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AUGUST 2008

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**Guide to the 2009
Remodeling Market / 19**

**Managing Customer
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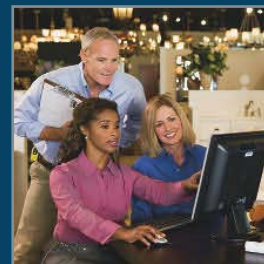
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AUGUST 2008
VOLUME 12 NUMBER 8



FEATURES

GUIDE TO THE 2009 MARKET

Stormy Forecast/19

Outlook is cloudy, but prepared remodelers can weather the storm

CORNER OFFICE

Brand Pickell/24

Grassroots marketing makes Orren Pickell stand out from the crowd

PROJECT SPOTLIGHT

Weather Beater/28

Time-honored looks and state-of-the-art materials come together in a deck that withstands the elements

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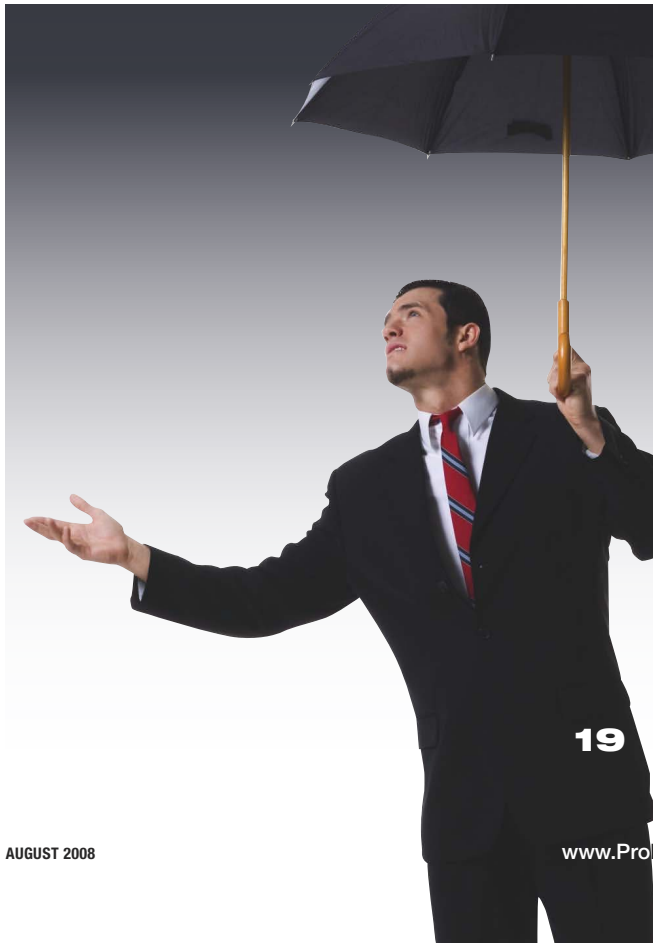


table of Contents

AUGUST 2008

DEPARTMENTS



Remodelers' Exchange 14
Managing Customer Expectations

Trade Secrets 17
Building a Better Site with SEO



Portfolio 32
Finished Basement



The Green Room 39
Passive Solar Design

Product Preview 41
New Product Showcase

Interior Products 44
Cabinets & Hardware

Exterior Products 46
Green

columns

From the Editor 9
On Leadership 11

On Business 13
The Board Room 54

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Remodelers' Exchange

Listen to this month's discussion between Tom Swartz, Beverly Koehn, Gary Adam and Jennifer Dainard on managing customer expectations. www.ProRemodeler.com

ONLINE POLL

How do you expect business to be in 2009?

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CHOOSE PROFIT OVER VOLUME

Next year looks like it could be one of the most difficult our industry has endured in more than a quarter of a century. Nearly everyone we've talked to — even the company owners who are not struggling to reach their 2008 volume goal — have confirmed that converting leads to sales has become exceedingly difficult, and it's eating away at profit margin.

The widely held solution during a time like this, of course, is to cut overhead. That's a great place to start. But because your sales operation is at the crux of the problem — even if this is a customer-generated problem — make it a high priority to take a long look at your sales process.

A lot of remodelers are blaming the media's coverage of the mortgage and real estate crisis for the slowdown in the economy. The fact is that our nation is heading into a recession regardless of whether the media sticks its head in the sand and pretends everything will be alright or whether they perform their duty by reporting facts.

The bottom line is that consumers are spending more conservatively and are slower to make decisions about high-ticket purchases and discretionary spending. Most remodeling jobs fall

into both of these categories.

Your salespeople were the first to be affected by these realities. They have experienced the change in your prospects' buying behavior and patterns first-hand, which means they likely hold the key to any solutions that may exist

for stronger future sales.

Ask for their input.

By all means, hold the line on price whenever possible, and explain this strategy to your sales team so they don't get in the bad habit of underpricing jobs in order to reach their sales goal.

One of the biggest mistakes you can make is to sacrifice margin to keep work coming in and your employees busy. Did you realize that just a 1 percent price decline, everything else remaining equal, can lower profit by as much as 8 to 10 percent?

You have to find a way to sell jobs without giving away margin or gross profit, and that means

selling on value over price

more than ever. If this means sacrificing volume, cutting staff, trimming overhead and downsizing your company, so be it.

When the market comes around in a year or two, at least you'll still be in business. And then you can leverage your good name in your market, as you have in the past, to build your business back to a healthy level. **PR**



Michael R. Morris

Editor in Chief

One of the biggest mistakes you can make is to sacrifice margin to keep work coming in and your employees busy.

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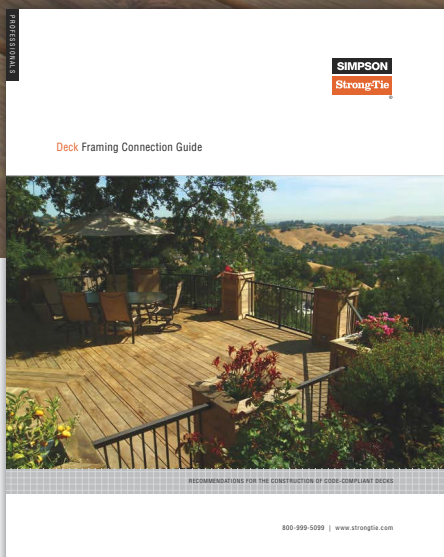
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CONSTRUCTIVE COMMUNICATION

I first wrote about the importance of effective communication in my July 2005 column Building Team Communication. In that column, I said that to achieve excellence within our companies' cultures, leaders must work hard at keeping healthy relationships. Our communication skills must be a strength, not a weakness. It takes time, energy and effort, but it pays big returns by producing better results and deeply enriched relationships. As leaders we must be proactive in building a positive growth culture, being observant and having challenging conversations when needed.

What is the best way to have a challenging conversation? I've found it helpful to have a plan and know that it's rare that these discussions are ever easy.

Over the years, I've had to face many challenging situations, often times while at a conference or business meeting. One situation occurred while I was conducting a large training conference. It came to my attention that one of our associates was not living up to the conduct of our Code of Values. He was using inappropriate language, exhibiting negative body language and was withdrawn at times. After the first day of the conference, I knew the situation needed to be addressed because it was affecting other attendees.

Because of this associate's relationship with the company, I was the most appropriate person to contend with the situation. Yet, at that moment, I did not want to deal with it. At times, this person had a very outspoken personality and could have an intimidating presence. And, like most of you, I had more than enough on my plate to fill my hectic schedule. To address this issue added a complexity to the three-day event.

Before our conversation, I spent about 20 minutes preparing my thoughts. I first noted what I didn't want to happen during the dialogue. The purpose was to

share this with him so he would feel more comfortable about the intended outcome of the meeting (rather than forming his own conclusions), and would therefore be more engaged in the conversation that was about to occur. I then wrote down what I wanted to happen.

Throughout the majority of the meeting, neither of us was 100 percent comfortable and certain times were more challenging than others.

The shortened version of the conversation went something like this: "You know, Joe, I wanted to meet with you about a very important topic. What I don't want to happen is for you to leave this meeting feeling like I don't want you to be a part of the company, that I don't have respect for you, or that I want our relationship to end. What I do want to happen is for you to continue to be a great member of the team, in a way that meets our company standards of conduct and professionalism."

Then, I addressed the specific behavior that was inappropriate for a member of the team. Fortunately, he took ownership of his behavior — he even noted that he had been trying to work on some of the issues I addressed. He fully understood what we were trying to accomplish as a company and committed to meet the standards as discussed. The added bonus was that we were able to reconnect our long-term relationship in a significant and meaningful way. The great news is this gentleman is still an associate and is excelling greatly since this meeting.

So, how can this story relate to you?

Simply stated, if you are faced with a difficult conversation, don't ignore it. It would have been easier in that moment to just avoid the conversation altogether, with the hope that he would just change on his own. But, in this case, it is likely he would have never

known that his behavior was affecting others nor understood the company's commitment to operating at the standards we discussed.

As a business owner or manager, I am sure you have likely experienced many challenging encounters with associates, clients and others. While working to strengthen my communication, I have found two great books, *Crucial Confrontations* and *Crucial Conversations*, to be great resources in finding a positive outcome to a difficult situation. I highly recommend you read these and share them with your team.

As I mentioned in the July 2005 column, don't forget to call a business friend or consultant for

advice when you're faced with a difficult situation. Don't let the problem continue to slide; it can build up and become an explosive situation. As a business consultant once said to me, "It is easier to kill the monster while it is little." **PR**

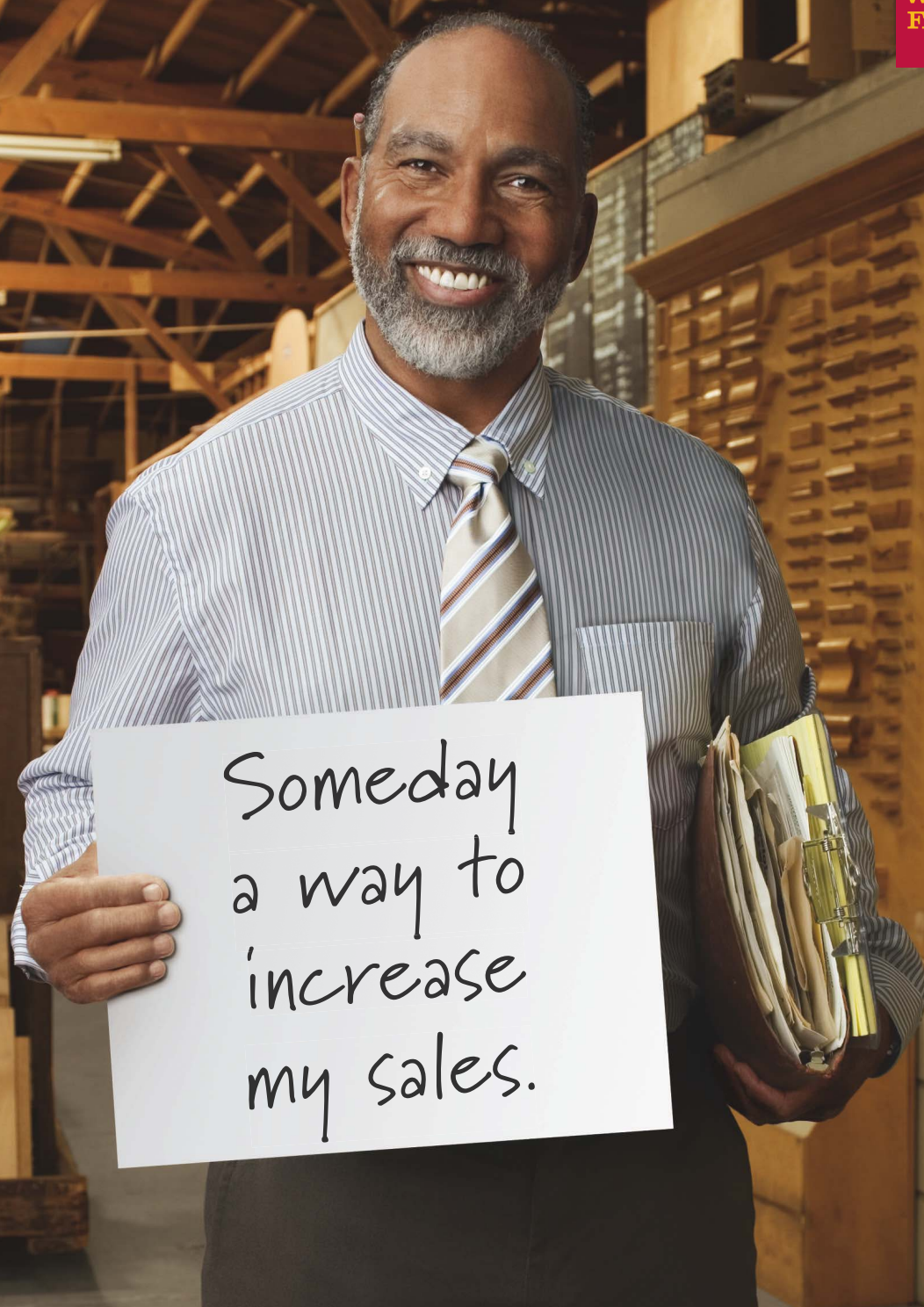
Doug Dwyer is president and chief stewarding officer of DreamMaker Bath & Kitchen by Worldwide, one of the nation's largest remodeling franchises. He can be reached at doug.dwyer@dwyergroup.com.



Doug Dwyer
Contributing Editor

As leaders, we must be proactive in building a positive growth culture, being observant and having challenging conversations when needed.

>> For more Doug Dwyer on Leadership, visit www.ProRemodeler.com



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WHY SWOT IS IMPORTANT FOR YOUR BUSINESS

Giving everyone who works in and with your business a clear sense of what the enterprise is about is one of the over-arching purposes of preparing a business plan. That is why the business' vision, mission and core values are so important.

With this foundation in place it is easier to look forward, trying to see what the future holds for the company. A process for doing this is called a SWOT Analysis.

Many of us tend to get swept up in the immediate and obvious — not necessarily what is most important in the long run. As a small business owner, it feels natural to be responding to clients' needs and concerns, dealing with the employee's truck that is broken today and helping the trade contractor get what he or she needs so work can proceed. These are all important matters, but if all the attention of the company is focused on this unending flow of important and short-term concerns, it is very likely that serious challenges will not be anticipated. The trick is to focus on both the present and the future, without excluding one or the other.

SWOT is an acronym that stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. By doing a Situational Analysis (otherwise known as a SWOT Analysis) it is possible to look ahead to see the company's needs before it becomes unsuccessful.

This is an exercise best done with the entire staff. It is surprising what can be learned from a carpenter's helper about these different categories, as such people are often the ones who have the most realistic view of what kind of experience the company is actually providing to clients.

It is most effective to do this download with the assistance of a facilitator. When the business owner takes the role of facilitator in this exercise it is normal that the

openness of the attendees is diminished. Simply by body language responses, if nothing else, the owner sends messages approving or disapproving of what he is hearing.

Once everyone is gathered, employees are first asked to identify the firm's strengths. Wikipedia defines strengths as attributes of the organization that are helpful to achieving the objective.

We do not spend enough time celebrating what we do right. This is a good starting point for this exercise. It is also an opportunity for attendees to acknowledge the good things that coworkers do on behalf of the company.

The powerful thing about strengths is we can decide to focus on how we can do more of what we know really works and is effective. Sometimes, simply stopping and noticing can make a big difference from that point forward. If this works so well in this situation why don't we do it more often?

Weaknesses of the company are often stored up in coworkers' heads. Why do we handle this need in this manner as opposed to a different way when we know the way we do it is not as effective as anyone wants it to be? Wikipedia defines weaknesses as attributes of the organization that are harmful to achieving the objective.

This is an extremely important area to explore thoroughly. The insights are critical in helping to decide what the company is going to stop doing in its operations.

Wikipedia defines opportunities as external conditions that are helpful to achieving the objective. Working together,

the members of the company talk about what they see in the marketplace that the company could exploit to achieve even more success.

This will involve a little stretching, as opportunities don't always seem that obvious. What do we do really well for

our clients and how could we find more clients?

Those are examples of the kinds of questions that are worth considering.

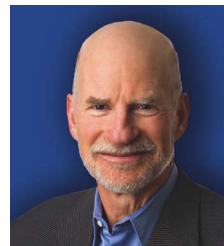
Finally, it is time to focus on threats. Wikipedia defines threats as external conditions that could do damage to the business's performance. What is happening with market conditions that could be a challenge for the company? Who are our competitors, and how healthy are their businesses?

A thorough examination of threats makes it less likely that the company will be blindsided by something that could have been anticipated, if the time was

taken to think about what could go wrong before it happens.

The SWOT Analysis has really galvanized the company! It has been a wonderful day. The hard work of setting current concerns aside and looking to the future will really pay off with a more focused group of people, all attuned to what is and, more importantly, what could be. **PR**

Paul Winans CR works with Remodelers Advantage. He is a founder of Winans Construction, which he and his wife, Nina, sold in 2007. He can be reached at paul@remodelersadvantage.com.



Paul Winans
Contributing Editor

The insights are critical in helping to decide what the company is going to stop doing in its operations.

>> Look for Paul Winans' next article in November on www.ProRemodeler.com

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Are your customers' visions in sync with what you deliver?

DO YOUR CUSTOMERS ALWAYS get what they want? Are they delighted with the finished project? Are they happy to recommend you? If they're not, this is a must read that will help you manage those expectations.

Tom: Do you have a sales process in place that deals directly with selling expectations for the prospect up front? Gary, I'll start with you and Jennifer.

Gary: We have a process that is written, but there can be variations to that.

Jennifer: Usually when someone makes a phone call, we have Lisa answer the phone and take the important information, which gives us a clue so we can be prepared to understand what they're looking for and make sure they've really thought through the process. That can bring us to whether I decide that I go directly to their home and get to know them there. Sometimes the best way to get to know them

better is to have them into our offices first. If someone approaches a project that sounds very ambitious and they've never done it before, I want to help them understand what they're about to get themselves into and also if they're being realistic with their budget and their expectations.

Tom: Beverly, what do you see as some of the good processes for setting the expectations for the prospect right upfront?

Beverly: One of the best things you can do is make sure you spend enough time interviewing a customer upfront. Not only allowing them to interview you, but you interview them to make sure that there is a match there between what they are expecting and what you'll be able to deliver.

Tom: Is there a fine line you walk regarding selling realistic expectations without turning the customer off before they decide to go with you?

Gary: There is always walking on a fine line with a client. When a client has expectations that may be unrealistic to our company, we try to have an understanding of why they're looking for a completion date that seems to be out of tune with what we may be able to deliver. It may be a family function they're going to be hosting at their home. We now would have an understanding of why they need it and if we're able to meet that expectation.

Tom: How do you keep the customer's expectations on track during the remodeling process?

Jennifer: Letting them know what a roller coaster ride it is. There will be times when it feels like nothing is happening, but it is. You need drying time, etc. Make them aware of that type of thing. Problems arise.



PHOTO: COREY MIHALUK/GETTY IMAGES

GARY: "100 percent, it's a team effort. I agree that the salesperson is the key communicator, yet we always designate the lead hand to be the on-site communicator with the client."

Tom: Is it one person that watches over that customer throughout the project, or is it a total team effort?

Gary: 100 percent, it's a team effort. I agree that the salesperson is the key communicator, yet we always designate the lead hand to be the on-site communicator with the client to keep them informed dur-

This month featuring:

Beverly Koehn, Owner

Beverly Koehn & Associates, San Antonio, Texas
The 23-year-old business specializes in enhancing customer experiences and improving sales performance.

Gary Adam, President, and

Jennifer Dainard, Interior Designer

Pioneer Craftsmen, Kitchener, Ontario

Pioneer Craftsmen is a full-service renovation company with 21 employees on staff and three salespeople. Gary has 35 years of hands-on experience. Jennifer has been with the company for about a year after running her own interior design firm. Volume is about \$4 million a year.

BEVERLY: “One of the best things you can do is make sure you spend enough time interviewing a customer upfront.”



PHOTO: LIZ GARZA WILLIAMS

ing the various stages of progress during the day, what's going to be happening the next day. It's a daily process from that lead hand versus the once or twice a week from the salesperson.

Tom: We'll talk about the different types of customers. Are the design/build customers harder, easier, about the same or any different to deal with than the customer who calls in — not a design/build, but a remodel or renovation customer?

Jennifer: Interestingly enough, sometimes I find that the people who aren't doing as large of a project will be pickier. On the bigger projects, sometimes they're happy to take the whole thing and take the stress off their shoulders. Sometimes on the bigger projects we are looking at higher-end finishes, and they're looking at more quality

products that we're putting in. Therefore there's less to draw their attention to they're not happy with how something is coming out. When I meet someone who has worked hard for every dollar and scrimped to get it all put together, and every dime is very important to them. They tend to need to hang over the shoulder of the carpenter and ask a lot of questions and be very finicky. I wouldn't say that it's a clear generalization. I think you get a little bit of everything no matter what. Sometimes they just want to be able to vent. You just need to let them talk it all out, and say, "I'm going to pass this list along." Sometimes it doesn't take more than that to make them happy.

Gary: In the design/build process, you spend a lot more up-front time with a client learning about their profession, their interests and their family. You're more aware of what issues may become a concern to them. As Jennifer said, it may be due to the finishes on the cabinetry or may have something to do with deadlines or disruption to the family. You now have better insight, and you're able to head that off ahead of time. That's the one advantage of the design/build process. There's a lot more time communicating with the client before the project is priced or the products are selected and delivered.

Tom: Are there any different expectations in specific age groups such as the baby boomers versus younger professionals, age groups and income groups?

Beverly: The only difference in that particular instance would be the method of communication. With some of the aging society, the method of communication is still one where they want to be the more traditional form of communication. If you're working with a young professional, their method of communication is going to be high-tech. They still want that face-to-face time but not as concentrated as the individual who perhaps is in their 60s or 70s.

Tom: We find customers today who want

speed, choice and convenience. They want whatever they want fast. Today the customers also want it at a great value. How do you deliver this in the best possible way with those expectations?

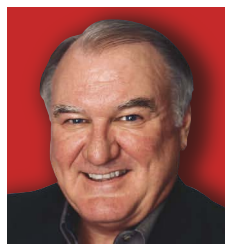
Beverly: I think that the way you do that is if you continue right up front to help them align their expectations with your delivery reality of what speed, choice and convenience actually entail. If one of those has more value than one of the other three components, you've got a misalignment.

Total value is what most people are looking for. They don't know how to put a price point on that. If speed is more important to them than the other two components, it's going to affect total value. I like to do that three-tier approach where we talk about the price being important, but price certainly needs to be a component of total value. This is how we

allocate that. This is what convenience factors we will be able to deliver, and these are the choices you'll be able to make. If any of those three are out of line, then that's going to unbalance the value component. We have to do that right up front.

Tom: You're talking to a group of remodelers right now. What advice would you give them?

Gary: My strongest piece of advice for them is that besides doing everything else — we read about construction flow charts, pre-construction conference — is to pick your lead hand carpenter or project manager with the same psychological profile as your client. We're willing to marry that lead hand carpenter with that client. That can give us two people who can communicate together, share some of the same interests. **PR**



Tom Swartz
Contributing Editor

TALK BACK

>> For the rest of the discussion on this topic or to listen to the podcast, visit www.ProRemodeler.com/bestpractices

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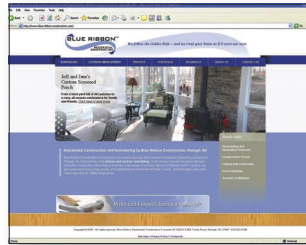
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Building a better site with SEO

When Blue Ribbon Residential Construction decided to improve its Web site, the company knew it wanted to use a professional firm rather than tackle it themselves as they had before.

"We wanted to work with people who would be able to help us drive people to our site. We wanted people who knew exactly what they were doing," says Marcia Townsend, office manager for the Raleigh, N.C., company. Blue Ribbon hired Vision Point Marketing, a local firm specializing in electronic marketing.

One of the most important things Vision Point did was design the site using search engine optimization, or SEO. Put simply, SEO means writing site text so it uses popular



search keywords to draw people in; site design takes advantage of search algorithms. (For more on SEO, visit our blog at www.housingzone.com/sweet.)

Vision Point brought Blue Ribbon 300 pages of key words and asked the management team to pick out the ones that best described their company and the customers they were trying to attract. In the case of Blue Ribbon, that meant focusing on landing

higher-end, design/build jobs. Vision Point took that list, pared it down and wrote the text for the site to include those words.

The results have been overwhelming. Traffic to Blue Ribbon's site (www.blue-ribbon-construction.com) is up more than 200 percent since the new site was launched, and potential clients are spending more time when they visit. More leads are coming from the site as well. Even more importantly, the company is now landing larger design/build jobs, a key goal of the Web site update. Most projects now fall between \$100,000 and \$150,000, with some topping \$200,000. Before the new site, most jobs were in the \$50,000 to \$80,000 range, Townsend says.

>> If you have a **Trade Secret** you would like to share, e-mail Senior Editor Jonathan Sweet at jonathan.sweet@reedbusiness.com.

Marketing with financing

The Windsor Construction Group found a new way to generate business: offering clients help paying for their financing.

Under a new promotion the company started earlier this year, Windsor will pay 1 percent of the total contract cost to clients if they use the company's preferred lender, Bank of America.

"With the difficulties in the financing end of things right now, it's a way we can soften that blow," says President Jim Wolohan. "So far, we've had an overwhelming response."

The Rockville, Md.-based company plans to run the promotion at least through the end of the year. The program is not only helping increase leads, it also encourages clients to use the preferred lender, which can make the financing process run more smoothly.

"They're very well versed in these types of loans and know the value of what we do," Wolohan says. "It's a little different than if they try to go out and get the loan on their own from their local bank or someone who doesn't know the industry as well."

1%

THE GREEN PIECE

Reduce, reuse, recycle

ARC Design-Build has made it a mission to find ways to reduce the waste the company produces.

On every project, the Huntsville, Ala., design/build remodeler looks for any products that can be reused or recycled during the demolition stage. For example, the company often finds a use for the handmade bricks that are so common in homes ARC remodels.

If ARC can't reuse the products, the company will donate them to the local Habitat for Humanity ReStore, where they are sold to benefit the program. (For more on Habitat's ReStore, see our April 2007 issue or visit www.ProRemodeler.com.)

For products that can't be reused or donated, ARC tries to find ways to recycle

them. The company has even found a firm in northern Alabama that will recycle debris such as 2 by 4s and drywall.

"We may have to take special trips instead of just throwing it in a Dumpster, but we feel it's important," says company President Anders Adelfang.

The company also tries to reduce the waste it produces by specifying products that are recyclable and even considering factors such as the amount of packaging and if it's recyclable when selecting materials for a project.

"We try to reduce the amount of waste from the get-go," Adelfang says. "Because we're design/build we can specify the products we use and then make sure they get installed properly without waste on the construction side."

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Stormy Forecast

OUTLOOK
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REMODELERS CAN
WEATHER THE STORM

By Jonathan Sweet, Senior Editor

WHILE 2007 HAD ITS ROUGH MOMENTS, 2008 SEEMS TO BE THE YEAR that the housing downturn really hit remodeling.

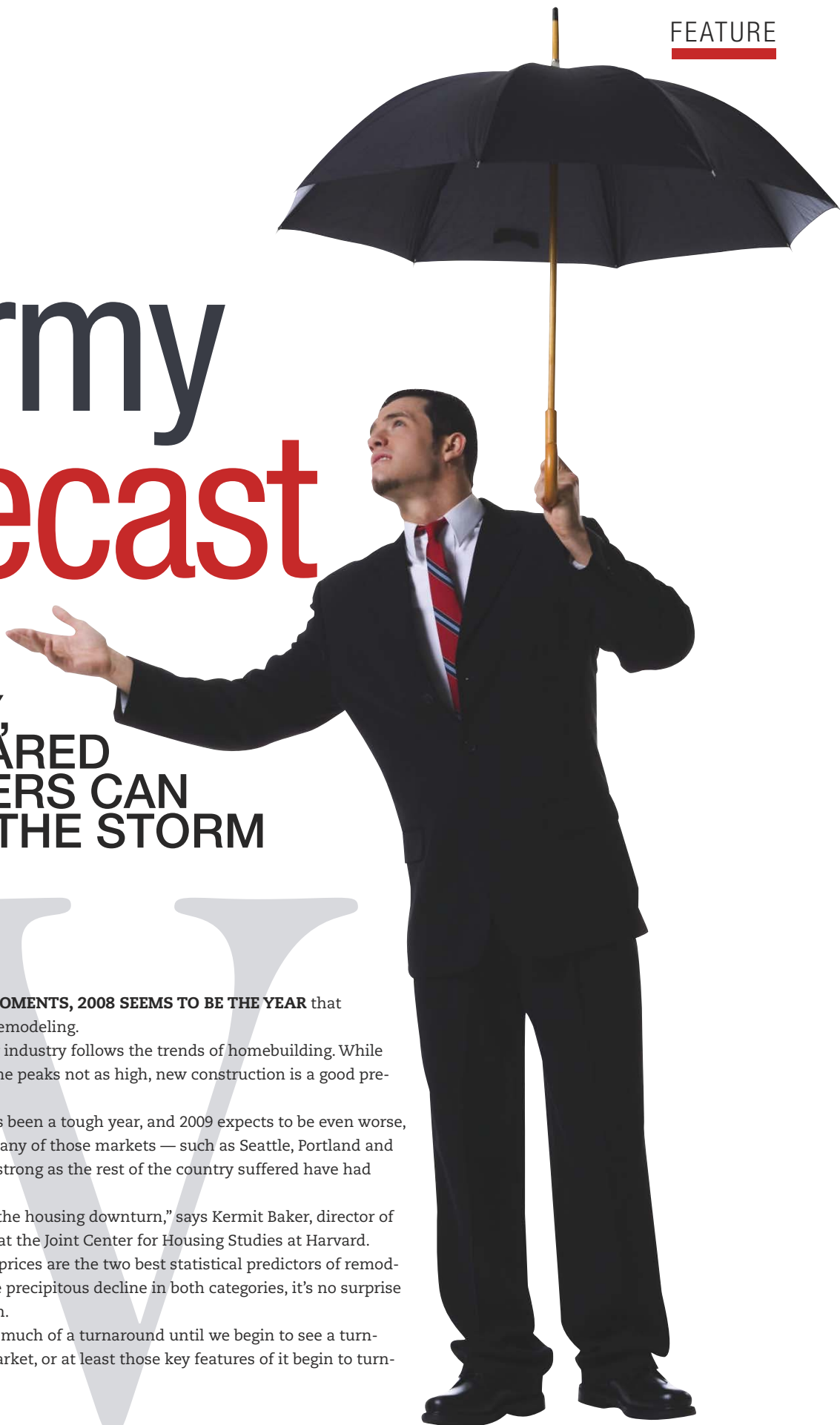
Fundamentally, the remodeling industry follows the trends of homebuilding. While the troughs are not as deep and the peaks not as high, new construction is a good predictor of remodeling activity.

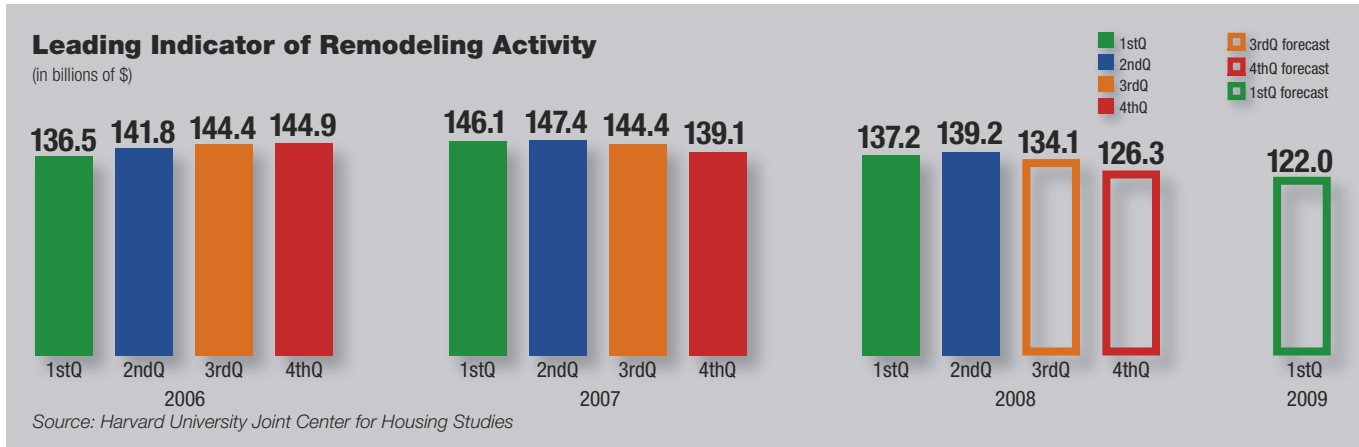
Not surprisingly, that means it's been a tough year, and 2009 expects to be even worse, at least in the early going. Even many of those markets — such as Seattle, Portland and Texas — that had been relatively strong as the rest of the country suffered have had struggles this year.

"We're really getting caught in the housing downturn," says Kermit Baker, director of the Remodeling Futures Program at the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard.

Existing home sales and home prices are the two best statistical predictors of remodeling activity, Baker says. With the precipitous decline in both categories, it's no surprise that remodeling activity has fallen.

"It's unlikely we're going to see much of a turnaround until we begin to see a turnaround in the broader housing market, or at least those key features of it begin to turnaround," Baker says.





Harvard's LIRA, which uses four-quarter moving totals to track remodeling volume, is predicting a drop to \$122 billion for the year ending in the first quarter of 2009 — down 11 percent from a year earlier and a drop of more than 17 percent from the market peak.

GROWTH BY 2010?

The National Association of Realtors predicts that existing home sales will increase to 5.7 million next year. That's a 6.6 percent increase from the nearly 5.4 million the group projects for this year and a slight increase over 2007, but still well below the 7 million recorded in 2005. It's also worth noting that a year ago, NAR projected 6.1 million in sales for 2006 and 6.3 million for 2008. As for home prices, NAR forecasts a 3.7 percent increase for existing homes in 2009.

Harvard is predicting a continued decline in the market in 2009. The Leading Indicator for Remodeling Activity released in July projects an 11.1 percent decline for the first quarter of 2009 compared to first quarter 2008. (The LIRA uses a four-quarter moving rate of change, so the 2009-1 number, for example, is based on activity in the second, third and fourth quarters of 2008 and the first quarter of 2009.)

2009 could see a turning point, Baker says. That is the point when the rate of decline slows, but the market still isn't producing positive growth. Sometime in 2010, we could expect to see a return to a positive market, he says. That would be the first growth in the LIRA since the second quarter of 2007.

"We should be back into the growth range in 2010, but it's too early to say when," Baker says.

The LIRA only measures improvement activity in owner-occupied homes, not maintenance and repairs, which typically remain fairly stable.

"If you have a repair project, you're unlikely to defer that even if the economy is bad," Baker says. "In most cases, those projects go ahead as they would independent of the economy."

The LIRA also doesn't track improvements to rental housing, an area that has been underinvested for years. While increased

investment isn't showing up yet on a large scale, there is great potential for the next decade, Baker says.

Tighter credit standards and increase in foreclosures are putting pressure on the rental stock, as people who were homeowners rent again and people who a couple of years ago would have bought homes stay in the rental market.

"What's muddying that trend now is that just as these households are coming back to the rental market, a lot of these housing units are, too," Baker says. "We've got houses that were built for owners turning into rentals, condos turning into apartments, so we're seeing an increase in both the supply and the demand side."

In the long term, though, the trend still looks positive for remodeling growth in the rental market because of increasing demand and more than a decade of underinvestment in upkeep.

STAYING STRONG

If companies want to survive the downturn, it's necessary to change things. Owners should look at every aspect of the company, from sales and marketing to production and staffing. Being willing to make changes is the difference between success and failure.

Sun Design Remodeling Specialists in Burke, Va., is one of the few companies that can point to a healthy increase in business this year. The design/build firm expects to hit its goal of a 14 percent increase in revenue over last year, says vice president Bob Gallagher.

Even so, the company has had to adapt its sales and marketing efforts to focus more on building relationships with potential clients.

"The sales process has become a courting process," Gallagher says. "We got very accustomed to signing design agreements at the first meeting. Now, we'll be meeting with people three to four times before they sign."

The reluctance to pull the trigger on a project has been a problem for Normandy Builders of Hinsdale, Ill., as well despite leads approaching record levels, says vice president Andy Wells.

"We're seeing a lot of people still, but closing ratio has gotten worse," Wells said. "Wait and see is kind of the attitude."

Sun Design is seeing a reluctance by many clients to make the decision, taking more time before signing anything.

"I think people generally have a sense that it's a market where they don't have to rush," Gallagher says. "We are seeing some apprehension in people getting off the fence."

The company's sales team has also rededicated itself to a consultative sales approach, focusing on what made the company successful originally. The process has to be more about the "why" (why they want to remodel) than the "what" (what they want done).

"We have rediscovered it more clearly than two years ago," Gallagher says. "We need to hear them on an emotional level and prescribe solutions."

The Sun Design staff is also emphasizing networking and branding in its marketing efforts, to become more personally connected to people. That means attending events the company wouldn't have in the past — such as a local wine festival — to get out in front of potential clients.

"The point is when the market changes and the thing you've done for years doesn't work, you can dig in your heels and be stubborn or you can find some alternatives," Gallagher says.

Job size has also gotten smaller. Normandy Builders is seeing a shift away from large additions toward smaller kitchen projects, which Wells believes has been caused by the drop in home sales. The two types of projects actually represent two different sets of clients, he says.

"Some people would have moved, but now they can't sell their house, so they're remodeling their kitchen instead," Wells says. "The bigger additions came from people who moved into a house and decided they were going to remodel. I think the clients who would have done the addition are now doing nothing instead."

Earlier this year, the company started making cuts to be more efficient and position the company to succeed when the market comes back. That meant watching every dollar, avoiding big purchases, consolidating some jobs and laying people off.

"We had to lay off some people we really liked, but you just have to do it," Wells says. "We had to recognize that right away, because if we waited too long to make those decisions it could hurt the company."

Layoffs have also been a necessary survival tactic for Feinmann Inc., an Arlington, Mass., design/build firm. President Peter Feinmann let 25 percent of his staff go. The company has also been chasing more leads. Typically, Feinmann would visit 40 to 45 percent of the leads that come in. This year, it's

"We should be **back into the growth range** in 2010."

— Kermit Baker



THE UPSIDE OF GAS PRICES

Rising costs of staples like fuel, food and utilities obviously reduce discretionary income and hurt spending on luxury items, including remodeling. It also drives up material costs.

But there may be a benefit to rising fuel prices, as well, says Kermit Baker, director of the Remodeling Futures Program at Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies.

"It's suddenly gotten a lot more expensive to live in a new subdivision 40 or 50 miles from downtown," Baker says. "One thing it's going to do is force prices up closer to downtown and in older suburbs and force prices down in remote locations."

That's a trend already being seen in many markets. For example, in Washington, D.C., property values inside the Beltway are staying strong, while far-flung exurbs are suffering.

"It's simple supply and demand," says Bob Gallagher, vice president of Sun Design Remodeling Specialists in Burke, Va. "People are just not buying out there anymore."

Take a look at the foreclosure map for almost any major metropolitan area, and it gets worse the further you are from the city center. (We've also posted several blogs on this topic at www.housingzone.com/sweet.)

The benefit for remodelers is that those homes in the cities and near suburbs are older and in more need of remodeling. As prices there rise, it presents a great opportunity for work.

"These are prime targets for major remodeling activity," Baker says. "It encourages home improvements, often big additions or, at the very least, major structural improvements to the home."

closer to 80 percent.

"We want to be in front of as many people as possible these days," he says.

The company also cut prices to get some work this year, something Feinmann says was possible because he had reinvested past profits back into the company over the years.

"We didn't have to make a lot of money this year; we just had to be maintaining what we were doing," he says.

The company closed three or four jobs this past winter by cutting margins, yet still maintaining profitability. Making those tough decisions allowed Feinmann to avoid more layoffs.

"At that point, it was that job or no job, and I was better off getting the work at low margins than not getting them at all," Feinmann says. "So we were very aggressive this winter selling jobs with the specs and prices that we could make a decent amount of money to keep the energy of the company flowing. Some people didn't do that, and they got in trouble."

The other big change has been focusing on smaller projects and being more efficient in those projects, Feinmann says.

"There are less larger projects, so we need the smaller projects to keep us going," he says.

Smaller job sizes have also been the theme for Los Angeles-based Custom Design & Construction this year. A couple of years ago, the company had jobs in the \$500,000 to \$600,000 range. Those projects are now closer to \$400,000. The company is taking on the same number of projects this year, but revenues are down about 25 percent.

"It used to be if someone wanted to spend \$500,000 and we designed a project for them that was \$600,000, and they fell in love with it; they'd do it," says President Bill Simone. "Today people are holding hard and fast to what their intended budget is. That's it, and they're not going to exceed it."

One significant competitive advantage for the company has been that it can carry the financing for its projects. In today's lending climate, that has helped close many deals, Simone says. (For more on the company's financing program, see the Innovators article in the January issue of *Professional Remodeler* or visit www.proremodeler.com.)

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

A big part of making it through the downturn will be having realistic expectations for the recovery. It'll likely be quite a while before the industry reaches its 2005-2006 highs because of fundamental changes in the residential construction industry – and that's probably a good thing.

"I'm not sure the peak is something we should really be looking for, because when the market was at its highest level, it was driven by a fairly thin slice of the population, spending a lot on

"We want to be **in front of as many people as possible** these days." – Peter Feinmann



THINKING POSITIVE

Even in a down market, there can be opportunities. Here are some of the key ones:

- **Rental market** – The increasing demand for rental units means rising rents are allowing owners to invest after years of not doing so.
- **Handyman work** – The maintenance and repairs segment of the industry remains strong even in economic downturns.
- **Urban remodeling** – The rising price of gas is making cities and near suburbs more attractive for commuters and those older areas ripe for remodeling.
- **Financing** – With tightening credit markets, helping clients land a loan could be the difference between selling or not selling a job.

fairly high-end home improvement projects," Baker says. "That's not something I consider a very healthy market and probably not something we want to replicate."

Much of that growth was driven by unsustainable increases in home sales and prices. Instead, we should look for a return to the healthy market of the 1990s, Baker says, when the industry was growing, but not being driven by a very small upper-end clientele.

"It should be a much healthier industry with more broad-based activity and more and more households undertaking home improvement projects," he says. "We're looking for a good mix of projects to restore a healthier industry." **PR**

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Clad-Wood Pocket Double-Hung Window

A full-page photograph of a middle-aged man with a grey beard and mustache, smiling at the camera. He is wearing a grey suit jacket, a white dress shirt, and an orange tie with a diamond pattern. He is standing in front of a window with horizontal blinds. His right hand is on his hip, and he is wearing a gold watch on his left wrist. The background shows a green lawn and some buildings through the blinds.

Brand Pickell

GRASSROOTS
MARKETING MAKES
ORREN PICKELL
STAND OUT FROM
THE CROWD

By Jonathan Sweet, Senior Editor

ORREN PICKELL IS A REMODELER. He's a custom builder. He's a businessman. But perhaps most importantly, he's a brand.

Talk to high-end homeowners in Illinois, Michigan or southern Wisconsin and they'll know the name Orren Pickell. Whether it's remodeling or custom homes, the name Orren Pickell carries a meaning beyond what most contractors ever achieve. So much so, in fact, that the company that carries his name can charge more for a project if Pickell is going to be personally involved with the design work.

"Probably the No. 1 thing that allows us to keep revenue coming in is branding," Pickell says.

BUILDING A BRAND

For the last 30-plus years, Pickell has made decisions that have brought him to this point. Building a brand is not a short-term process, but investing time and energy in it can make a huge difference down the road.

"You're not going to have a brand until you're out there for 10 years," Pickell says. "You've got to have those years of work out there to show quality and longevity."

The most important part of building a brand is having a reputation for quality work and service.

"Treat your customers more than fairly. Exceed their expectations," Pickell says. "When you exceed expectations, customers will go out of their way to talk about you."

That grassroots marketing lays the foundation for any success. Bringing classic marketing (advertising, public relations, etc.) into the mix raises a company's profile. The idea is that that gets people to ask their friends and neighbors about Orren Pickell. If the grassroots marketing has done its job, then the response will be, "I hear they do good work," Pickell says.

"A brand is a promise," he says. "It's a promise of longevity, of quality. In the last 15 years, I've never seen one of our homes go up for sale, or one of our major remodels, without our name being mentioned."

Besides remodeling and building, the company also has cabinet and maintenance divisions. That's all part of a strategy of exposing more people to the Pickell brand.

"One of the great ways to brand and do grassroots marketing is to do high-volume, low-revenue touches as opposed to custom homes, which are high-revenue, low-volume touches," Pickell

Orren Pickell built a brand that is recognized among high-end homeowners in three states.

says. "So now instead of touching 20 or 30 clients a year, we're touching more than 100 clients in a year, hopefully in a positive way. I know if I do a \$25,000 remodel or a \$225,000 remodel now, I'll get another remodel in seven years, or if they decide to move, I'll get a shot at building that home."

While he was trying to build a brand, Pickell also had to build a strong company behind him if he wanted to continue to grow. That meant finding the right employees and creating systems and processes that allow them to excel. That way, as the grassroots marketing did its job, the company was ready for growth and didn't let quality suffer.

"If you grow your business and don't build it behind you by actually putting people in place, your business will probably do what 95 percent of remodeling businesses do," he says. "They go up, get that one last job, then they go down. Because one bad job will make it all go bad if it's just you."

COMPANY CULTURE

Pickell says the company would not be where it is today without a good group of employees who buy into a culture.

"For most people who work here, it's as important to be great at what they do as it is to make money," he says. "Everybody on this team, they want to do great work and be known for that."

When building a team, the mistake many remodelers make is looking for "superstars," Pickell says. Although they have the talent, they are hard to find, hard to keep and usually don't work well in a team. The key for Pickell has been to find those employ-

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Orren Pickell Designers & Builders, Lincolnshire, Ill.

President/CEO: Orren Pickell

2007 remodeling projects: 23

2007 remodeling volume: \$5.2 million

Projected 2008 remodeling volume: \$9 million

Employees: 94

Founded: 1974

Biggest challenge: Dealing with increased government regulation, which Pickell says has become "obtrusive, obstructive and destructive."

Web site: www.pickellbuilders.com

“A brand is a promise. It’s a promise of longevity, of quality.”

ees who want to be great, but know they’re better as part of a team.

That philosophy carries over to the owner as well. Like most remodelers, at one point, Pickell has done just about every job in the company, and he readily admits he has people in place now who do it better than he did.

“I couldn’t have been the best by myself,” he says. “Everything I’ve ever tried to do, there’s someone better at it. So I’ve looked for those people and gotten them to do it.”

Delegating has made the company better by allowing Pickell to keep his best employees — those who want a chance to grow and lead.

“I’m giving them an opportunity to better their lives and do something they absolutely have a passion for,” he says.

Building a big team hasn’t been without its pitfalls, though. With an employee count that peaked at more than 120 before recent cuts to under 100, workplace politics became a problem. One of his biggest mistakes, Pickell says, was having a human resources department.

“As soon as you’ve got somebody that you can put in a requisition for a body to, the managers don’t have to work as hard and they can build a fiefdom,” he says. “You know why GE fires 10 percent of its workforce each year? You can walk down the aisles and not know who’s working. Only the manager knows who’s really working. It was the same problem here.”

For that reason, the company has returned to a system where the managers do all of their own hiring and legwork. Pickell has

also rededicated the company to cross-training employees, so if one department needs help, an existing employee can temporarily do so instead of the company having to hire another person. It’s a return back to the way things were done in the past.

“As you’re growing a business, everybody’s helping each other, so cross-training is just a natural phenomenon,” Pickell says. “What happened here is my HR department took in specialists. Nobody ever did anyone else’s job. It’ll never happen here again.”

MOVING FORWARD

These days, Pickell focuses mostly on doing “what presidents do,” as he puts it — making the big decisions and giving his employees the tools to be successful. His only frontline involvement now is design work, something he says he’ll never get tired of doing.

“When a client comes to you to do a remodeling project, it’s the biggest thrill on the planet,” he says. “They can go anywhere they want. It’s not like I own the lot. When you’re chosen to do something custom for someone, it’s a huge honor.”

As for the company, the future will be determined by what the team wants rather than any desire he has to grow at this point.

“If you believe part of your job as CEO is to create opportunities for people who have devoted their lives to this company, you have to give them those opportunities,” Pickell says. “So if they want to do it, I’m behind them. If my troops want to consolidate and instead of becoming bigger want to become more profitable, then I’m all for that.”

A lot will also have to do with what his daughter, Lisa, will want the direction of the company to be. Currently the sales and marketing manager, she’s on the ladder to be the president, Pickell says.

The company has lost some business, going from about \$60 million to \$45 million over the last few years, but Pickell says the custom home business is strong, and he expects remodeling to follow. Even with the “goofiest economy since 1981,” he says the biggest long-term challenge for the company — and the industry — will come from increasing government regulation.

“I’ve been doing this for 33 years, and it’s never been worse,” he says. “It seems like the less busy we get, the more obstructive government gets.”

It’s gotten bad enough in some municipalities that Pickell worries about the future of the industry.

“My guess is by the time I’m dead, this whole industry will be a shambles,” he says. “Either that or it will be so expensive, the small guys won’t be able to do it.” **PR**

A WEEK IN THE LIFE

How Orren Pickell spends his average week

Meetings with executives and senior management	5 hours
Project/site visits	2 hours
Client meetings	7 hours
E-mail and returning phone calls	5 hours
Design	5 hours
Promotional or marketing events	6 hours
Strategic planning	5 hours
Company management	6 hours

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TIME-HONORED
LOOKS AND STATE-
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THAT WITHSTANDS
THE ELEMENTS

Weather Beater

By Wendy A. Jordan, Senior Contributing Editor

AFTER PUTTING UP WITH A LEAKY DECK for 10 years, Mick Roberts wanted the problem to end. Permanently. The deck had been leaking since he and his wife had had the Tarpon Springs, Fla., house that was built in 1996. Over the years, he had brought back the builder three times to repair it. He commissioned a home inspector to recommend how to fix it. He hired a home repair specialist to make the repair. All failed.

Roberts had run out of patience. So when he turned to design/build remodeler John Marzulli of Emerald Contractors in Tarpon

Springs, he had a straightforward request: make the problem disappear; give him a deck that is leak-free, a deck that will no longer require a stitch of maintenance. Oh, and do this without changing the appearance of the deck in any way.

STUBBORN PROBLEM

When the developer built the house on the banks of the Anclote River, Roberts's wife specified Key West style details, including lap siding and traditional-looking white cedar trim. The look is



PHOTOS BY BILL MUEHLING, EMERALD CONTRACTORS



Faulty original construction meant that water leaked persistently from the rear balcony onto the deck below, deteriorating the deck flooring, posts and steps.

pleasing, but in this coastal area the elements — from the sun's piercing rays to windblown saltwater and heavy rains — can take a toll on wood-skinned buildings. The Robertses knew that well.

"My wife and I wanted [the builder] to use some of the low-maintenance, synthetic wood products that would be resistant to decay," Roberts says, "but he continually told us that there were no products on the market that would work with our design." Instead, the builder used pressure-treated wood steps, cedar posts and handrails, and wood trim for the decks and balcony. To expedite the project, Roberts went out and found metal roofing and wood-look fiber cement siding — the only weather-resistant products specified.

Soon after the Robertses moved in, they discovered water bleeding onto the rear deck from the 7½-foot by 14-foot balcony overhead. The builder came back and applied "Band-Aid" solutions that corrected the problem only temporarily.

In 2005, Roberts's next-door neighbor hired Emerald Contractors to design and construct a detached garage that matched the style of the house. Roberts was impressed. "I saw John visit my neighbor's a number of times to check on the progress of the construction and to make sure my neighbor was satisfied. I noticed how clean and neat the workers left the work area each day. I saw a group of craftsmen who seem to take great pride in doing things with care and precision." Not only that, he says, but he had confidence, too, because of the extensive research on contractors in the area that his neighbor performed.

Roberts called Emerald in February 2006. "We talked over the phone at great length," Marzulli recalls. Then Marzulli and project manager Bill Muehling met with Roberts at the house "for probably a good couple hours." Marzulli came away with a plan

COMPANY SNAPSHOT

Emerald Contractors

Owner: John Marzulli

Location: Tarpon Springs, Fla.

2007 volume: \$1.5 million

Projected 2008 volume: \$1.3 million

Web site: www.emeraldcontractors.com

Biggest challenge of this project: Maintaining a traditional-looking deck using high-tech materials

PRODUCTS LIST

Boardwalk composite decking: CertainTeed **LXT railings:** Digger Specialties **Fiber cement siding:** James Hardie **Composite vinyl column wrap & trim:** Versatex



GRAPHIC CREDIT

So much of the balcony perimeter beam was rotted that the balcony would soon have given way.

for solving the leakage problem, a signed design agreement and a commitment to build. Roberts never considered contacting additional contractors.

BAD NEWS, GOOD NEWS

Looking around the rear deck, Muehling says, “it was purely evident that there were faulty details” in the structure. “They had tucked the fiberglass deck behind the drip edge and fascia,” says Marzulli. The cedar railing posts had never been flashed. Water was going

PROJECT TIMELINE

2006	Stage of Project
Feb. 2	Design agreement signed
March 15	Pre-construction meeting
March 25	Contract signed
April 9	Materials ordered
April 14	Demo begins
April 21	Fiberglass deck installed
April 27	Railing and trim installed; existing awning and storm shutter reinstalled
April 20	Deck painted
May 8	Punch list and cleanup
2006	Client Payment Schedule
March 25	\$6,000
April 27	\$16,630
May 27	\$2,500

behind the fascia boards, around the posts and into the wood members. “We poked and prodded,” says Marzulli, “and saw how soft things were.” It was clear that the balcony perimeter beam was partially rotted, and the railings and posts had deteriorated.

Marzulli gave Roberts the bad news: the decks needed to be torn open and rebuilt. The good news: The leak would finally be resolved.

But rebuilding with high-tech, maintenance-free products would not come cheap. Marzulli gave Roberts a rough preliminary budget of at least \$22,000 and said, “I think it will be more — as much as \$27,000 or \$28,000 [total].” Roberts didn’t flinch. “I could have cut the price in half if I had used standard materials and done a Chevy fix” — another patch and paint

THE FINANCIALS

John Marzulli based his estimate for the Roberts project on a sticks-and-bricks calculation, including the 35 percent gross profit margin that is standard for Emerald Contractors. Ordinarily that margin holds. When it doesn’t, says Marzulli, “most of the time [the change] goes in our favor, not against. To slip a point is the exception, not the rule.”

But two factors brought down the margin on the Roberts project to

Budget History

Initial estimate	\$25,480
Final estimate	\$25,480
Change orders	0
Final price of job	\$25,130
Cost to produce	\$16,798
Gross profit	\$8,332
Budgeted gross profit percentage	35%
Actual gross profit percentage:	33.15%

33.15 percent. One is that the team had to order more LXT railing than needed to be sure not to run short. “When I did my initial take-off, I

didn’t realize they don’t take back [any extra]. We ate the difference.” The second factor: Marzulli’s estimate included about \$350 for painting the new fiber cement siding around the deck door. It turned out that the new siding matched the existing so well that painting was unnecessary. “We gave him credit because it was work we didn’t need to do. “I could have kept the money,” says Marzulli, but that’s not how Emerald does business.

job — says Marzulli. But that's not what Roberts wanted. "He didn't mind paying for a Mercedes," says Marzulli, "as long as he got a Mercedes."

Unlike the builder, Marzulli assured Roberts that classical style, maintenance-free materials could be found. He had used some on other projects, and he scoured the market to find more that would suit the Roberts project. "He sometimes brought me samples, sometimes just brochures. Several times he sent me Web links," says Roberts. "Then we would discuss the various products, the pros and cons, and which best met my requirements." Marzulli's \$25,480 estimate incorporated a palette of innovative, traditional-looking, easy-to-install products including:

- Composite decking that never rots and resists mildew. It "cuts and miters with a regular saw — no special tools or fittings" he says, and installs like a pressure treated wood deck.
- A polyvinyl railing system with a stainless steel core that is "indestructible and colorfast. It goes together like an Erector set," he says. "It's so much quicker than standard wood fencing, and it looks like a regular rail system unless you are up close."
- White, wood-grained composite trim that "cuts like cedar, looks like cedar, and blends and flows" with the other products.

HIGH AND DRY

Soon after demolition began, Roberts left the country; his wife is stationed overseas, and Roberts is away for months at a time. Emerald sent reports by e-mail, often with Muehling's progress photos attached. "They kept in constant contact with me," says Roberts. Before draw requests, Muehling asked Roberts's brother, who lives nearby, to come take a look. Roberts then wired payments to the bank.

One of Marzulli's first e-mails to Roberts was a shocker. It read, "Hey, you're lucky you didn't stand on the corner of your balcony six months from now." Why? The beam was rotted farther back than Emerald had anticipated, the sheathing was completely rotted away, and the corner post was supported on the bare edge of old fascia board. Marzulli said another six months would have left no corner at all.

Emerald's subcontracted crews repaired damaged structural members in the rear deck and balcony; replaced the main beam, posts and wood wraps; and rebuilt the structure. They reinstalled the awning and installed a new frame around the balcony door, surrounding it with fiber cement siding to meld with the existing siding. In the front deck, they replaced all the wood rails.

Is the problem solved? Since project completion, "we've had some big weather systems come through," says Marzulli. "I've been over a couple of times" to take a look. It looks as crisp and fresh as new. And best of all: no leaks. **PR**



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WILD AND WONDERFUL

A new custom layout coupled with exotic finishes turns a basement remodel into an exciting adventure

By Ann Matesi,
Senior Contributing Editor

FINISHED BASEMENT

REMODELER AND ARCHITECT: Finished Basement Co., Denver

PROJECT LOCATION: Centennial, Colo.

AGE OF HOME: 3 years

SCOPE OF WORK: Create a unique design and improve the functionality in a previously finished walk-out lower level

REMODELER PATRICK CONDON of Finished Basement Co. knows how important a well-finished basement can be for homeowners who want to boost their living space or expand their entertaining options. The family of this Centennial, Colo., home turned to his company to do just that and

now enjoy a basement that provides an at-home “escape from convention” that the family sought.

Condon is familiar with such projects. They are so popular, in fact, that the Denver-based design/build firm he founded nearly 11 years ago has been very suc-



AFTER PHOTOS BY STEVE DIMASI, DIMASI DIGITAL

The remodeler gutted the lower level to have a fresh start for the new basement. Existing mechanicals and support structures were either incorporated into the new design elements or moved. The coffered ceiling (above) incorporates recessed lights and features a tongue-in-groove fir finish. The new circular bar (opposite page) features a split bamboo finish and a granite countertop.

cessful in focusing exclusively on this element of the remodeling market. With a client list that averages more than 90 projects annually in the city's metro area, as well as additional projects handled out of a second office that serves the Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn. region, business is booming, he says.

A Great Escape

This one-of-a-kind safari-themed walk-out

basement features distinctive coffered ceilings and unique finishes that depart from the upscale traditional Colorado home. The 1,800-square-foot space connects directly with the homeowner's pool terrace and features a dramatic circular wet bar as its primary focal point.

It wasn't always that way. The basement of this three-year-old home had previously been finished. "But it was just your very run-of-the-mill basic basement with framed

BEFORE



PRODUCTS LIST

Insulation: R13 & Visqueen barrier in furnace room Paints & stains: Kwal paints Cabinets: Mastercraft Heritage Countertops: Black Galaxy granite Faucets & fixtures: Kohler Tile: Eddie Walnut Fireplace: Novus Carpet: Karistan



Built-in storage cabinets flank a niche surrounded by faux stone trim.

out walls, drywall and a small wet bar,” Condon says. “There was nothing unique or remarkable about it. We came in and totally gutted out the space, and then took a completely fresh approach.”

The remodeling team pushed the clients to consider new ideas. “Nothing is as challenging or ultimately as rewarding as getting a client to think outside the box when it comes to the possibilities a finished base-

ment can offer them in terms of bonus living and entertaining space. In this case, we had to get the clients to see what the potential was beyond what currently existed.”

In addition to the central wet bar, the lower level includes a changing room, a full bathroom, several zones for gaming, a media center and generous storage space.

Departure from Convention

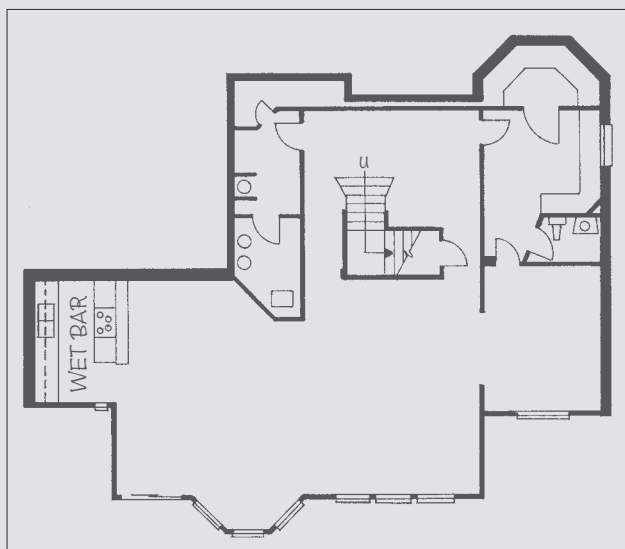
It was the homeowners who seized the concept of a safari retreat because of its similarity to the theme of one of the family’s favorite local restaurants. The African-inspired accents are a deliberate departure from the traditional style found throughout the rest of the home.

The result, says the remodeler, is an informal entertaining area that is as much a conversation point as it is inviting and comfortable.

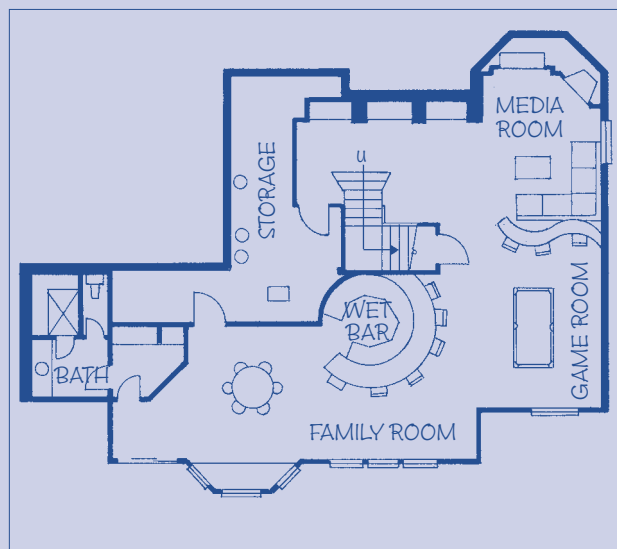
With the selection of faux zebra-skin carpeting, split-bamboo trim for the bar and natural stone trim, the clients went “all in for this design theme,” says Condon. “They never plan to leave this house.”

However, because care was taken to keep the overall finish palette of the lower

Before



After





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The lower level connects to the home's outdoor swimming pool terrace, so the team replaced the basement's laundry room with a new changing room and bathroom.

level upscale but neutral, the unique character of the space can easily be altered to satisfy the homeowner's tastes should they change. It will also help meet the requirements of a future buyer with minimal effort. "By changing the carpet, you can literally change the character of the room," says the remodeler.

Focus on Enjoyment

Because the home's lower level connects to an outdoor terrace and swimming pool, the transition between the two areas was improved by adding an additional access door that connects directly to a new changing room and full bath.

"The whole family uses this space, but it is really great for their two teenage daughters who love to entertain their friends downstairs."

The new lower level also features an elaborate sound and lighting system as well as a wall-mounted television that can be pulled out from the wall and rotated to pro-

Curves Put a New Spin on Thinking Outside the Box

With their myriad of structural support beams and columns, not to mention mechanicals, ducting and plumbing runs to plan around, basements can pose a significant challenge for the remodeler when it comes to creating design excitement as well as functional living space.

Remodeler Patrick Condon, owner of Denver-based, Finished Basement Company, however, says that he finds inspiration, rather than limitation, in the constrictions presented by this type of building environment.

"The first thing I do when I look at all of these elements in an unfinished basement is think 'How do we cover these up?'" he says.

For this project, the curved ceiling details that add character to the space were inspired by the existing ductwork.

"We incorporated them into the design and made them beautiful architectural elements," he says. "We actually do this quite often."

The pie-shaped soffit above the bar radiates from a central point. "We then used the space below to imitate the ceiling curves with the shape of the bar. The design goal was to create drama by mimicking the ceiling in the structure below it.

vide an optimum viewing angle from any area in the basement.

While every job may not be as elaborate as this \$150,000-plus project, each one gets the same attention to detail, says Condon, because the majority of his customers come from word-of-mouth recommendation. These clients contacted him after they'd seen his work at a neighbor's home.

"Ultimately, they're thrilled with the way that their new space turned out," he says. "I know that they spend a lot more of their time downstairs these days." **PR**

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Owner: Habitations Home Plans
Est. 1998

Owner: DreamMaker
Bath & Kitchen
of Ogden
Ogden, Utah
Est. 2005

For Steve Coombs, it's all about the big picture.

And, for him, that meant taking his architectural firm to the next level. An Engineer, Coombs explored business opportunities that would complement his existing architectural design business, and that's when he discovered franchising with DreamMaker Bath & Kitchen.

Why did you choose DreamMaker Bath & Kitchen?

Steve: With my partner Brad Stevens being an experienced contractor and my experience as a designer, we felt our combined experience would give us the necessary background needed for the nuts and bolts of a remodeling business. But after learning more about DreamMaker, we found that the franchise had established systems and training in place to help franchisees open a proven business, rather than

DreamMaker's model gives me freedom... I'm able to run my architectural business and DreamMaker business simultaneously."

starting from scratch. That gave us a lot of peace of mind. Our success wasn't relying solely upon our own knowledge and experience.



Photo: Business Partners Brad Stevens and Steve Coombs

What advantages does your architectural background give you as a DreamMaker franchise owner?

Steve: The ability to visualize a customer's dream space is key to this business. And as a designer, I am able to see the big picture. I can tailor a bath or kitchen project as a trained designer as well as an experienced remodeler, accounting for the structure and the aesthetics that best meet a goal.

How has DreamMaker's franchise system impacted the way you run your business?

Steve: DreamMaker's model gives me freedom to have a business that somewhat runs itself. It doesn't require my full attention, so that I'm able to run my architectural business

and DreamMaker business simultaneously. By developing the model, DreamMaker's already done the hard part.

What's been the most significant benefit to becoming a DreamMaker franchise owner?

Steve: Associating with the peer network of DreamMaker franchise owners. I enjoy rubbing shoulders and networking with really good, quality people. Not only do we have a business in common, but we have a commitment to common goals. Each franchise has an exclusive territory, so that we aren't competitors. That creates a platform for us to ask specific, in-depth questions, seek advice and encourage one another. Because we are in the same system, we cover more ground in less time.

Coombs never ceases to think about the big picture. In mid-2008, he opened a state-of-the-art, 11,000-square-foot facility to house his architectural business and a DreamMaker Bath & Kitchen design center.

About DreamMaker Bath & Kitchen:

Based in Waco, Texas, DreamMaker Bath & Kitchen has approximately 100 independently owned and operated franchises nationwide.



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PASSIVE SOLAR DESIGN

Increase a home's energy efficiency by keeping the sun's heat in mind

Passive solar design is one of the more unique and innovative ways you can boost the energy efficiency of your clients' homes. Good passive solar design is driven by the sun's heat. In warmer climates, you can sometimes eliminate the need for mechanical cooling, heating and artificial lighting entirely.

For many remodeling jobs, incorporating passive solar design is simply not an option. On a simple bathroom or kitchen remodel, for instance, it's probably not a good fit. But on major additions, whole-house remodels and numerous other jobs where window location can be altered and insulation concerns addressed, there are energy-efficiency gains to be had.

The techniques involved in designing to take advantage of the sun's rays are the same in every climate. Regardless of location, the goals are to maximize solar heat gain in winter and minimize it in the summer. Two key elements for achieving these goals are properly selecting and locating windows and ensuring the home is well-sealed and insulated. But there are many others that can be used depending on the job scope. The U.S. Department of Energy recommends incorporating the following elements:

INSULATION

Passive solar design's effectiveness will be significantly reduced if a home is not insulated and sealed effectively. By tightening the building envelope, using the International Code Council's recommended insulation levels (www.intlcode.org), properly installing the insulation and repairing or replacing leaky ducts, you can effectively reduce heat loss and gain to prepare for further passive solar techniques.

WINDOWS

The science behind using windows is simple: when the sun shines through the glass, heat is trapped, which helps keep the house warm. The part that's not so simple is choosing the right windows and locating them for maximum heat gain or loss, depending on your market's climate.

In cold climates, maximize heat gain by locating many windows on the south-facing walls (7 percent of the building floor area is recommended) while reducing the number of windows on the north, east and west. Choose windows with a high solar heat gain coefficient (.60 or higher is recommended) and low U-factor (.35 or less is recom-

mended) to reduce heat transfer. You'll also have more visible light transmitted.

In warm climates, locate fewer windows on the south-facing walls and more on the other sides. To reduce heat gain on the south-facing windows, install solar window screens, shutters, oversized overhangs or landscaping to reduce the effects of the full sun. The Department of Energy recommends you specify windows that have a U-factor below .4 and a solar heat gain coefficient below .55 in warm climates.

SHADING

Because the sun rises higher overhead in summer than in winter, properly sizing window overhangs or awnings can help heat a home in winter and cool it in summer. To properly size an overhang for optimum effectiveness, follow these five steps:

1. Draw the wall to be shaded to scale.
2. Draw the summer sun angle upward from the bottom of the glazing.
3. Draw the overhang until it intersects the summer sun angle line.
4. Draw the line at the winter sun angle from the bottom edge of the overhang to the wall.
5. Use a solid wall above the line where the winter sun hits. The portion of the wall below that line should be glazed.

DAYLIGHTING

Increasing the natural light in a home can decrease the homeowner's electric bill. Generally, glazing should account for at least 5 percent of a room's floor area for effective daylighting. Install windows with low-E coatings and a high visible light transmittance to minimize glare

>> If you have ideas or comments, e-mail the author at michael.morris@reedbusiness.com.

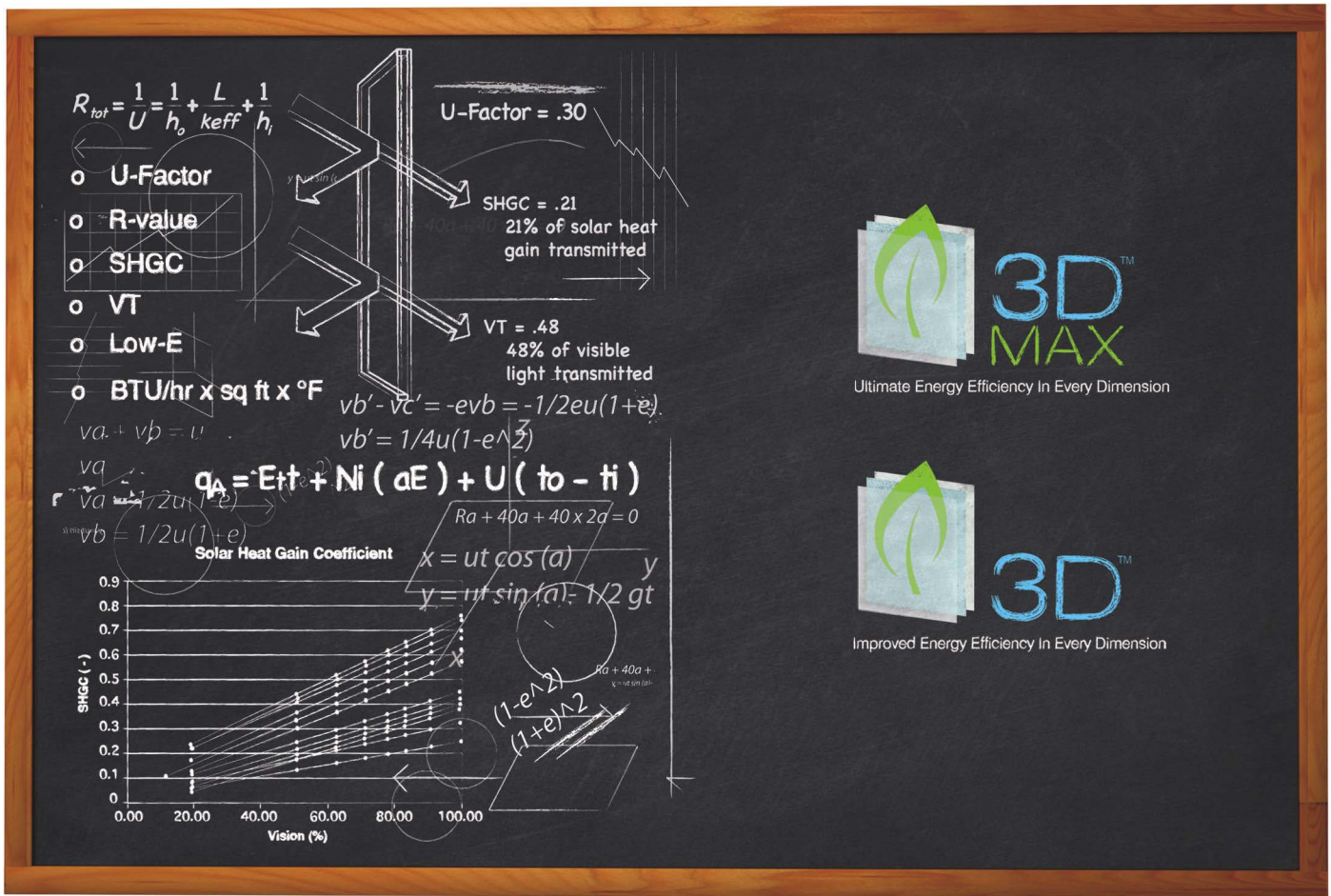


while allowing for proper heat gain and loss characteristics. Skylights can also provide additional natural light.

NATURAL COOLING

Natural cooling techniques help capture cooling breezes and reduce the need for mechanical cooling, thereby lowering energy bills.

The stack effect, or chimney effect, is one technique that can be used for this purpose in two-story homes. Create a design with second-floor exit windows, ridge vents, whole-house fans or other openings that will draw warm air out of the top of the home and first-floor windows or vents where cool air can enter. **PR**



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Universal design is sure to dominate baby-boomer concerns when it comes to remodeling. If you have clients with mobility concerns, suggest the near-silent drive system and smooth ride from Inclinator's latest home elevators. The models feature attractive decorative panels and hardwood veneer raised panels. Cars can be up to 15 square feet.

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KALLISTA

This one's for the kitchen aficionados. The fashionable one-pot filler, made by Kohler's Kallista brand, features a unique joint that allows the pot filler to retract almost flush to the wall or deck area when not in use. The design also allows for supply pipes to run behind or inside kitchen cabinetry or islands. It reaches 26 inches when fully extended.

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You don't need to feel bad about lumber companies cutting down old-growth forests with Alno's Alonart Woodglas product. The product line features the company's patented inkjet technology to print patterns on kitchen doors to create truly stunning book-matched veneers in an eco-friendly way. Three exotic finishes are offered: Brazilian rosewood, zebra and beech heart.

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Mold is a pain to deal with. Remodelers who need help with that battle should reach for Saint-Gobain's FibaTape Mold X-10 fiberglass mesh tape to complement mold-resistant drywall. The tape has an anti-microbial coating that actively kills fungus and black mold. The material is self-adhesive and doesn't require a pre-bedding coat and the mesh construction helps you avoid bubbling.

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ATLAS HOMEWARES

The latest creations from Adrienne Morea's Atlas Homewares hardware company include the Studded Mango Wood Collection, which features round, square and triangular knobs and pulls at an affordable price point. The company recently released the self-adhering, screwless Paragon Collection of house numbers and letters.

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A pop of color in the right place can make all the difference in the world. That's why Crystal Lace decorative hardware collection from Liberty Hardware comes in three color choices that can create a snappy look. The new line is available in 3-inch bar pulls and 38 mm bar knobs. Crystal Lace is finished in satin nickel and black; satin nickel and blue; or satin nickel and clear.

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RSI HOME PRODUCTS

Two new styles are now offered from RSI Home Products' American Classics Kitchens line. The Manhattan has a raised panel, full-overlay with stylized details, and the Shaker has a versatile full overlay design for a more modern look. Also new to the line are custom accessories, including oven cabinets, refrigerator panels, corbels and light rails.

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BERENSON

Sporting a hip, modern look, the Opus Suite from Berenson can complement most any traditional or contemporary kitchens, vanities and entertainment centers. The suite offers 96 mm, 128 mm, and 416 mm pulls that are accompanied by an oval-shaped 1 3/8 inch knob. Standard sized hardware in Venetian bronze, rustic tin and other finishes are available.

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QUALITY CABINETS

If it ain't broke, don't fix it. That's just what Quality Cabinets put in practice when it updated the Classic II cabinet line. The standard overlay design and recessed center panel is perfect for a consistent, clean look in both new and remodeled kitchens. The company now offers the door style in cherry wood with three standard finishes and three glazing options.

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Two exclusively designed door styles form the foundation of Signature Custom Cabinetry's latest line of turn-of-the-century cabinets. The Harbor View raised panel door features a modern twist on beading and carving and is finished in a custom stain with the company's Cordovan cherry finish. The second door style, Drape Mullion, has an arched glass front with the same early 1900s look.

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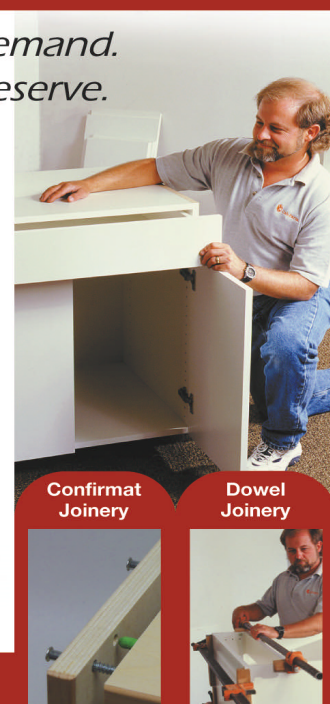
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Advertiser Index

Advertiser	Page No.	Web Site
AZEK Trimboards	18	http://pr.ims.ca/5662-8
CertainTeed Building Solutions	16	http://pr.ims.ca/5662-7
CertainTeed Vinyl Siding Collection	27	http://pr.ims.ca/5662-10
Custom-Bilt Metals	31	http://pr.ims.ca/5662-11
DreamMaker Bath & Kitchen by Worldwide	38	http://pr.ims.ca/5662-15
Ferguson	4	http://pr.ims.ca/5662-2
JELD-WEN	23	http://pr.ims.ca/5662-9
LaFarge North America	45	http://pr.ims.ca/5662-18
Marvin Windows & Doors	C2, 3	http://pr.ims.ca/5662-1
Milgard Manufacturing	40	http://pr.ims.ca/5662-16
Pella Corp.	36, 37	http://pr.ims.ca/5662-13,14
Propane Education & Research Council	46, 47	http://pr.ims.ca/5662-19
Simpson Strong-Tie Co.	10	http://pr.ims.ca/5662-5
Stock Building Supply	8	http://pr.ims.ca/5662-4
Swan Secure Products	42	http://pr.ims.ca/5662-17
Therma-Tru Doors	C4	http://pr.ims.ca/5662-21
Trex	7, C3	http://pr.ims.ca/5662-3,20
+ U.S. Cellular	35	http://pr.ims.ca/5662-12
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MARKETING DOLLARS THAT WORK FOR THE COMMUNITY

Grassroots marketing is a way organizations can get exposure for their company by being active in their community by giving of their time, treasure and resources. This involves the conscious effort of an organization and can lead to stronger relationships within the company and the community. It is a way to gain respect and trust while helping others, which is the best reward of all.

The idea is to find ways to help your community or a special cause. That's easiest if you and members of your company are involved in local organizations such as the chamber of commerce; local NARI and NAHB chapters; Rotary; or BNI. Not only will networking in a community organization give you an opportunity to help build relationships with key members of the community, it will also offer an avenue to meaningful projects that you can feel good about sponsoring.

Here are 5 examples of small steps you can make to create some community goodwill — marketing dollars well spent!

1. HELP BUILD AND REVITALIZE THE COMMUNITY

Consider reworking your marketing budget to include a category for community involvement and sponsorship activities. We recently had the opportunity to sponsor an addition and remodel of a local theater that features live music and children's shows. Our sponsorship has enabled us to reward our subcontractors

and clients with theater tickets and dining opportunities, as well as other benefits.

2. PROMOTE THE ARTS

Consider sponsoring a local theater, museum, dance company or art studio. It is another way to reach a market of people who appreciate beauty. As designers and remodelers, we appreciate art, and this is a good way to communicate that appreciation to the community.

3. HYDRATE RUNNERS AND WALKERS

Everyone drinks water — why not drink a bottle with your logo prominently displayed on the label? Water donations are always popular for fundraising activities. Consider donating recyclable bottled water or reusable aluminum water bottles to local events such as races or festivals.

4. GIVE BACK TO THE KIDS

I'm willing to bet that some of the kids you know play on little league teams, play an instrument in the marching band, run on the track team or are involved in one of the other plethora of organized activities available to them. The fields they play on, the pools they swim in, the tracks they run on and the instruments they play all require mainte-

nance and cost the school, township and parents money. As a local organization, you have the opportunity to donate to these organized activities that keep kids active and out of trouble. Whether you donate money toward uniforms or

for instruments, the schools and kids will be extremely grateful and may offer you a billboard or Web site for advertising. And if you're the parent of one of the team members, you're likely to get a lot of thanks throughout the season for your help.

5. DONATE TIME AND LABOR

Nothing is as valuable as time. Donating time and labor is a meaningful way to create personal connections. And having a personal referral is so much more of a benefit than a call from a picture

in an ad. What projects are going on in your community that you may be able to donate personal time or a few hours of company labor to? **PR**

Bob DuBree, CR is the president of Creative Contracting, located in North Wales, Pa. Bob and his wife Kim founded Creative Contracting and along with their entire staff are celebrating their 20 year business anniversary this year. Bob can be reached at bob@creativecontracting.biz.



By Bob DuBree
Advisory Board
Columnist

The idea is to find ways to help your community or a special cause.

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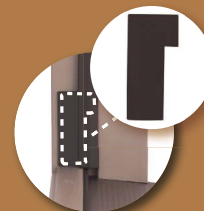
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