, but soon proved unproductive. He then switched to only doing design after clients had committed to a construction contract. For the past year, he's used what he calls a scope of work program. For \$1,000 to \$2,500 upfront, Baker measures the home, develops a conceptual floor plan, creates a takeoff and produces a complete line item bid with some allowances.

Once they sign a construction contract, he requires \$1,000 to put them on the production schedule (California contractors can't ask for more than a \$1,000 deposit). At that point, he puts the scope of work fee toward the job.

Case uses a variation on that approach, charging an upfront fee that ranges from \$800 to \$1,800 depending on the size and scope of the project, according to Audet. The fee includes all space planning and selections. Half of that amount, he adds, gets credited back when the client signs the construction contract.

CKC charges a lump-sum design retainer that depends on the designer and the project scope. Johnson's fee starts at \$1,500. Most of the time the retainer is applied toward the construction price, but not always — in fact, her design contract says it won't. That way she can recoup the cost of her designers' time when an extra-demanding customer requires more service than usual. If the customer doesn't go to contract, CKC charges an additional \$1,000 to buy the plan. In 2005, the company did \$41,000 of business just in design.

#### **Is a showroom necessary?**

While the Internet is a great source of information, nothing replaces seeing and touching products in person. That doesn't have to mean building a showroom, though.

"Having some way to show product effectively is essential, whether it be your own showroom or you're aligned with local showrooms or if you have a number of samples," says Audet. Two of Case's four Washington, DC-area locations have showrooms that display kitchen cabinetry, and one is being renovated to incorporate counter, faucet, tile and lighting samples, as well as more cabinet options.

"The product itself is probably the smallest cost to the showroom," Audet adds. "The space to have the showroom is probably the most expensive."

Johnson felt having a showroom was important enough to move to a larger one in a more prominent location. "We were lucky if we got eight new people through the door in a month," she says. "Here we get eight to 10 in a day."

It's too soon to tell how many of the walk-ins are tire-kickers, but already the showroom is helping to educate consumers that CKC can do more than just kitchens, Johnson says. The showroom leads will be a good way for new designers to begin building a client base and growing sales, she adds.

#### **Is a design program necessary?**

In a word, yes. Consumers need some kind of help visualizing the end result. But in software, as in kitchen design, there is no "right" answer — it all depends on the user's



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### Top Eight Items on High-End Kitchen Remodel List

1. Countertops
2. Cabinetry
3. Plumbing fixtures
4. Wall finishes
5. Flooring
5. Lighting
7. Cooking appliances
8. Dishwasher

### Top Eight Items on High-End Bathroom Remodel List

1. Faucets
2. Flooring
3. Showerhead
4. Wall finishes
5. Lighting
5. Toilet
7. Basin
8. Vanity

Source: 2005 HIRI Kitchen & Bathroom Remodeling Study

needs. CKC uses 20-20 Design, popular in the kitchen/bath industry because many cabinet manufacturers support it. Johnson also likes Planit Fusion, and plans to introduce AutoCAD or Chief Architect in the next two years.

Case uses a combination of 20-20 and SketchUp for renderings and visualization, says Audet, turning to VectorWorks for final construction drawings. Baker prefers Chief Architect as an all-purpose product, using it for conceptual design, drawing the existing structure and creating new floor plans or rooflines.

#### Is pricing different in kitchen/bath remodeling?

With prices for kitchen and bath products readily available to consumers from retailers or the Internet, high markups can be hard to achieve.

"Appliances are maybe a 20, 25 percent markup," says Johnson. She prefers using high-end professional

brands because they use UMRP – unilateral minimum retail pricing.

"People aren't price shopping," she says. "Otherwise there are places that go dirt cheap, and we do all the work of selling it but don't make the money."

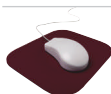
Baker views UMRP more negatively because this strategy doesn't offer a price break to professionals. He chooses not to mark up appliances at all, instead adding an installation fee as a line item for each appliance. Overall, D&J averages a 67 percent markup and 40 percent margin per project, but Baker varies the markup as he feels appropriate per line item. For example, on a recent \$200,000 remodel, he marked up \$23,000 worth of plumbing fixtures by only 25 percent.

#### How important is fast turnaround?

"The kitchen and bath are the two most lived in and used rooms in the house, so our time there is as short as possible," Audet comments. Minimize down time with lots of planning. "The scheduling, because of the different trades that are involved, is critical. Be focused on systems and processes to keep the project going smoothly."

He recommends presenting homeowners with an individual job "forecast," a word he prefers to schedule, that includes a brief description (demolition, rough-in) of what is going on each day as well as key milestones.

Case also might make suggestions or assist in putting together a temporary kitchen with counter, microwave, coffeemaker and a water source somewhere in the existing space. "Try to get them running water as soon as possible," Audet advises. **PR**



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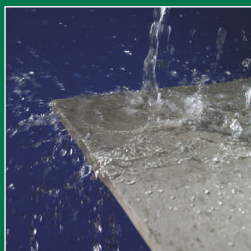


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# Commercial Success

A phased schedule allowed Earl King to triple the size of this restaurant in five months while closing it to business for just seven weeks.

By Wendy A. Jordan  
Senior Contributing Editor

**The food at Fiorentino's** outclassed the building the way grilled brie outclasses melted Velveeta. Rob and Rose Billas had opened the family-friendly Italian eatery in 1999, immediately after buying the 200-year-old building – once a restaurant, most recently a biker bar. From the start the Lancaster, Pa., restaurant and bar was a hit. The great food and warm atmosphere made Fiorentino's a happening place. What was not to like?

Well, how about that the restaurant was rundown and, at 1,350 square feet, too small? With two obscure entries (neither one handicap-accessible), the old restaurant had no sense of arrival. Inside, patrons crowded into a smoky, congested room, and hovered over diners while waiting

for a table. Noise and smoke spread throughout the space. The kitchen and wait staff were tripping over each other in a cramped, poorly laid out cooking and food prep area.

The Billases placed an order for a major upgrade with Earl King Inc. in late 2004. The Leola, Pa., contractor dished up a four-star remodel that more than tripled the size of the restaurant and resolved the building's problems – yet enabled the restaurant to stay open for all but seven weeks of the five-month project.

**Architect Tom Weaver retained the building's old-style character and scale by designing a stepped structure that flows from entry to new dining room to existing building. Paired porch and vestibule bump-outs flank and help identify the entrance.** *Photos courtesy of Earl King*



## THE FINANCIALS

About 60 percent of Earl King's work is remodeling, with 40 percent new construction. Commercial projects add up to 50 percent of the company's remodeling revenue, says president Ron King, because the commercial jobs are bigger despite being fewer in number. Because of their high dollar volume, King says, commercial projects have a lower markup than Earl King's residential jobs. The Fiorentino's remodel was about medium size for the company.

King uses a lump-sum or fixed-price contract. Trade contractors visit sites to aid in preparing a detailed estimate, which is provided free to clients. On this job, the company even subbed out the finish carpentry in order to meet the tight production schedule.

"We have working relationships with 90 percent of the subcontractors," Ron King says. "When we go out for budgeting and pricing, they understand us, and we know what they'll do." That means the subs' estimates are informed and on target.

Gross profit on the Fiorentino's project was budgeted at 20 percent. It came in close to plan at 18.6 percent, off by \$8,775.36.

"The owner got hammered with unforeseen structural problems," says King. "We chose not to aggressively go back to him with change orders for everything. We try to treat our clients fairly."

Labor overruns to deal with problems in the old restaurant building caused the cost bulge. For example, the double floor — a barn floor topped by joists and another floor — meant that whenever wiring or conduit had to run from the upper level to the basement it had to go through 16 inches of floor, beams and joists.

"We didn't charge the owner for that," says project manager Chuck Lewis. Change order charges included:

- ▶ 150' ADA-approved metal handrail: \$4,352
- ▶ excavation and paving along state roadway: \$15,192
- ▶ re-roofing with dimensional shingles and creating 8-inch gable overhangs: \$4,024
- ▶ additional plumbing for pasta cooker, bar sink, prep sink, icemaker: \$5,962
- ▶ additional wiring for recessed fixtures, dimmers, equipment outlets: \$3,595
- ▶ concrete retaining wall to protect exposed foundation at front of existing building: \$4,249.

### Winning the job

When the Billases moved to town several years earlier, architect Tom Weaver of Ephrata, Pa., designed a new house for them and became a good friend. They asked Weaver to design the restaurant redo and recommend contractors. He provided a few names, as well as straightforward advice.

"He said a big company may provide less specific attention," recalls Rob Billas, "and a small, mom and pop company may not be very professional." Conversely, Weaver told Billas, a mid-size company like King would have the benefits of being small but still be professional and "likely to be very accommodating of all the little things we wanted to do. In the end you'll probably end up going with King."

Architect Connie King does Earl King's in-house design work, but the firm typically works with architects retained by customers. Weaver has been a partner on several projects.

The Billases talked to a few companies but liked Earl King best from the start. In the initial meeting, company president Ron King and project manager Chuck Lewis made a good impression with their honesty.

"They did not promise to build the restaurant in a day," says Billas, "and they did not promise to be cheapest."

The Earl King estimate was a little higher than the ballpark figures provided by the other contractors. Still, the Billases requested a detailed estimate only from Earl King. King and Lewis brought two of their subcontractors, the plumber and electrician, to a second on-site meeting to gather information for the proposal. (The company subcontracts all labor except carpentry.) Lewis then called Billas several times with questions while he worked up the numbers.

"They weren't messing around," says Billas. "They really cared."

The scope of work included a 3,250-square-foot addition on the west side and a 220-

square-foot dishwashing room and service entry on the northeast corner of the existing building. The large addition included a welcoming entry with vestibule and waiting area, a new bar, a second dining room, handicap-accessible bathrooms and a dining porch. It also featured an office, food prep area and storage on the lower level.

### Budget History

Initial estimate	<b>\$513,838</b>
Add-ons	<b>\$15,303</b>
Final estimate	<b>\$529,141</b>
Change orders	<b>\$55,883</b>
Final price of job	<b>\$585,024</b>
Cost to produce	<b>\$476,500</b>
Gross profit	<b>\$108,524</b>
Budgeted gross profit	<b>20%</b>
Actual gross profit	<b>18.6%</b>



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### Fast service

The rule according to Rob Billas: “There had to be as little down time as possible, so I could generate the income to pay for this.” He also told Earl King that while the business was open during construction, restaurant operations and customer comfort could not be compromised.

“If they had to shut down the water or electricity they had to do it before 11 or at least before 4,” Billas says. “On our busiest days – Friday and Saturday – they could not do that at all. They were very considerate of that.”

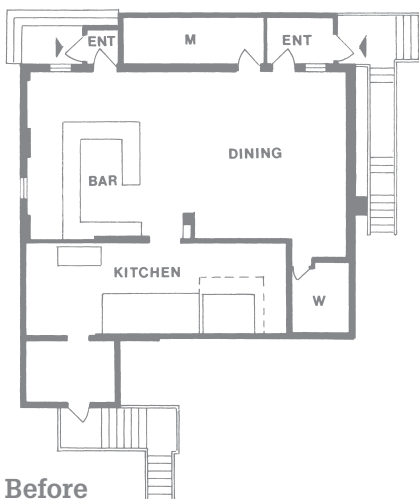
Lewis delivered by approaching the project in two phases. During the longer first phase, from January 10 to April 26, 2005, the restaurant remained open and Lewis concentrated on building the two additions.

As for the site, Earl King placed the Dumpster in an out-of-the-way spot on the grass so as not to clog the parking lot. The crew kept the site meticulously clean. A huge sign announced that the restaurant was still open, and fencing kept access both clear and safe.

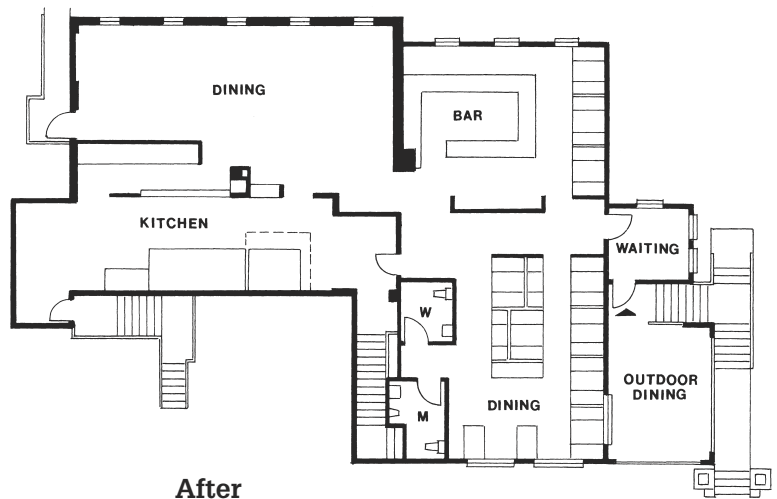
Only when it was time to break through to the existing building did the restaurant close. Lewis budgeted six weeks for the intensive second phase.

During this time, Earl King planned to remodel the old structure by replacing the wiring and plumbing systems, ripping off unsightly bump-outs that had been added over the years, adding an ADA compliant ramp, rearranging the existing dining room and upgrading the existing kitchen area.

**Billas and Lewis kept the new dining room cozy with an island of booths, walnut-stained pickwick paneling, sponge-painted walls and acoustic wall tiles.**



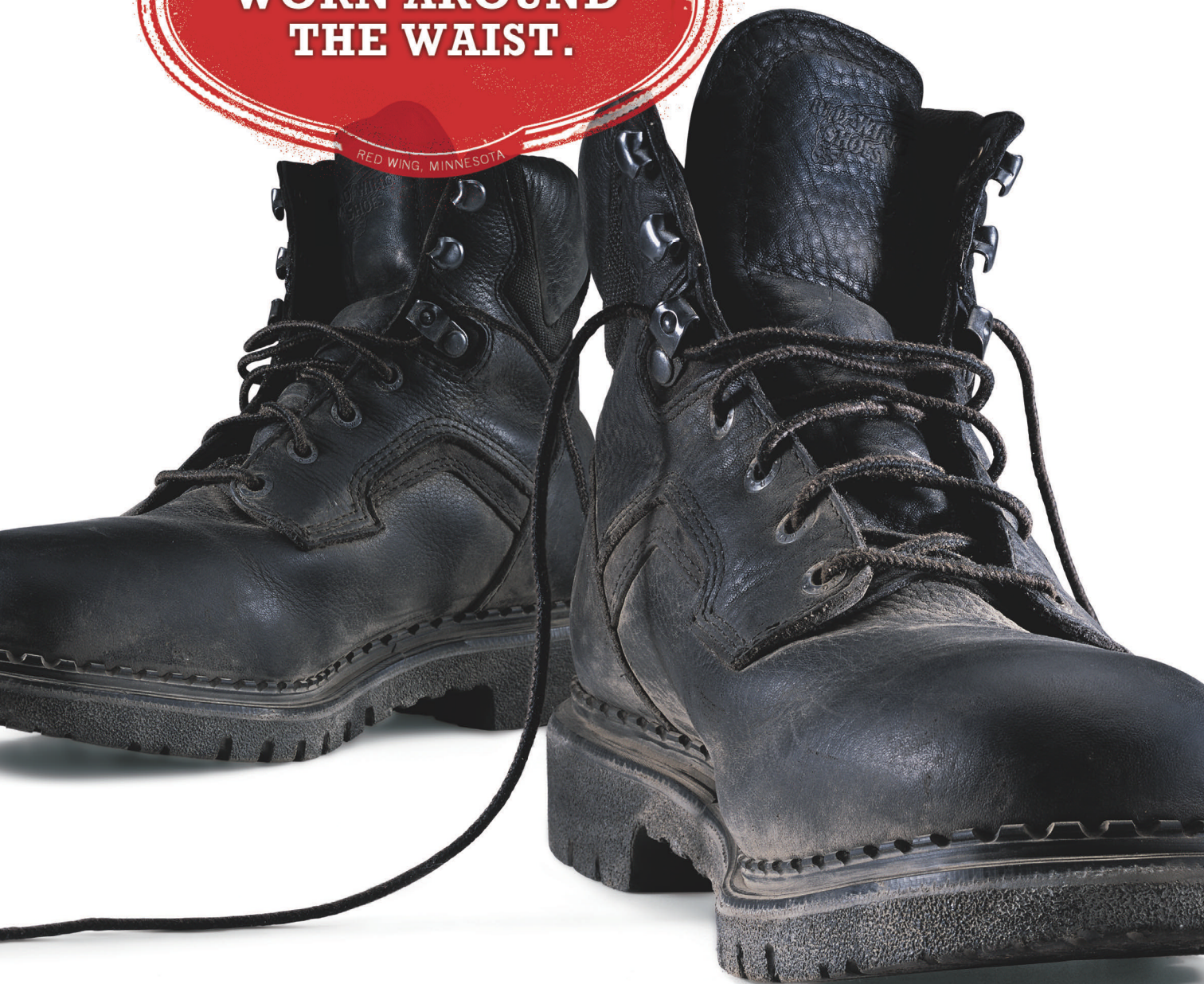
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### Flies in the soup

Major structural problems threatened to blow the schedule and the budget. The new west wing of the building sits in a flood plain, so it was designed to be built with reinforced concrete walls. But Lewis soon learned that substantially more structural support would be required.

"When we excavated along the existing west wall for the addition we found the stone foundation to be in poor condition," he says. "It began to crumble. So we poured a new concrete wall against it and pinned it with rebar to shore it up."

Lewis ran into the same problem while excavating for a 70-foot, handicap-accessible ramp along the front of the building, requiring Earl King to pour a reinforced concrete retaining wall to support the foundation. That added \$4,249 in costs. "There was quite a bit more concrete work than anticipated," says Lewis.

The walls of the original wood building held more problems. Built like a post-and-beam barn, the structure had posts where Earl King planned to create large new window openings. Lewis removed five intermediate posts along the front wall, adding a 3ply 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" LVL beam to support the attic floor and roof loads, thereby clearing the way for windows.

Extensive deterioration of the wood framing also had to be addressed. Lewis replaced rotted floor joists with



**A glass partition contains the smoke and noise of the bar, but lets light and views shine through. Lewis inserted a 6-inch plastic pipe behind the bar; bottles are dropped into a recycling bin in the basement.**

new lumber and inserted treated lumber where the wood structure came into contact with the foundation.

The front wall bowed 4 inches end to end and was 5 inches out of plumb. Lewis couldn't remove the wall without affecting the roof structure, which was staying in place, so he sandwiched it between new exterior and interior walls. The result is a 10-inch-deep front wall with room for extra insulation.

He also discovered that the floor of the above-grade restaurant was out of level by 5 inches. Lewis finessed the connection between the old and new dining rooms with a paneled half wall, linking the floors with a little rise.

To keep the remodel moving along despite changes and surprises, Lewis chose to add more labor to the project. As a result, the restaurant was closed only one week longer than planned.

"Framers worked some long days to get the building ready for rough-ins," says Lewis. "Plumbing and electrical subs put additional manpower on the job. At one point we had carpenters, electricians, plumbers, mechanicals, metal workers, concrete workers, and siding installers all working on the project at the same time."

Billas says, "I'm amazed that it went that quick." That kind of problem-solving is one of the things Billas liked about Earl King. "There were lots of surprises" along the way, he says. "They rolled with it." **PR**

## SNAPSHOT



### Ron King, Chuck Lewis

Earl King Inc.

**Location:** Leola, Pa.

**Type of company:** Design-build general contractor, residential and commercial work, remodeling and new construction

**Staff model:** 4 office, 5 field

**Years in business:** 68

#### Sales history:

2002	\$2,851,600
2003	\$2,503,900
2004	\$2,856,600
2005	\$3,645,100
2006	\$3,000,000 (projected)

**Annual jobs:** 17 to 22

**Workweek:** 50 hours office, 45 hours field

**Software:** Sage Timberline, AutoCAD, Microsoft Office, Microsoft Project

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### PRODUCTS LIST

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kitchen

## Real Simple, Real Clean

The balance of wood and glass give this kitchen Scandinavian sophistication

**T**wenty years ago, Benvenuti and Stein had designed the kitchen of this home on Chicago's North Shore. The new owners liked its basic form and function, especially the center island. But the homeowner, an art collector, wanted the space recast in the modern, minimalist Scandinavian design she loves. She also sought more storage space and natural light, and the ability to keep an eye on the kids while cooking and managing family finances.

In moving the kitchen to the back corner of the home, Benvenuti and Stein architect Jeff Herberholz preserved the dining room and also created



Before

**Remodeler and architect:** Benvenuti and Stein, Evanston, Ill.

**Project location:** Winnetka, Ill.

**Age of home:** 80 years

**Scope of work:** Relocated the kitchen and doubled its size, adding a pantry, work nook, breakfast area and wet bar.

Benvenuti and Stein designed both versions of this kitchen. The new one features a picture window, 6½-foot-square glass skylight and under-cabinet windows (at right) for views and sunlight. Seating six, the granite-topped island includes a cooktop and a warming drawer. *Photos by Paul Schlismann*





**Storage drawers beneath the dual-fuel (wood and gas) fireplace in the breakfast area/work nook, as well as the desk drawers and built-in shelves, repeat the form and style of the kitchen cabinetry. The door leads to a new pantry.**

a sensible flow throughout the first floor, avoiding adding hallways. A 200-square-foot addition allowed the homeowners to nearly double the size of their kitchen and to have a new family room. With no second floor above the new kitchen location, Benvenuti and Stein raised the 8-foot kitchen ceiling another 10 inches without affecting the existing second-floor windows.

That added space made room for full 44-inch upper cabinets topped with lighting detail. Too many uppers would have made a large picture window unworkable, so Herberholz designed a

floor-to-ceiling column of cabinetry around the refrigerator. Cantilevered shelving on the ends of the upper cabinets and open glass shelves in the cabinets serve as display areas. In- and under-cabinet lighting and above-counter, under-cabinet windows help keep the kitchen open and light.

Benvenuti and Stein duplicated the cantilevered shelving in the work nook, located off of the kitchen and breakfast area. A column of square glass-block windows over the desk repeats the window pattern of the kitchen but provides privacy for getting work done.

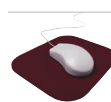
“We didn’t put the side supports in because it would make the sink and desk areas look too closed,” Herberholz says. “The actual cabinet construction was streamlined because we have an in-house cabinet shop, and whatever we think of they can do, so we’re not limited to ideas that come out of catalogues.”

The resulting 483 square-foot kitchen (increased from 230 square feet) has defined areas but still embraces open space. It can be accessed from both the dining room and new family room.

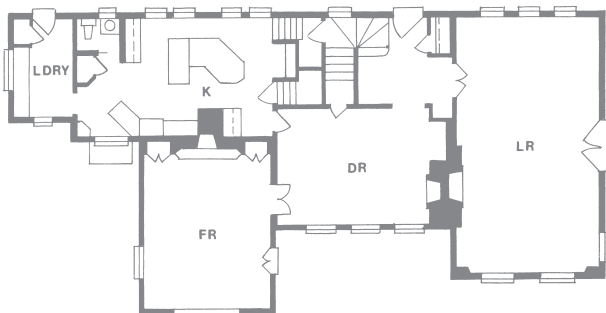
“You can literally connect people in any of the three rooms, which is much more desirable for entertaining formally or simply having the swim team over,” Herberholz says. The kitchen represented approximately \$120,000 and four month’s work of this whole-house project. **PR** — *Meghan Haynes*

#### PRODUCTS LIST

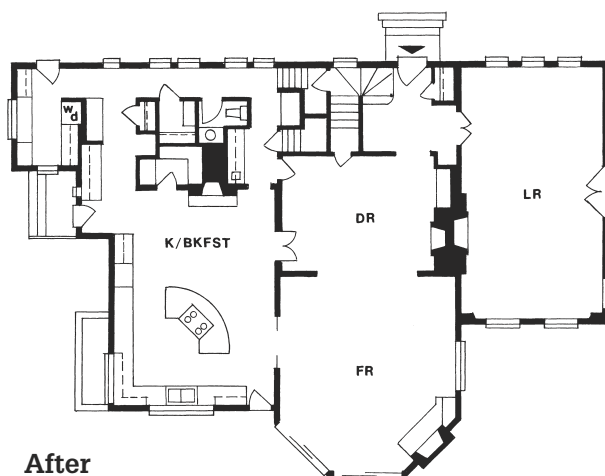
**Appliances:** Miele, Sub Zero, Viking. **Faucets:** Grohe, Kohler. **Lighting:** Valli and Valli. **Paint:** Sherwin-Williams. **Sinks:** Franke. **Windows:** Andersen, Pella.



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**After**





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8:34 AM

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# Productivity Push

Lars Construction  
goes wireless to save time

By **Kimberly Sweet**  
*Editor*

**W**ho wouldn't want to spend his late 30s working part time, savoring time with his wife and three children in the Southern California sunshine, building a new home, and enjoying the income of a profitable, growing business? Jason Larson, CR, certainly did. So at a time in his life when many remodelers are still putting in backbreaking hours building their businesses, Larson, owner of Lars Construction in San Diego, has pulled back to 15 to 20 hours a week.

Part of the reason Larson can do that is he's already put in years of effort, having opened the business in 1991 at age 22. Another piece of the puzzle is his staff: three project designers/salespeople, three project managers, four field workers, an office manager and a controller. Where Lars Construction sets itself apart, however, is in its use of technology to increase customer satisfaction and productivity while allowing staff to stay closer to home.

Digital cameras and CAD are old hat here, with the project designers all tak-

## New Department

This month *Professional Remodeler* begins Innovators, a department that profiles the new generation of remodelers: men and women introducing fresh technologies, ideas and business models to our industry. To suggest a subject, e-mail Kimberly Sweet at [ksweet@reedbusiness.com](mailto:ksweet@reedbusiness.com).



**Jason Larson**

*Photography by James Aronovsky*





## Jason Larson, 37

**Company:** Lars Construction

**Personal background:** Grew up in Minnesota helping his father on job sites. Did high school work-study program. Moved to California with family. Tried business school before founding Lars Construction in 1991.

**Employees:** 12, including dad Gary, brother Seth and brother-in-law Brandon Spann

**Typical job:** \$120,000 room addition and/or kitchen remodel

**Market:** San Diego metropolitan area south to Chula Vista and north to Carlsbad and Escondido

**Sales:** Nearly \$6 million in 2005; on pace for \$7 to \$8 million in 2006

**Strategy:** Delivering a "No-Tears" remodeling experience and specializing in the "Art of Blend" — completed homes where the new and the old blend seamlessly.

**Company goals:** Stabilizing wireless technology systems in the production department. Moving into a larger building. Improving customer satisfaction systems.

**Personal goals:** More date nights with his wife and more baseball games and cheerleading with the children.

## I can visualize the outcome, but mapping out the process is the challenge.

ing digital pictures at the first site visit and using Chief Architect for their conceptual designs. These positions require a wide range of skills and traits. The success of these individuals — including Jason's father, Gary, younger brother, Seth, and brother-in-law Brandon Spann — is what allows Larson to get rid of the sales hat that so many business owners find impossible to doff.

"I'm looking for someone with great people skills and passion for the business. Computer skills are a must," says Larson. "If they don't know that, they're not going to succeed."

Though each project designer has a laptop on which to present designs, Lars Construction also offers clients the option of viewing 3-D models on a large plasma television in the office. Located on a main street near the freeway in La Mesa, Calif., the building just holds the current staff, with a large open room that includes a conference table and a small working kitchen vignette. Clients can make changes with designers on the spot and immediately visualize them.

To keep the project designers focused on sales, Lars Construction outsources working drawings to a draftsman. Using Adobe Acrobat to create PDF versions of the CAD files, the project designers can e-mail documents back and forth to the drafter. Taking this strategy one step further, Larson recently began "sending out" some of the design, too. The new designer lives a one-and-a-half hour drive from the building, making in-person meetings a challenge.

San Diego traffic is one of the reasons Larson implemented Verizon Wireless BroadbandAccess in his company this March. With the wireless

technology, the new designer will be able to participate in client meetings from her home. It will also allow project designers to access the company server from their laptops, eliminating time wasted waiting for the office to return a phone call about a schedule, contact number or e-mail.

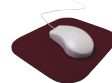
Just one of the project managers has a laptop at present, making him what Larson terms "the IT guinea pig" for the production department. In the more hands-on realm of the field, few workers — especially trade contractors — have the desire or see the need to computerize all operations.

"I know it's going to be a slow transition," says Larson. "I can visualize the outcome, but mapping out the process is the challenge."

For example, Larson knows that many of his trade partners do not have e-mail, or if they do, they don't check it every hour. So Lars Construction has installed eFax software that will allow project managers to send change orders or approved bids straight to a trade partner's fax, rather than letting a piece of paper get lost in a stack back in the office.

"It will increase productivity," says Larson. "We have one guy who lives in North county who has to drive in 30 minutes every day just to check his e-mail."

Getting a strong scheduling tool in place also will help. Lars Construction has been using a simple Gantt chart method, but is trying out Master Builder's scheduling module. Use of the accounting module has already become standard practice. **PR**



For pictures of the Lars Construction office and more **Innovations**, visit

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*Pictured: Rainier Maple Natural Kitchen*



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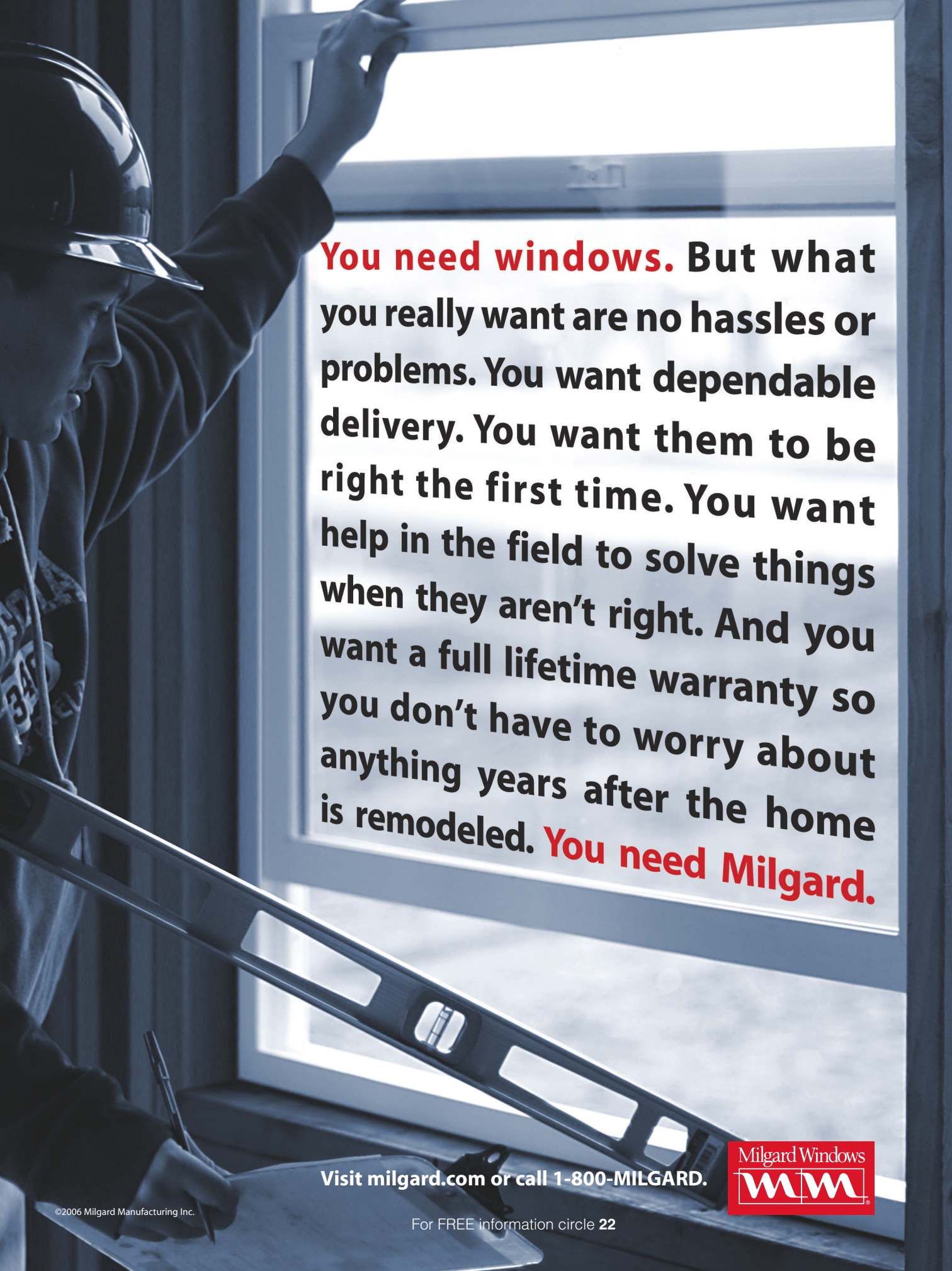
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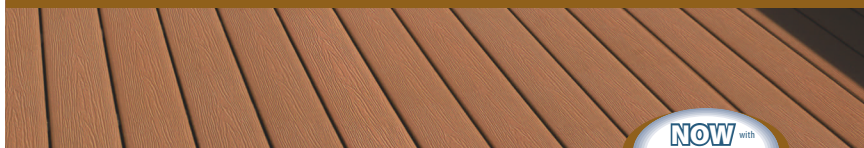
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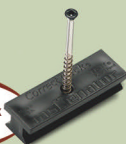
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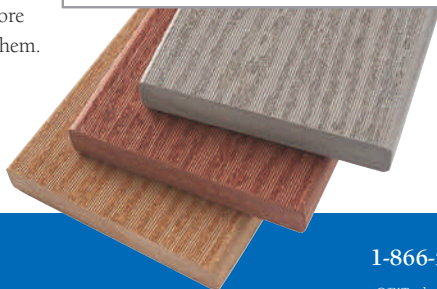
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# Insurance Savings

Senate bill could provide relief for rising healthcare costs

**V**ital legislation promoting affordable health care for small businesses will hit the Senate floor for the first time in more than a decade, thanks to a March 15 vote by the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee.

The Health Insurance Marketplace Modernization and Affordability Act would allow professional associations to provide group health insurance across state lines. One report estimates this could reduce health insurance costs for a small business by 12 percent.

An estimated 27 million small-business owners account for the largest segment of the uninsured population in the country. (Small businesses are defined as those with less than 100

employees.) Those that do provide health insurance have faced double-digit rate increases in recent years.

Dan Danner, executive vice president of the National Federation of Independent Business, issued the follow-

ing statement in favor of the act: "Small Business Health Plans, combined with much-needed competition for the small-group market, will bring more choices for owners facing double-digit rate increases and struggling to

afford health insurance for their employees.

"SBHPs will level the health insurance playing field and give participating small businesses the same buying power as Fortune 500 companies and unions."

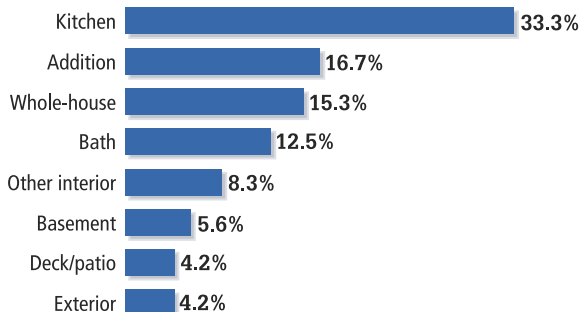


## Lead Safety

**T**he NAHB Remodelers Council is calling for remodelers to contact the EPA requesting an extension of the comment period on docket ID EPA-HQ-OPPT-2005-0049 regarding lead-safe work practices. NAHB wants the extension so it can finish its lead safety research and present the EPA with an alternative to potentially costly regulations.

## THE RESULTS

### Which type of remodeling job did your company do the most of in 2005?



*Results from February reader poll as of March 23, 2006.*

## THE POLL

### How would you describe the most typical client your company serves?

1. Couple with children
2. Couple without children
3. Single parent, female
4. Single parent, male
5. Single female
6. Single male
7. Three generations
8. Relative of owner

*To cast your vote and view the results as they are tabulated, visit [www.ProRemodeler.com](http://www.ProRemodeler.com)*





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