

remodeling

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BIG 50
— 2016 —

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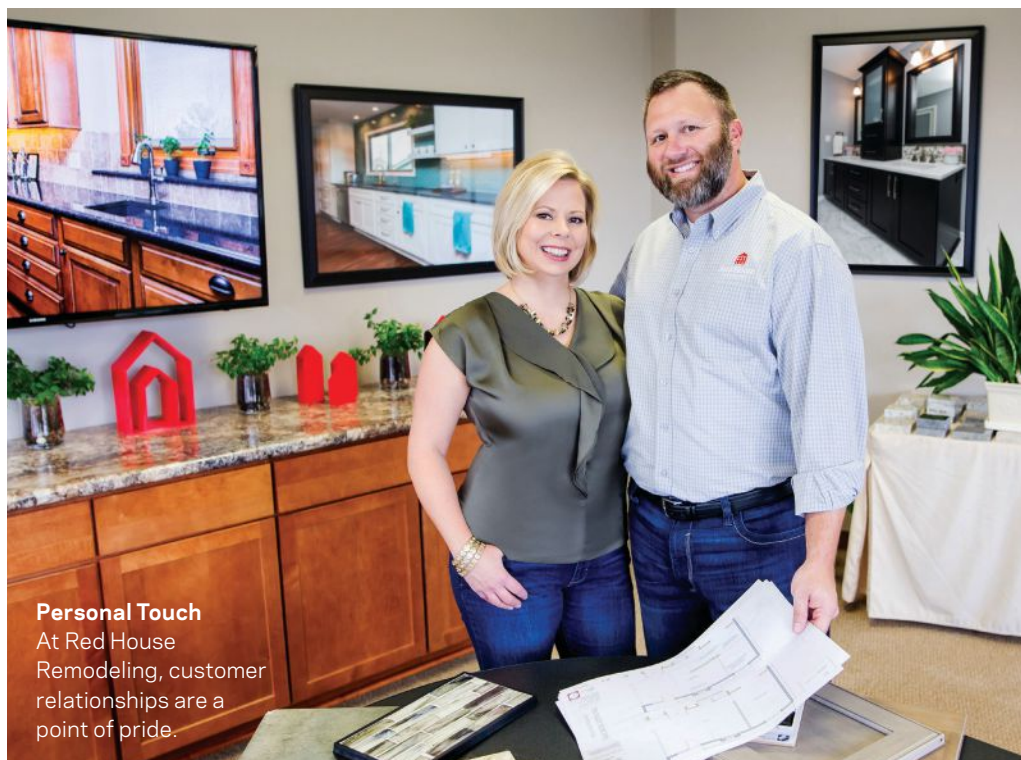
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VOL. 32, NO.5



Cherry Chiles Photography

Personal Touch
At Red House Remodeling, customer relationships are a point of pride.

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COVER STORY / **BIG50**

Our annual salute to the newest remodelers named among the country's elite features a group that stands out in a number of ways, from their dedication to pleasing customers to their willingness to embrace new technology. Their tried-and-true tips for success could work wonders for your company.

Cover photo by Tim Coffey Photography

ONLINE NOW



We've packed the pages of this issue with insight from 2016's Big50 remodelers, but there are even more ideas and advice from these firms that we couldn't fit into print. Head to remodelingmag.com for takeaways on customer service, marketing, employee retention, and more—as well as the first edition of our new year of Big50 Bites.

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Upfront Oasis

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Big Lessons

What you can learn from this year's Big50 winners.



Putting together the Remodeling Big50 is a months-long task that starts the year before and extends well beyond the publication of the issue you have in your hands. Even after the Big50 profiles are complete, we like to reach out to the featured remodelers for future stories, since all of our winners are leaders in their field. In this issue, you'll learn about each winner and read about some of the ways they've found success in their markets.

But across the board, when talking to remodelers for this issue—including those that weren't selected as members of this year's winning class—a few standard practices popped up that aren't exclusive to any one region or group. These basic practices are stealable in the sense that they apply to every remodeler out there, from replacement to design/build, from new businesses to old hands.

The biggest trend we saw among our interviewees was a dedication to customer service. Before clients even present themselves to these companies, the remodelers are prepared to do whatever it takes to make the experience a pleasant one. For some time-challenged clients, that means the remodeler may offer changes to the design or selections order so the project remains on schedule, even if that means doing things a little differently than originally planned. For others, it means having a personal shopper so the client isn't overwhelmed by all the options in the showroom. No matter how they do it, each of these remodelers names customer service as their specialty.

The second most prevalent trend we witnessed was going beyond the client/remodeler relationship. As a remodeler, you're being asked to come into a client's home, sometimes to make sweeping changes. You wouldn't want just anyone in that personal space, and so many of our winners go out of their way to make the client feel comfortable. We've heard of remodelers submitting dossiers with short bios of the teams that will be going in and out of houses or providing introductory and congratulatory meals at the beginning and end of projects. All of this is done for the sake of making the client feel comfortable and friendly with the team working on the home.

And lastly, each of these remodelers is committed to finding the right job. That means turning down work if the client's personality clashes with the remodeler's, or recommending another company if the job is outside of the firm's specialty. All of our winners do their best to work with each client, but sometimes the best thing for both remodeler and client is going somewhere else to find a better fit. With the industry on the upswing, learning when to say no has become one of the most valuable skills in the remodeler toolbox.

Hopefully you aren't hearing these tips for the first time, but if you are, think about how best to incorporate them into your business. Should that occur, you just might be Big50 material next year.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Curtis Sprung".

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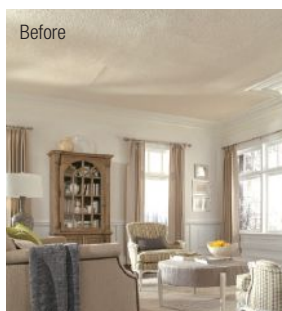
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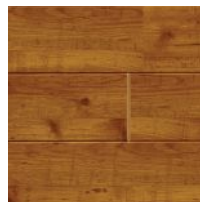
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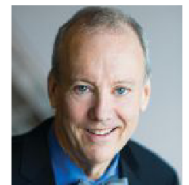
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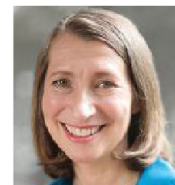
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Homeowner interest in health issues tied to remodeling has increased dramatically in recent years. During a remodeling project, they are most concerned about the health of their family and pets, and protecting their personal belongings. They are seeking contractors who share those priorities, and can do the right thing by providing a livable remodeling experience—free of airborne dust and other remodeling hazards—from the beginning of the project to the end.

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– Sandee Bailey,
Homeowner

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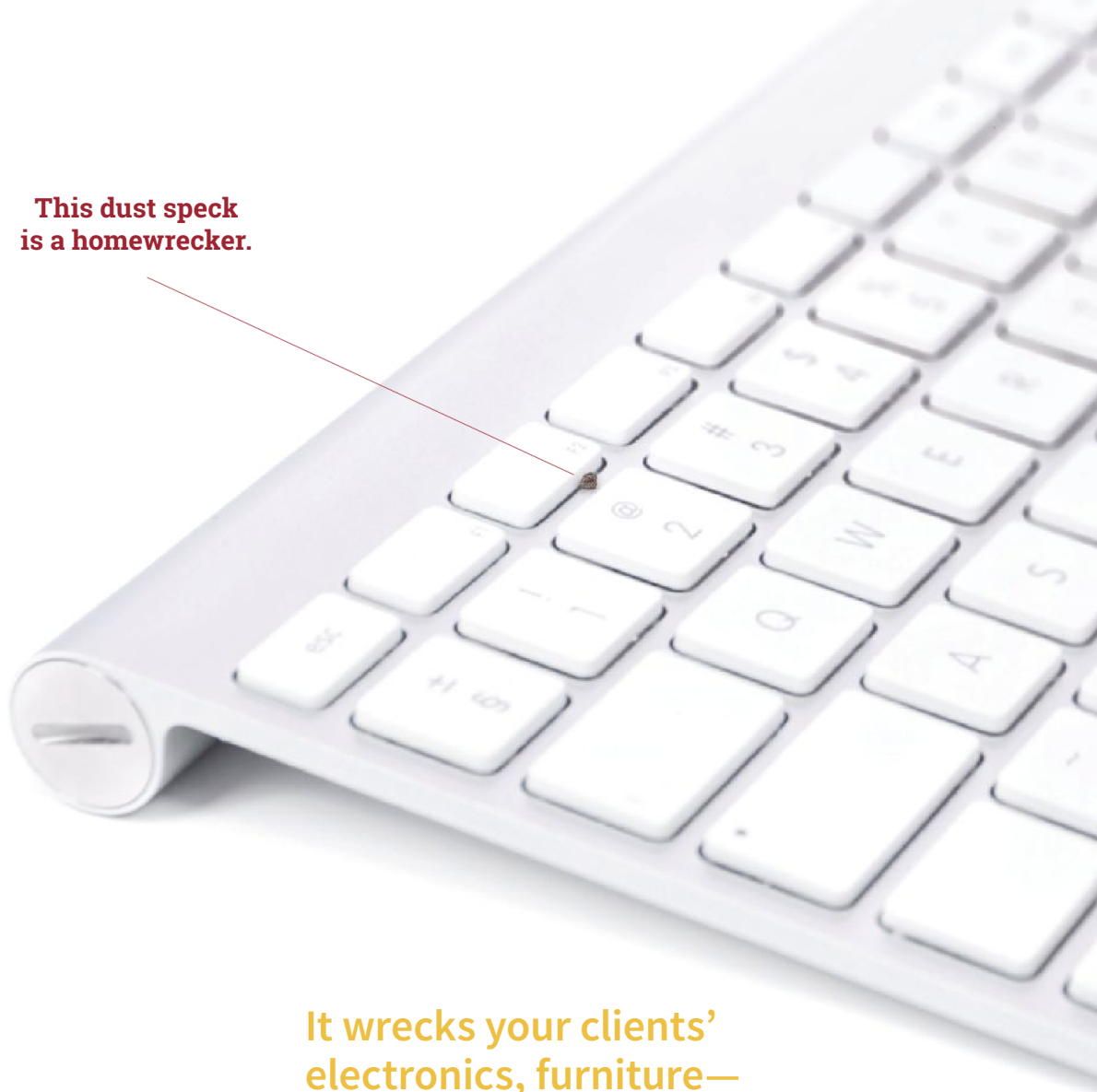
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Your Business



Throughout the Big50 interview process, we hear from remodelers all around the country who are competing for the best clients and the best jobs. Each company puts their own spin on remodeling and customer service, but some are utilizing some very out-of-the-box—and very stealable—ideas. Here are five of our favorites that you just might want to steal and use in your business.

1. EXTEND THE WARRANTY

Remodelers operating in different states have to abide by different minimum mandated warranties, but one Big50 trend this year is to go above and beyond. Some of this year's winners provide a lifetime warranty as long as the original client still lives in the house; others extend to five or 10 years based on the type of remodeling that they do. These remodelers stand by their work, so they generally don't have to return, but that longer warranty date is something they use as a selling point to put customers at ease.

2. THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS FIRST, EVEN WHEN HE'S NOT

All of our Big50 winners have an insatiable drive to please their customers and ensure a happy client. But keeping the customer happy can come at the expense of your own workers, which ultimately can cause your work to suffer. The team at Building Company No. 7 has strict limitations on when a client can call and ask a question or request assistance. Those boundaries help keep the teams on the jobsite focused when they're working, while also ensuring they have time to relax. This prevents burnout, which leads to happier employees—and clients.

3. EVERY EMPLOYEE IS AN OPPORTUNITY

One of the most commonly cited problems in our interviews was the labor shortage, but your next lead carpenter could already be working for your company. Closet America gives employees a career track, no matter what level they start at. Education opportunities exist for all sorts of positions, so if a truck driver is interested in becoming a carpenter, make an effort to work with him toward that goal.

4. STAY BUSY EVEN IN THE OFF SEASON

Don't let the weather get you down, especially if you're a replacement contractor. Coastal Windows & Exteriors in Massachusetts deals with this issue every winter by switching gears: The roofing team turns into a snow removal team, and the company offers to pay heating bills for those who are reluctant about replacing their windows during the winter.

5. SYSTEMS SAVE TIME AND MONEY

Every project is different, but that doesn't mean you should change how you approach the job every time. Many of our winners this year have codified systems to help move the job from one stage to the next. If you can identify the key aspects of every job, starting as early as lead generation and going up until completion, you can not only identify small problems early on before they can grow, you also can get better at estimating time and how long a job might take.

OPERATIONS

Connection Error

Focus on communicating effectively, not just efficiently

INSIGHT BY BRUCE CASE

My family and I spent a week in Asheville, N.C., to savor the food, culture, and nature, along with well-deserved relaxation and family time. All that wonder was forced to fit between emails, phone calls, texts, social media, and a web conference.

I thought technology was here to make us better, faster, and smarter. In reality, I am so connected that I'm disconnected. I've got my iPhone, my iPad, social media sites, my desk phone, note cards, and a carrier pigeon in the back room just in case—more technology than sent the first person to the moon. So much, in fact, that I often can't connect fully with my family, my team members, or my clients—not on a logistical/tactical level, but with deeper connections.

Technology—and communication—has to work for us rather than become an addiction. We have the power of choice to check that email. We have the power of choice to tell Facebook our latest adventure. That power is liberating, but is also part of the dilemma. Some of us choose to lean on email. Others have chosen text. Some of us actually still prefer to talk. This creates a tangled communication web. Technology has brought infinite information but has added layers of complexity to our communication.

I'm trying to refocus on what is effective, not just efficient. A sensitive conversation is more effectively handled face-to-face rather than through the more efficient text or email. If I am most efficient at texting but my client prefers email, then email is most effective. Certain social media sites are more effective for our business than others; we have a presence on many sites, but focus our time and money to go deep on the most effective one or two. Going deep in those is better than going shallow across them all.

Determining the most effective paths to communication takes thought. What does my co-worker respond more effectively to? When I first meet someone—a client, a prospective team member, a subcontractor, a supplier—we need to talk about how they and I communicate most effectively. That includes not just mode of communication, but also responsiveness on weekends, upcoming vacations, etc.

How about who should receive the communication? Do I really need to “Reply All,” or can I avoid spamming everyone with unnecessary email? If there is an issue on the project, does our client know where to go for answers? That could be a key point person or an online portal, but ideally it should be one place or person. Saying, “Call Jane for design questions, call Ralph for production questions, call Eddy for billing questions, and press ‘0’ for the operator,” might be efficient for you, but it's certainly not effective for the client.

Technology is working to turn communication into an addiction. It just doesn't feel right to be disconnected for more than an hour—or to wait four hours to respond to a text, email, or voicemail. Communication technologies should be tools in our toolbox that we only use when we need them. The next time we visit Asheville, my emails, phone calls, texts, social media, and web conferences will have to wait. They will have to fit between the wonder of food, culture, nature, relaxation, and family.—*Bruce Case is the president of Case Design/Remodeling, a full-service home improvement firm in Bethesda, Md.*

MARKETING

Zombie Hunters

BY CRAIG WEBB

A public relations consultant who built his reputation by creating electronic products has four rules for creating “zombie loyalists” that together sound a lot like new ways to build word-of-mouth marketing.

“Advertising and marketing are secondary to recommendation and trusted sources,” Peter Shankman told attendees in Austin, Texas, at NARI's Spring Business Meeting. What he calls zombie loyalists are the clients who like you so much they tell others freely and enthusiastically about you. That's better than self-promotion, he said, because “no one believes how awesome you are if you have to tell them.”

In creating those zombies, Shankman said you need to be aware of four things:

- The ability to lie has gone away. The internet is too pervasive and transparent for you to fool people and expect them to never share what they know about you.
- “Having customers and clients is a privilege, not a right,” and thus you need to serve them by asking them regularly what they want. The mere act of asking makes clients feel better about you.
- Brevity rules. Today a potential customer will give you just 2.7 seconds of attention before moving on, Shankman said. That's about how much time it takes to read a 140-character tweet. So you'd better maximize that moment by having good writing and good graphic design. “If you only have 2.7 seconds, bad writing or a spelling error will kill you,” he said.
- Strive to always be top of mind. Reach out even when you have nothing to sell, Shankman advised. Ask constantly what you can do for that person.

Aside from his four rules, Shankman opened his NARI presentation with two basic principles. First: “Be brilliant at the basics,” he said, “because all the technology in the world can't help you if you can't be trusted.” And his second thought? “Brand everything you do. If someone else has a bigger audience and they steal it, so long for you.”

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REGS

Silica's Spotlight

OSHA's new rule dramatically lowers permitted exposure levels

BY HELENA OKOLICSANYI

On March 25, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration announced its highly anticipated and controversial new ruling on crystalline silica dust exposure. The 606-page final rule is the first update in more than 30 years on silica exposure in the workplace. Secretary of Labor Thomas Perez said in a press release that the new ruling will "enable workers to earn a living without sacrificing their health." Silica has been linked to silicosis, lung cancer, chronic pulmonary disease, and kidney disease.

The new rule reduces the amount of allowable silica exposure from 250 micrograms per cubic meter to 50 micrograms per cu-

bic meter within an eight-hour work shift, an 80% reduction. It also will require employers to provide medical exams to exposed workers and offer medical surveillance to employees exposed to silica between 50 micrograms and 25 micrograms. The new rule "boils down to OSHA having an obligation to show that employees were exposed at significant PEL [permissible exposure level] risk and that we need to either eliminate that significant risk or lower it," says OSHA's David O'Connor.

The new rule has been met with criticism from industry leaders, who filed two petitions in the 5th and 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. The National Stone, Sand, & Gravel Association in its petition said that the OSHA rule is "not based on sound science" and that the laboratory used to get the data did not provide precise and accurate silica samples. Those against the ruling also say that OSHA has grossly underestimated the total cost of implementation for employers.

However, North America's Building Trades Unions said it is "pleased OSHA has issued the final silica standard. We believe that the agency has been diligent in its efforts to hear and consider all stakeholder input, and done a great job in getting the rule out."

OSHA has issued a 2.5-page fact sheet, a nine-page FAQ, and a table to help people figure out if they are in compliance with the rule. Employers will have until June 23, 2017, to comply.

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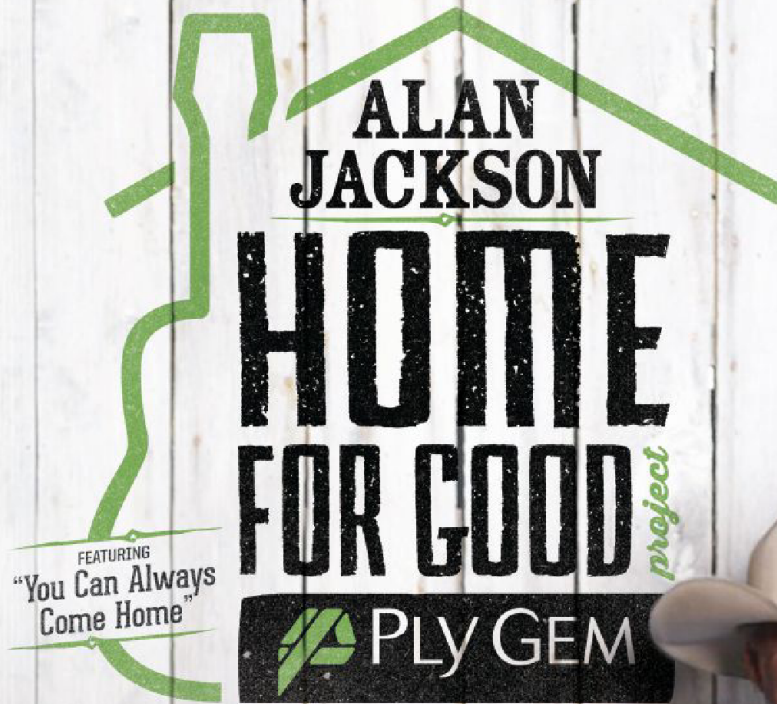
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SALES

Working the System

Fine-tune your vetting system to make sure you're selling to the right clients

INSIGHT BY PAUL WINANS

In a recent post for the REMODELING website, I suggested having a script for a phone call with a prospective client is a good idea. The comments reminded me that not everyone agrees, so let me lay out some thoughts about sales in general.

DEVELOP A SYSTEM

For many years I resisted the idea of anything approaching a sales system, as I thought it made more sense to decide what to do on a case-by-case basis. I thought the marketplace determined the gross margin I could sell at. Worse yet, I had no idea what "gross margin" meant! A call would come in and I would try to deal with it as quickly as possible so I could get back to the "real work"—estimating and managing production. To me, sales was a pain. And I was stupid. Eventually I realized that sales provided the fuel the business needed, which was money.

How could I handle sales as efficiently as possible? I needed a methodology to follow. Working with Sandler Training, I got better at figuring out who I would allow to play in our sandbox. That is when we started making more money than I ever thought was possible.

FOLLOW A SCRIPT

We developed a lead intake sheet that included questions to let the caller know two things: 1) We had a good idea of what a desirable client is for us; and 2) We had a process that clients were to follow. Great clients for us loved the intake process. It prompted confidence in them that we knew what we were doing, in turn lowering their concern about cost. Those who bristled at the intake sheet questions did us a favor by saving us the time and grief of working with them on a project.

BE A DETECTIVE

All the questioning that we did through the sales interactions was based on the goal of being in control. The more we could discover about the client's true motivation for going through a remodel, the more likely they would feel smart having had us work with them. Those who did not like being questioned would not allow us to be in control, so we did not work for them. All the above is driven by getting to the goal: Making the sale to the right client. Some might call it persuasion. I think it actually is manipulation—in a good sense.

Think about a sales interaction where the salesperson makes you feel she has been waiting for you for her entire life. It's an interaction where you are swept along and feel good about spending more money than you intended. When you use the item or service, you are reminded of how good the interaction was.

Call it what you will. If you have happy clients writing checks with your company's name on it for amounts with lots of digits in them, does it really matter?—Paul Winans, a veteran remodeler, now works as a facilitator for Remodelers Advantage and as a consultant to remodeling business owners.

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TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

Google Me This

Six lesser-known ways to optimize your use of the popular search engine

INSIGHT BY MARK HARARI

Did you know that Google averages over 40,000 searches per second? How many of those do you think are yours? Your time is money: If you can shave 60 seconds off your search time, then you're freeing up least 20 minutes per day. (I suspect it would be much more.) While you may already know a few of these techniques, many are lesser known but highly effective methods for exploiting the true power of Google efficiently.

1. Quotes: Use quotes to find an exact phrase. "Ways to build a workforce" will only find websites that use the exact phrase, in that order.

2. Don't include: Use the minus sign to exclude words from the results. This is handy when your search could be easily confused. Say you have an applicant you want to look up named Kevin James. Limit many of the erroneous results by searching for something like this: "kevin james -actor -comedian -film."

3. Wildcard: The asterisk [*] symbol is a wildcard. This is useful when you can't remember an entire phrase. It works particularly well in conjunction with quotes.

4. Site-specific: You can limit your results to a specific website by using [site:]. For example, "site:remodelersadvantage.com workshops" will search for pages containing the word "workshops" within the Remodelers Advantage website.

5. File types: If you seek a specific file, such as PDF documents, Word documents, or Excel spreadsheets, then use the "filetype:" operator. So searching with "filetype:PDF" with your keywords will return PDF documents.

6. Image Search: It's not just for finding images. For example, I did a search for "how much to pay a carpenter." One of the first images is a map of the mean wage in 2015 by state. You can then click the "visit page" button to be taken to the webpage.—*Mark Harari is director of marketing for Remodelers Advantage.*



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TECH

Digital Rx: An App a Day

Top contractors name six business apps they swear by

BY GARY THILL

By now, you've heard the expression, "There's an app for that." And when it comes to some of the most difficult aspects of contracting—time tracking, presentations and estimating—there's an app for that, too. Here's a look at some of the apps top contractors are using and why they recommend them:

1. Penultimate. This is an app that works with the popular Evernote app. With Penultimate, a picture in your Evernote file can be written on and then used as a presentation tool in client meetings, says Eugenia Marshall, customer experience manager at Contract Exteriors. Penultimate photos and the accompanying notes can be accessed from anywhere on a computer or mobile device. That way, customers can see photos and progress any time they want, ideal for busy or out-of-town customers. "We deal with a lot of people with second homes and rentals," Marshall says. "This really makes it easy to work with them."

2. Skitch. Another option for electronically annotating and drawing on photos is Skitch. The app can be particularly useful to help clients better understand project parameters, says Dan Dragomir, president of dRemodeling. "We do a lot of repairs," Dragomir says. "Ultimately this provides better customer satisfaction because they can see exactly what we're repairing."

3. TSheets. One of many different time tracking app solutions, TSheets is a cloud-based time sheet, tracker and expense-tracking app. It also tracks mileage and time off accruals. Dragomir says he loves the app because he can immediately check on workers' hours. "It's especially useful for when we do deliveries," he says. "I would suggest it to any contractor."

4. ExakTime. Another time tracking app, ExakTime is a suite of services that includes a mobile app. The app uses photo verification to eliminate so-called "buddy punching," in which employees check each other in even if they're not on the jobsite and uses GPS to track employees so you know which workers are at which jobs. Brian Hogan, owner of Hogan Design and Construction, says the app has given his company a new accuracy—and a new way to incentivize workers. "If someone's ExakTime is perfect in a week they get an extra hour on their paycheck," Hogan says.

5. HoverPro. This app is designed to easily create an interactive 3D model of a property. Using photos snapped from a smart-

phone, the app promises to generate measurements for a variety of materials such as siding and roofing. The app can also show users what different materials would look like on the home. "It really helps expedite the proposal process," says Meghan Ritchie, marketing director for Superior Pro Exteriors.

6. RenoWorks. This app is somewhat similar to HoverPro. It also allows users to see what different design features would look like on a home based on an uploaded photo. But this app shows customers specific products rather than just general colors or styles. Ritchie says her team is still trying it out, but it looks promising.

Some contractors are taking another route: creating their own app solutions. PCS Residential is developing an app to streamline the sales, ordering, and installation process, says Eric Kollauf, the company's marketing manager. When it's completed, Kollauf says, the app will provide measurements and pricing for different products right from a smartphone. If the app is successful, the company plans to license it to other contractors.



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72180120	60" x 32" Ensemble Curve shower, right drain
72180116	60" x 32" Ensemble Curve Aging in Place shower, left drain
72180126	60" x 32" Ensemble Curve Aging in Place shower, right drain
72171110	60" x 30" Ensemble shower base, left drain
72171120	60" x 30" Ensemble shower base, right drain
72181110	60" x 32" Ensemble shower base, left drain
72181120	60" x 32" Ensemble shower base, right drain
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- 39% of the Greenbuild audience works in both residential and commercial construction
 - 30% of this audience said Residential was their primary sector
- Home appraisers are recognizing a greater value in green homes

*Source: Dodge Data & Analytics 2015 SmartMarket Report - Green and Healthier Homes: Engaging Consumers of all Ages in Sustainable Living



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remodeling's

BIG 50

— 2016 —

Every year since 1986, REMODELING has searched for 50 remodelers at the top of their field. This year, we had nearly 250 entries. Our winners embody some of the most innovative strategies to survive—and flourish—in a changing market. Half of the companies featured on this year's list are less than a decade old. These remodelers were either just starting out when the market crashed or saw opportunity among the volatility. Others have continued to innovate over the years, with one winner celebrating its 50th anniversary. Securing a spot on the Big50 isn't all about size or volume: This year, we're featuring eight companies with revenue under \$1 million and three with revenue above \$10 million. But each featured company is doing something right, from raising the bar for customer service to embracing pioneering technology. Over the next few pages, you'll meet each one of our winners, learn their stories, and hopefully find a stealable idea or two. | by [Curtis Sprung](#) and [Gary Thill](#)

This year we again partnered with GuildQuality, an Atlanta-based customer satisfaction polling company, to identify candidates for its Service Excellence Award. Based on the results of customer surveys, the award recognizes Big50 winners who consistently deliver an exceptional customer experience. They are identified by this symbol ● next to their names.



ROBERT FREEMAN

Above Roofing

Jenison, Mich.

Years in Business: 20

2015 Volume: \$2.9 million

Staff: 8 office, 4 field

Robert Freeman has discovered a simple equation for success: happy employees = happy customers. And based on his achievements it's hard to argue with that formula. Above Roofing has received the Angie's List Super Service Award seven years in a row and won the Better Business Bureau's Torch Award for Ethics.

But to really illustrate the power of this equation, Freeman tells the story of the "roof Nazi": a former roofing foreman whose exacting tactics started out producing good customer ratings. But the longer he worked, the worse the ratings became. "The average roofer would love to have the roof Nazi," Freeman says. "But after a while, his team started to feel unappreciated. Any ideas they had were just overlooked and then there was a feeling like you can never do a good enough job. That just made a negative work environment. We're not willing to hire someone and have it destroy our culture."

DAVID POLLARD & RUSSELL HEAD

Liv Companies LLC

Riverside, Ill.

Years in Business: 4

2015 Volume: \$1.5 million

Staff: 4 field

When architect David Pollard teamed up with builder Russell Head, they got a "baptism by fire" into remodeling. Working with institutional investors, the two rehabbed foreclosed homes at a clip of 19 to 20 houses per month.

"It was crazy," Pollard says. "We pretty much saw everything. And it really prepped us for the remodeling world. We don't have too many people call us up today and say, 'Hey, can you get a car with no wheels out of the garage?'"

Today, Liv Companies' success centers on what the firm brings to the table as both a contractor and an architect. Pollard says the duo offers clients a feasibility study and takes time to discover how people live, what solutions they can offer—and how much the client can actually spend. "We're asking bigger conceptual questions than carpet and paint or new cabinets and countertops," he says.

STEVEN SILVERMAN

Valley Home Improvement

Northampton, Mass.

Years in Business: 25

2015 Volume: \$4.2 million

Staff: 7 office, 18 field

When Steven Silverman knocked on the door of Valley Home Improvement looking for a job after moving to Massachusetts, he had no idea that he'd buy it in 2013. "It's really changed the trajectory of my family and hopefully the people I employ too. I'm fortunate for that happenstance meeting," he says.

Last year, Silverman took the next steps to modernize his business and launched a solar division. "We looked at the numbers and crunched it. It was a service we knew our clients would hire." Installing solar panels isn't unique to Valley Home Improvements, but the added benefit of being carpenters and remodelers first has created opportunities when talking to customers.

"There's a real jazz to being able to talk about remodeling a kitchen and also talk about solar," Silverman says. "We had seen a few of our clients in the past go into solar and we knew it would work with our carpentry background. There are projects other firms are passing on because of the structural work involved."

Silverman also has entrusted employees with running the digital side of the company, resulting in an unusual partnership that's benefited his firm a lot. "We have a cracker-jack 27-year-old business information modeler. He's married Chief Architect with a gaming software that is just incredible," he says. The resulting demonstration allows for digital tours and 3D walk-throughs that assist in the sales process.



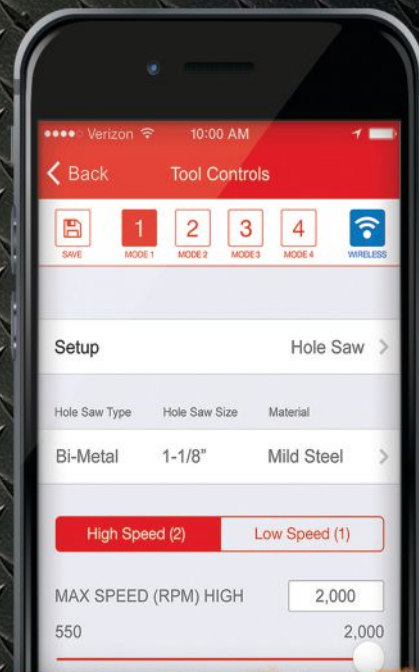
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KYLE SWARM, MATT MILLSAP, & TONY HIRSCH

Building Company No. 7

Nashville, Tenn.

Years in Business: 7

2015 Volume: \$2.4 million

Staff: 2 office, 3 field

Matt Millsap left his safe job with a large company as the recession was getting started in December 2008—he just wasn't happy with the type of clients he was serving. "They wouldn't appreciate ... any of the small things that differentiate us from our competitors. I wanted to remodel for people who appreciate quality," he says.

Thus, Building Company No. 7 was formed. In those fledgling years, a strong online presence generated upwards of 90% of the company's leads. In its first four years in business, Building Company No. 7 experienced 600% growth and was almost a victim of growing too fast. "We learned it wasn't smart to grow that fast. We had to pump the brakes in 2013," Millsap says. "Our revenue was increasing; our job size was growing."

That slowdown, combined with a focus on quality, led Millsap to a growing market for detached dwellings: With the rise of AirBnB, clients in Nashville are turning garages into short-term rentals.



BRIAN HOGAN

Hogan Design and Construction

Geneva, Ill.

Years in Business: 16

2015 Volume: \$2.9 million

Staff: 4 office, 5 field

Brian Hogan started remodeling by buying foreclosed houses and rehabbing them. But after several years of working with subcontractors, Hogan saw an opportunity. "The whole subcontractor deal was so awful," he says. "I'd make 10 calls and no one would call back. I thought, 'This is probably something easy to improve on.'"

What started as an all-around handyman service evolved into basement remodels and finally into a whole-home remodeling company. But through all the iterations, customer service has been central to the business plan—and the success. "We're really selling the experience," Hogan says. "It's super important that at every level of our company, the experience is stellar." That tactic seems to be working. Today, 87% of Hogan's business is from repeat or referral work. Hogan credits much of his success to "running a company instead of trying to make it work."



RON & LINDA JEDWAB

Lincorp

Washington, Mich.

Years in Business: 27

2015 Volume: \$1.9 million

Staff: 6 office, 2 field

Ron Jedwab must have felt like he was living in a bizarro world when he traded home building for remodeling during the economic downturn. "With homebuilding,

I owned the home until I sold it," he says. "With remodeling, I own nothing. The homeowner owns it all. With homebuilding I'm using my money. With remodeling, I'm using their money. Everything reversed itself."

But Ron liked this new world so much he immersed himself in it. He joined a remodelers group to learn more about financials and business operations. And he developed a process to stream-

line the design/build process that gives customers a rock-solid timeline and budget, which includes using Builder Trends software to holistically manage all aspects of the project.

"In a sense, we guarantee our price," he says. "We're covering everything in our design up to the cabinet knob so there's nothing left to be uncovered or discovered. That makes for a happy client."

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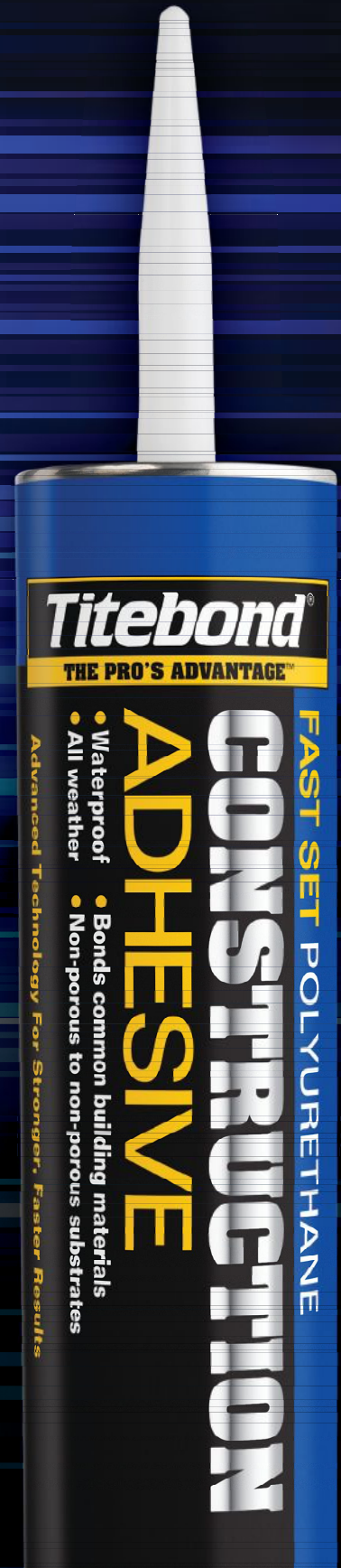
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IRWIN WEITZ

Superior Pro Exteriors
Marietta, Ga.

Years in Business: 18
2015 Volume: \$8 million
Staff: 12 office, 70 field

Superior Pro Exterior is a poster child for how to smartly grow a company. When Irwin Weitz decided to expand in 2012, he hired a marketing company to brand himself in the market and signed a contract with WSB radio. That got him endorsed by a local home fix-it show. Business grew 65% in 2013, says marketing director Meghan Ritchie. But Weitz wasn't finished. In 2014, his company became an elite preferred remodeler with James Hardie siding and bought a stucco repair company. In 2016, Weitz plans to create a separate windows division and add a roofing vertical to the company.

All the while, Superior Pro has focused on the thing that made Weitz successful in the first place: faithfully serving customers. "We're not one of those companies that's here today and tomorrow we're out of business," Ritchie says. "Homeowners want to know you've been around and that you stand behind your work."

ERIK BLOCK

Erik Block Design-Build
Hadlyme, Conn.

Years in Business: 13
2015 Volume: \$1.8 million
Staff: 3 field

Erik Block (pictured, right, with brother and employee Haldan) owes his start to a fire at his parents' home. Since he studied architectural technology in college, he designed plans to rebuild the house; upon seeing the plans, the builder that completed the job hired him.

Now, Block turns others' requests into reality. "A client came to us and said, 'We want a new kitchen and we want it to feel this way,' and showed us a bracelet," he says. To best serve those clients, Block keeps his team small. Right now there are only a few employees, but he says that's one of the key reasons he's been successful. "You come into a jobsite and you're like a ninja, all working really well together."

A small team can't take on too many jobs for fear of dropping in quality, but that's the kind of work Block and his customers are happy with. "It's the slow and steady approach," he says. "If we have two callbacks a year, that's rare."

DILSHA & JOHN HAPPEL

H&H Builders

Denver

Years in Business: 19
2015 Volume: \$1.5 million
Staff: 4 office, 4 field

Dilsha and John Happel attribute their company's survival during the downturn to operating like good squirrels: They managed their money well and now have secured a niche doing structural remodeling, a choice that stems from John's master's degree in structural engineering.

Due to the type of projects H&H takes on, they only do around five to 10 projects a year. To make sure that they're all successes, Dilsha acts as the gatekeeper and speaks to every potential client on the phone before accepting the job. "We screen all of our leads, 500 a year give or take," she says. "I spend a lot of time on the phone with them. I'll suggest solutions even if they aren't customers."

Making sure that only the best-fitting leads go beyond the phone call stage to meet with John is one of the systems that has helped H&H Builders thrive. "We're really big on systems," Dilsha says. "We have systems for everything. They can be tough to develop, but systems make life better."

One system that's helped H&H retain its employees is a longevity bonus. After completing a full year of employment, an employee receives a slight raise, regardless of whether or not performance was at its peak. According to Dilsha, "It's a little incentive. We like you, you like us. It's also because we keep the knowledge and experience with the company."



Andrea Stanton; Denver Image Photography

“We’ve gotten referrals off of just the feasibility study that hasn’t even gotten off the ground.”



RANDY HANN

Contract Exteriors

Murrells Inlet, S.C.

Years in Business: 7

2015 Volume: \$15.3 million

Staff: 12 office, 25 field

It's a given that customer satisfaction is key to success. But Randy Hann takes that concept to a whole new level with a devoted customer experience department. "When people spend \$20,000 on their home, that's a lot of money. And this is their home, their safe haven," explains Eugenia Marshall, customer experience manager. "When you interrupt that, you better make sure someone is there asking the questions that need to be asked and making sure everything is okay."

To that end, the customer experience department "holds the hands" of customers from start to finish. But it's really communication that's crucial, Marshall says. That means daily contact with customers, progress photos regularly uploaded to the client's project portal, and always asking: "What can we do to make this better?" Marshall says. "There can never be enough communication."

ANDREW LANGE

Drake Homes

Birmingham, Ala.

Years in Business: 5

2015 Volume: \$5.2 million

Staff: 4 office, 3 field

Andrew Lange has been running Drake Homes since 2011, doing what others have labeled "heavy remodeling." "We take houses that are existing [and] take them down to the ground," Lange says. "In Birmingham, there's no lots."

One of the ways he separates Drake Homes from the competition is his pre-project feasibility study. After the initial meeting with potential clients, he estimates all of the costs and draws up some initial plans. "They might say, 'I want new hardwoods and an addition.' I'll price that out. ... Sometimes we might do a sketch to relay our thoughts or ideas."

Offering that work for free is something Lange has assessed, but he feels it's the right choice for his company. "A lot of times what happens is they'll bid out two or three people, or want a commitment, or somebody local charges for an estimate. We don't think that's the best way to win the trust of our clients," he says.

STEPHEN MCNEIL

Creative Property Restoration

Houston

Years in Business: 15

2015 Volume: \$1.3 million

Staff: 3 office, 7 field

It was a deal too good to pass up: A HUD house was up for auction at a rock-bottom price, and Stephen McNeil decided to go for it. Never mind that it was a former house of prostitution or that McNeil had never renovated a home before. "I cut my teeth on every phase of construction by redoing that house," he says.

That determination—and the gamble—has paid off for McNeil, who transformed the ramshackle house into what the *Houston Post* called "the jewel of the neighborhood" and launched CPR (tagline: Breathing New Life into Homes) almost by accident. "People watching me redo the house hired me to redo their house," he says. "So I quit my job and went to work as a contractor." Years later, McNeil says it's still the work he did on that original house that sets his company apart. "I learned how long things take, how much things cost, and how emotional this entire process is."



GREG REHM

Liberty Hill Construction
Bedford, N.H.

Years in Business: 16
2015 Volume: \$1.5 million
Staff: 5 office, 3 field

With a background in environmental studies and wine making, Greg Rehm (center, pictured with Liberty Hill staff) didn't set out to become a remodeler. But once he started working as a carpenter's assistant, Rehm was hooked. "I really enjoyed the work and the industry, so I started going out on my own and doing a lot of small jobs," Rehm recalls. He also got himself heavily involved in the industry through local and national positions on NAHB. In 2015 he was the organization's National Remodeler of the Year.

Rehm says he owes his success to being a "systems driven" company with clearly written procedures and weekly team meetings. That combination has resulted in a company culture that always puts the customer first. "The customer experience stays the same through design, budgeting, planning, production, and follow up," he says. "But it requires a lot of supervision, management, and communication. We're just really excelling at that."



JEF FORWARD

Forward Design Build
Ann Arbor, Mich.

Years in Business: 12
2015 Volume: \$2.7 million
Staff: 9 office, 7 field

Forward Design Build has been growing so much over the past few years that founder Jef Forward's biggest problem is figuring out how to unclog his workflow. "With growing the company, we've transitioned from me being in the way to all of us being in the way," he says.

It's a problem that most companies would be happy to have, but Forward has seen friends and competitors fail because they grew too quickly. "One of the biggest reasons remodeling companies go out of business is that they grow too fast. That was a big 'a-ha' moment," he says. To continue growing at a manageable rate, Forward has limited his clients to only certain types of jobs. To tackle those remodels, his designers have started utilizing virtual design tools. "We'll fly clients through a project and do different color renderings right there," Forward says. "It's been a pretty big change for folks buying in emotionally to the design; cost becomes more secondary."



JESS FRONCKOWIAK
J2 Solutions
Venice, Fla.

Years in Business: 14
2015 Volume: \$6.8 million
Staff: 6 office, 21 field

When Jess Fronckowiak (shown with vice president David Fouche, right) got into remodeling, he found his first success in an unusual niche: detached garages.

Fast-forward to today, and he's still using that original recipe—only now it's for hospitals, one of the most demanding niches for any remodeler.

"It's very hard to get into the club," Fronckowiak says. "Imagine doing construction inside a clean operating room. That's what we have to do."

But being able to meet those challenges has proved wildly profitable. In 2015 alone, J2

Solutions went from seven to 21 employees. Fronckowiak says that number will be soon be 30.

And it all started because Fronckowiak was willing to take on projects other contractors didn't want to bother with. "We became the panacea for our client. We started solving their headaches," he says. "Eventually, we developed a reputation as the guys to get it done. That led to bigger and bigger projects."

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“My crews are there from day one to the end of the project. They’re not hopping around.”

DAN DRAGOMIR

dRemodeling
Philadelphia

Years in Business: 8
2015 Volume: \$1.9 million
Staff: 4 office, 11 field

dRemodeling started because Dan Dragomir couldn't find a decent contractor. At the time, Dragomir was a project engineer who'd been asked to find a contractor to fix a leak. "It took two days to find a good contractor," Dragomir says. "I saw an opportunity, and I grabbed it." Never mind that Dragomir had no remodeling experience. He figured his project management skills coupled with a veteran contractor partner would steer him in the right direction. Today, that intuition has turned into a million-dollar-plus going concern.

Dragomir still doesn't use subcontractors. "With subs, it's very hard to control the quality of the work," he says. Instead, Dragomir encourages his employees to exceed expectation. They get bonuses for finishing jobs early—and for customers who lead to referrals. "That's an incentive for them," he says. "We put the client first, always."

NATE BAHM

Nate's Custom Renovations
Lincoln, Neb.

Years in Business: 7
2015 Volume: \$960,000
Staff: 2 office, 4 field

When Nate Bahm started his business in 2009, he quickly realized the biggest hurdle he had to overcome was the experience customers had with other contractors. So he immediately set out to differentiate himself with a nine-point promise that focuses on the customer experience, and a three-year warranty on all work. "I decided that we were going to change the public's perception of contractors, if not in general, at least in our little corner of the world," he writes on his website.

As part of that change, Bahm makes sure his crews—all full-time employees—focus on one job at a time. "That's a real big key because it makes the process so much more efficient," he says, adding that many customer complaints about contractors just come down to poor scheduling. "They'll start on something and then something else comes up and they'll start on that."

BRANDON ERDMANN

HomeSealed Exteriors
Milwaukee

Years in Business: 9
2015 Volume: \$2.3 million
Staff: 8 office, 1 field

HomeSealed Exteriors has found success by following straightforward principles: setting clear expectations and communicating effectively. "We firmly believe in providing a positive, team-oriented environment," says company president Brandon Erdmann. "There is no yelling or bickering around our office."

That focus on solutions extends to clients as well. Each client, no matter the size of the project, is treated as a top-tier customer. "We constantly remind our staff that no matter how routine the tasks of your job may feel ... this person has invested thousands of dollars with our company and deserves to be treated as such," Erdmann says. To attract and retain top talent, HomeSealed prioritizes a simple benefit: salary. "We offer pay that is in the top tier of every position in our market. We believe in having A-grade players on our team, and it is necessary to pay in a corresponding manner."



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JOSH KEENEY

**LeafGuard Gutters and Roofing
of Northeast Wisconsin**
Neenah, Wis.

Years in Business: 7
2015 Volume: \$4.6 million
Staff: 5 office, 20 field

For Josh Keeney, starting his business in the maw of the Great Recession made a huge difference in operations. "It gave us our culture," says Keeney. "Had we started the business at the peak of the economy, I don't know if we'd be as grounded and customer focused."

Today, Keeney's mantra is not just to have customers, but have customers for life. That means doing whatever it takes to make clients happy—and keep them that way. For example, one customer asked to have his downspout 1 inch shorter. When a crew showed up to make it happen, he was shocked. "But the mileage we've gotten out of that customer on a referral basis is incredible," Keeney says.

For Keeney, that's what exceeding expectations is all about. "You shouldn't have to run and hide from a customer. If you're doing that, you're in the wrong business."

DUSTIN & JASON ROYER

RAMS Investing
Greenwood, Ind.

Years in Business: 8
2015 Volume: \$600,000
Staff: 1 office, 2 field

The 2008 housing crash was the signal for Jason and Dustin Royer to start their company. With a background in realty, the two saw an opportunity amid the chaos. "You're never going to find a better time to find a house," Jason remembers thinking. "Why aren't we doing this?" The brothers turned business partners began buying and flipping houses and thus, RAMS Investing was born.

Now, they work not only on flipping homes but are exploring opportunities such as rental properties. To grow as a business and take on larger projects, Jason and Dustin have continued to educate themselves by taking classes and networking in the community. "I think we have a pretty good reputation here in the Indianapolis area," Jason says. And maintaining that reputation is important to them. "Your name is everything. We don't want to pass along a product to someone and they hate it."

STEPHANIE VANDERBILT

Coastal Windows & Exteriors
Beverly, Mass.

Years in Business: 5
2015 Volume: \$2.8 million
Staff: 7 office, 12 field

Before Stephanie Vanderbilt started Coastal Windows & Exteriors with her husband David, she was a special education teacher. Turns out, working with homeowners isn't all that different. With both, Vanderbilt says, it's all about appreciating the audience.

"When you're teaching a special needs child, you have to think past what you see. What are the issues you have to get past to reach them and how can you identify with them?" Vanderbilt says. "I related that to homeowners. We're homeowners ourselves. We understand there's fear about renovation. So we made sure we took those fears and built trust."

How? Once again, through educating customers. As part of those efforts, Vanderbilt writes a "Dear Abby" style column for local papers called At Home With Stephanie in which readers submit questions. "We get leads from that all the time," she says.

Vanderbilt points to Coastal Windows' A+ rating on Angie's List and top awards from industry trade groups. But she says the company's core values really win customers over—and teach them how it's different from the rest. "We don't take advantage of people," she says. "We really tailor solutions to them."

That approach seems to be working. Vanderbilt says Coastal Windows has exceeded its sales goals every year and this year is on pace for 25% growth. That would make it a \$4 million company.



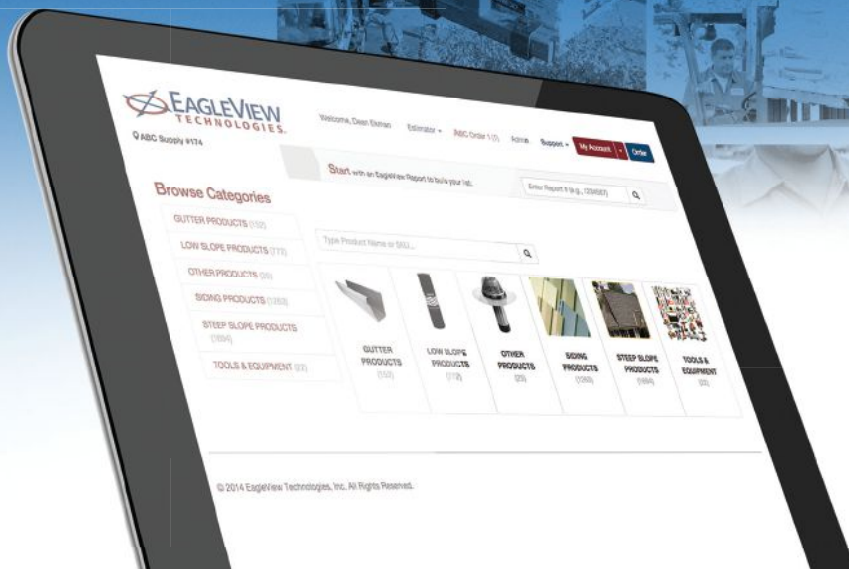
Lindy Scott; Lauren Poussard



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JOSEPH SMITH
Owings Home Services
Eldersburg, Md.

Years in Business: 13
2015 Volume: \$2.6 million
Staff: 5 office, 10 field

If the Owings name looks familiar, it's because sister company Owings Brothers Contracting was named Big50 in 2001. Owings Home Services is a separate beast that specializes in kitchen and baths. "But I think the reason people call us is we can do more than kitchens," says managing partner Joseph Smith. "Our niche is as a service provider."

To earn that reputation as a service provider, Smith employs two interior designers and promotes design to encourage customers. "I'll give them 50% of the design fee back if they sign up for design. We find that once design is involved, the homeowner gets involved."

Owings is also dedicated to online marketing and showcasing its work through photos and videos. "We're all in for digital," Smith says. "We track everything: where leads come from, how many jobs sold. We think videos will be better. We try something new every year."

LARRY RYCHLOWSKI
Imperial Kitchens and Baths
Brookfield, Ill.

Years in Business: 50
2015 Volume: \$1.9 million
Staff: 7 office, 4 field

Imperial Kitchens and Baths owner Larry Rychlowski has what he calls "a neurotic need to please." Saying it's a result of his upbringing, Rychlowski looks for employees who share that same tendency—and uses his background as a teacher to help enhance his customer service. "We try to educate our clients so they understand why we need to do things," he says. "We go to all the seminars and learn how and why you do things. The people who know why are far superior. After we become knowledgeable, we come back and educate our employees and our contractors."

The company also has a full-service shop on the premises, allowing for a much faster turnaround for things like cabinets. According to Rychlowski, "When changes occur, it makes the difference. No ordering in six weeks; it's back in 45 minutes to the client. People are looking for instant gratification."



LEO LANTZ
Leo Lantz Construction
Glen Allen, Va.

Years in Business: 9
2015 Volume: \$1.3 million
Staff: 2 office, 1 field

When Leo Lantz hires subcontractors, he knows if he's getting good work out of them—because at some point in his career, he's done it himself. From the time he was an "indentured servant" for his dad's real estate empire to working his way through college doing remodeling, Lantz has been involved in renovation the better part of his life. "I've done everything on a house," he says. "So each job is going to be done to my satisfaction, and they know it."

That approach seems to be working. Lantz is currently booked four months in advance, and he's going to need an addition to his office if he gets any more accolades. Along with his Best of Houzz award four years running, he received a Remodeling Excellence award from NAHB and NARI's Contractor of the Year award.

For Lantz, it goes back to showing customers why they should hire him. "We consistently produce beautiful projects for people," he says.



RUSSELL BUDD

PBS Contractors
Naples, Fla.

Years in Business: 30
2015 Volume: \$8.8 million
Staff: 20 office, 22 field

Russell Budd started PBS Contractors to do primarily commercial work. The recession changed all that. Residential remodeling was one of the few areas left, so Budd shifted gears and began working with homeowners. "Some of the fun on residential is not the job, it's the relationship—in contrast to the commercial market, which is very transactional," he says.

With the market picking back up, PBS is re-growing its commercial development while retaining the strong customer connection it developed. To accomplish that, PBS utilizes a Concierge Builder service. "Think of a concierge you'd meet in a high-end hotel; they make the experience even better," Budd says. "That is the attitude we take with our clients. We look for what they need and then how to get it done." The Concierge Builder service means no job is too small. "If it's moving furniture, or whatever, we'd never say, 'We don't do that.'"

WARD & SADORA HAMPSON

Classic Remodeling NW
Everett, Wash.

Years in Business: 7
2015 Volume: \$1.3 million
Staff: 3 office, 6 field

Ward Hampson built his company on superior customer service. So when he and his wife SaDora (pictured, center, with staff) decided to remodel their bathroom, he saw an opportunity. "We did it to be on the customer side of the equation," Ward says. "And I really learned a lot."

He put that education to work with a 15-point daily checklist that crews follow to make sure they're not leaving behind a mess—and they're making customers happy. That list goes on a whiteboard that's displayed in the office, where the team is reminded of it every day and customers see it the moment they walk in.

Once hired, each client is assigned what Ward calls a "client satisfaction representative" who follows the project from beginning to end. If any questions arise, company policy is that someone will get back to the customer within 24 hours. "This industry has a horrible reputation, and I'm trying to combat that," he says.

ANNA & BUTCH WUCHTER

Rock Solid Builders
McHenry, Ill.

Years in Business: 10
2015 Volume: \$1.6 million
Staff: 3 office, 7 field

A lot of people thought Anna Wuchter and her husband Butch were a bit bonkers when they announced they were forming a new business focused exclusively on deck building. Just decks? Surely there couldn't be enough work, the naysayers said. The whole thing was crazy.

Turned out, the Wuchters were crazy like a fox. For years, Anna had worked in corporate quality control, developing customer service standards for Fortune 500 companies. Now the deck building company gives her the ideal platform to cash in on those same skills. "All those years developing quality control really prepared us," she says. "I wanted our customer service to be far superior to anyone else's from day one."

Quality control meant hiring her own crews rather than subs. It also meant specializing even further with Trex composite decking materials. The result? Today, the company is consistently booked out three months in advance and is looking to add another crew to keep up with demand.

But Anna says superior customer service is the real key to their success. "The customer is always right," she says. "Even when they're not, we can frame the situation so they feel like their feelings are being validated."





GREG & BIANCA BEDNARSKI

Siding & Windows Group

Glenview, Ill.

Years in Business: 32

2015 Volume: \$5.5 million

Staff: 5 office

Siding & Windows Group has had some of the same employees for 15 years—and the owners know how integral those employees are to success. “We deliver coffee and snacks to jobsites. We make our employees our priority,” Bianca Bednarski says. That’s key, since they’re the ones on the jobsite each day. If an issue arises, it’s expected that whoever is there will resolve it as soon as possible. “Our staff is extensively trained with an eye for detail,” she says. “Each house is different and unique. Our staff can shift gears to meet client needs.”

To help meet those needs, Siding & Windows Group uses the latest apps to create digital models and simplify tasks like estimation and measuring, Bianca says. The company also shows off its technical prowess in the online design center: Clients can upload photos of their own homes and explore product possibilities and changes in real time.

CRAIG POSTLEWAIT

**Pendulum Solutions LLC and
Post Haste Handyman Services**

Wayne, Pa.

Years in Business: 6

2015 Volume: \$850,000

Staff: 2 office, 4 field

The economic downturn may have been the best thing to happen to Craig Postlewait’s business. Knowing he needed a new strategy to survive, Postlewait started a handyman service. “A lot of people were competing for the larger jobs, but no one was handling what the market was offering,” he says.

Today, he says 25% to 30% of his large-project customers start with the handyman service. “People get comfortable with us through the handyman service and when they’re ready to do the big project, they already know us.” It works the other way, too. But whether a project is big or small, Postlewait never just sends a person out to do a job. “I make an appointment and I go look at it,” he says. “The whole purpose is for me to build a relationship, and I can’t do that if I just send a guy out. I find a lot of clients don’t even know what they really want.”

MAIDA & ANDY KORTE

Designs by Maida

Rolling Meadows, Ill.

Years in Business: 28

2015 Volume: \$4 million

Staff: 4 office, 4 field

Maida Korte comes from a long line of contractors, so it was only natural for her to end up in the remodeling field. She started Designs by Maida as a part-time job, building her business into one that today deals with high-end clients with high-end expectations. “They want an excellent product in an excellent time for an excellent price,” she says. “Because there’s so many people, they can ask, why should they choose us?”

Maida answers that question by having a tight relationship with her subcontractors, ensuring that items like stone countertops arrive within seven to 10 days instead of four to six weeks. In order to keep that tight schedule, she looked at her operations at the end of 2014 and decided to modernize as much as possible. Utilizing cloud-based computing and programs that are easily understandable by clients, such as Microsoft’s Outlook 365, has helped her stay up to date with clients, but the biggest boon came when she redesigned her website.

“I cannot begin to tell you how worthwhile it was to invest in that. Instantly there were thousands saying they love the website. It’s all about the pictures,” Maida says. She also makes sure to personally post on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. According to her, that personal touch—knowing that the owner is saying something—attracts more attention.



Michael Spain-Smith; courtesy of Designs by Maida

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“It would’ve been nicer to start when there was more work available, but starting when the economy was down helped us get our legs under us.”

PETER DI NATALE

Peter Di Natale & Associates
Cold Spring, N.Y.

Years in Business: 26
2015 Volume: \$3.5 million
Staff: 5 office, 11 field

Peter Di Natale secured two projects the first day he started his business, and it’s continued to grow since. Focusing on upscale remodels, Di Natale works with outside architects to design the project while his crew focuses on the execution. “Because of the size of the projects, our preference is to build it and allow the design professional to do their thing,” he says.

One of his keys to maintaining high quality is to work with the homeowner to make sure everything is ordered on time. “If we see something like a bathtub with a ridiculous lead time, we take it to the owner and architects. They’re really relying on us as a partner to identify potential delays like that,” Di Natale says.

After the project ends, Di Natale maintains connections with his clients, doing smaller jobs and repairs. “Our contracts say a year. I don’t care if it’s actually two, three, five, seven years. We’ll go fix something at no charge.”

BEN AND STEPHANIE TRANNEL

Red House Remodeling
West Des Moines, Iowa

Years in Business: 7
2015 Volume: \$1.7 million
Staff: 4 office, 3 field

Ben and Stephanie Trannel learned how to operate their business during the lean years right after the downturn. In hindsight, Ben acknowledges that the timing wasn’t perfect, but starting under such tight conditions has ultimately benefited the growing Red House Remodeling. “That first year, we struggled with volume,” he says. “It helped us learn how we wanted to run it before we became overwhelmed.”

Started as a Case Design/Remodeling franchise, the Trannels decided to go independent so they could focus on building relationships in the community. “We have a lot of respect for Case,” says Ben. “For a year, we decided to think about why we’re here. This is a personal business.” That personal touch has informed their sales process: Once the scope of the project is set, Ben talks to each homeowner to learn why they want the project completed.

MATT CAVIGLIA

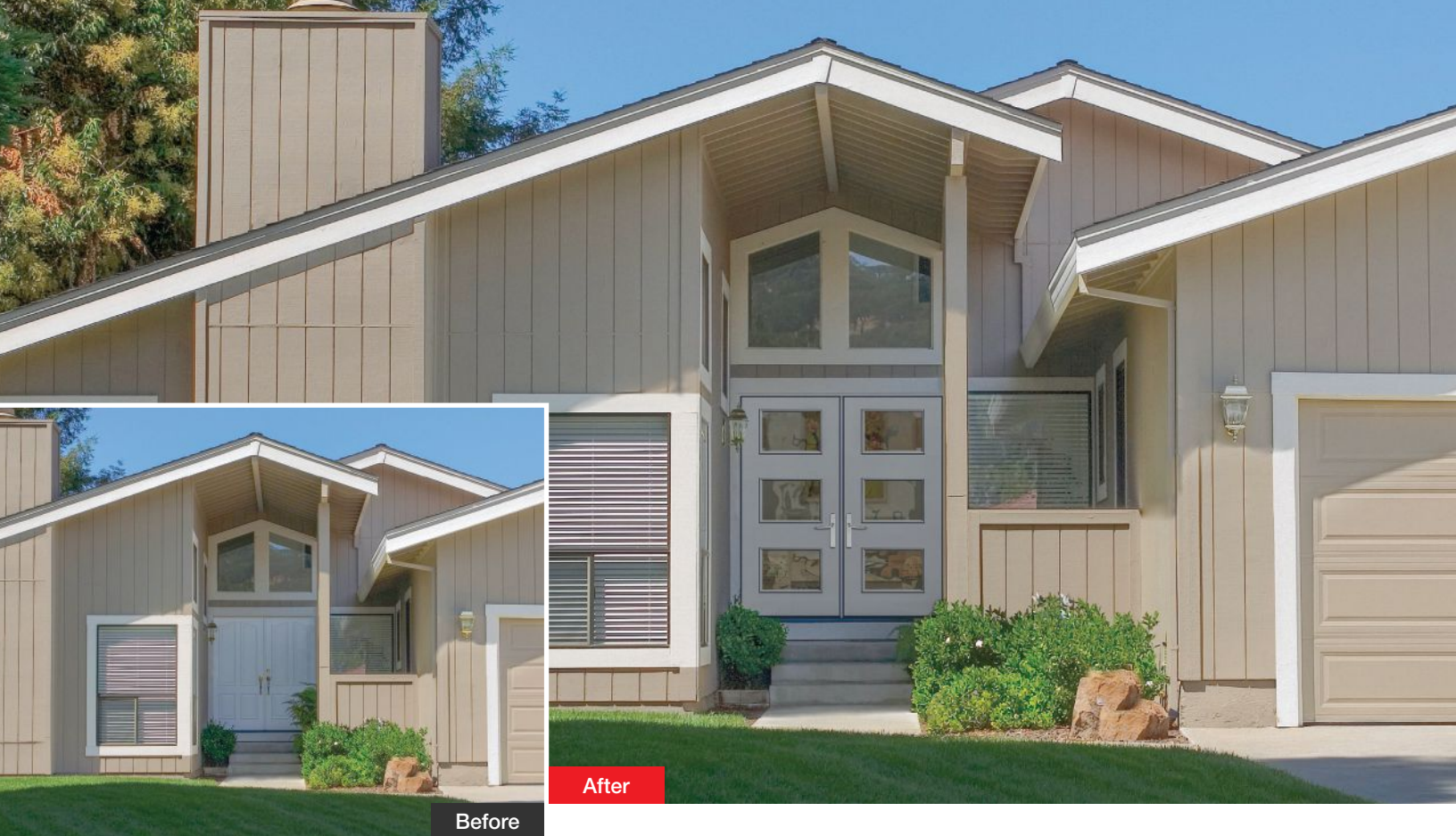
Reel Construction
Sparks, Nev.

Years in Business: 40
2015 Volume: \$2.4 million
Staff: 6 office, 13 field

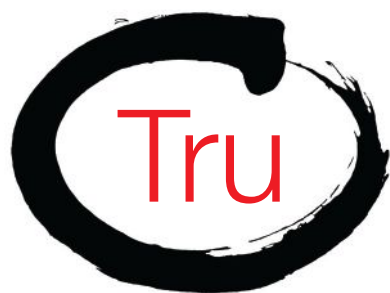
As an insurance contractor, Matt Caviglia sees the benefits of a remodel for a homeowner immediately. Reel Construction takes pride in getting people back into their homes as quickly as possible. “The thing I like most about it is ... when they come in and you do the final walk-through, especially if we’ve done any extra things, just to see their face,” Caviglia says.

Walking the fine line between obligations to the homeowner and the insurance adjuster can be challenging, but educating the homeowner on what’s covered leads to the best results. “We can do whatever you want, but you might have to pay out of pocket. Every now and then we’ll get someone who’s been planning to remodel. This is the silver lining.”

Caviglia also works with CARE Chest, a Nevada nonprofit, to help make homes more accessible after an injury or for elderly homeowners. “It’s really opened my eyes,” he says.



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BIG 50

— 2016 —



TODD & KIM PIERPOINT

Pierpoint Construction ②

Stafford, Va.

Years in Business: 26

2015 Volume: \$1.9 million

Staff: 2 office, 11 field

The goal at Pierpoint Construction isn't to just remodel a room or repair a damaged pipe. Company president Todd Pierpoint strives to be a one-stop shop for whatever customers need. "Relationships are important to us, and we want to be our customers' sole source for any question that comes up regarding home remodeling or repairs," he says. "For example, 'How do I make my home more energy efficient?' Or, 'My mother will move in soon and we need to make accommodations to our bathroom, will you take a look?'"

To maintain that status as a trusted wealth of information, regardless of the project, Pierpoint prides itself on quality and takes the time necessary to complete a job. "We will not compromise our quality to cut costs or time to get a job. We have been in business for over 25 years now. We have demonstrated that our work will last and that we will stand behind our work," Todd says.



BRIAN GOTTLIEB

Tundraland

Kaukauna, Wis.

Years in Business: 7

2015 Volume: \$18.1 million

Staff: 25 office, 60 field

Since Brian Gottlieb started Tundraland in 2009, the company has quickly grown to more than \$18 million in sales. The secret, he says, is company culture. "I don't believe in just hiring a bunch of skilled people and then motivate. I believe you hire motivated people." And in order to keep those people motivated, Gottlieb has instituted benefits to attract someone looking for an opportunity, not just a job. "If somebody graduates and has college debt, we'll help them pay it down," he says. "It attracts a different type of personnel. While they like a salary and bonuses, they have debt. The most important thing is to pay that debt down."

Leveraging that culture for sales, Tundraland has adopted a team selling process. Instead of one salesmen, a group of designers is sent out for whatever parts of the home the customer is looking to remodel. "The customers appreciate that. The customer feels like they have a team assigned," Gottlieb says.



PAUL & MARY MAKI

Porch Conversion ④

Wilmington, N.C.

Years in Business: 6

2015 Volume: \$4.2 million

Staff: 4 office, 24 field

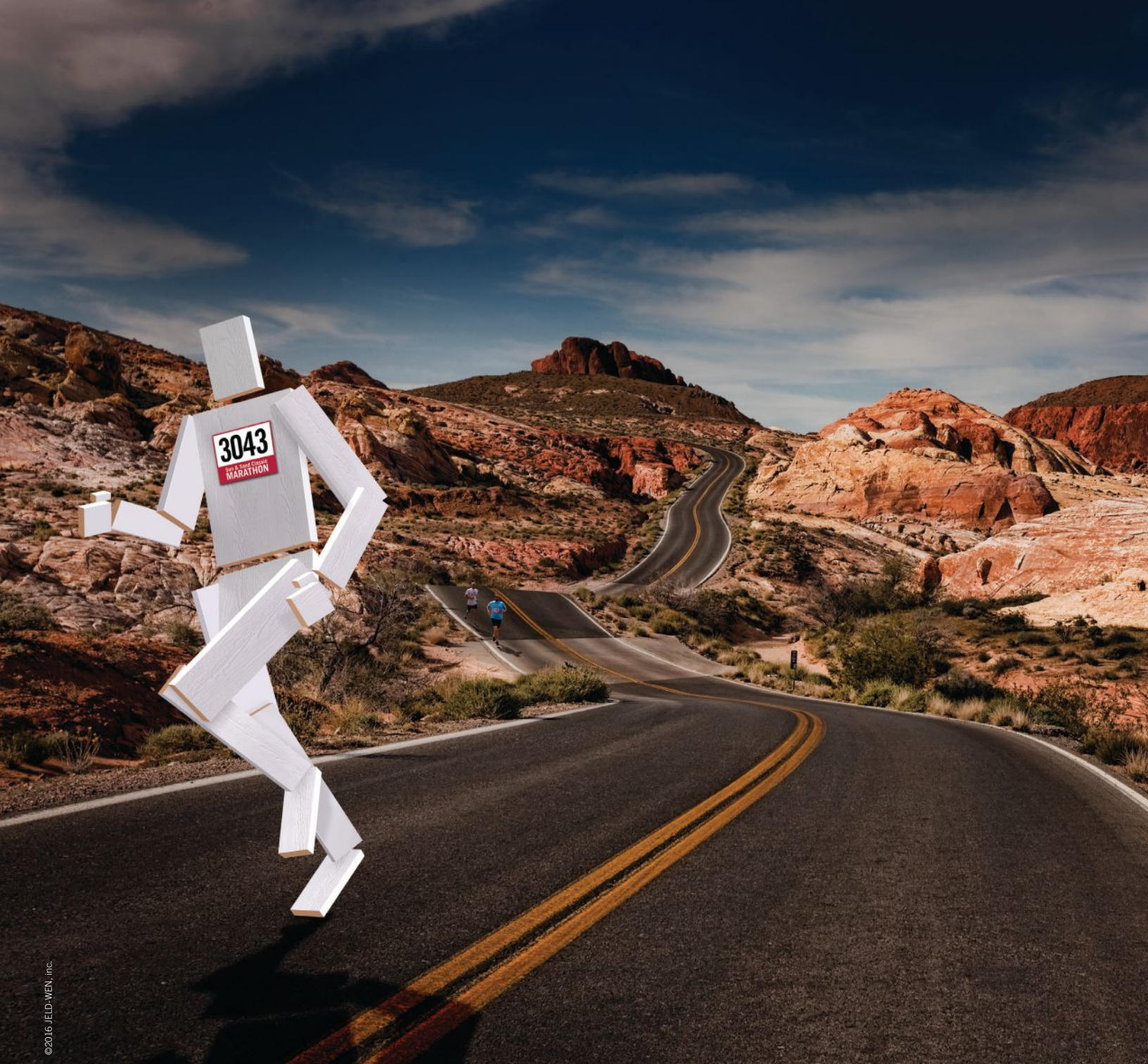
Porch Conversion's niche is somewhat obvious; it's in the name of the company. But what's more unusual is how the Makis (pictured with partners Scott

Fitzgerald and Brian Walsh) have built a business around converting porches into rooms that are usable all year. "A lot of builders build these screen porches that, because of our climate, it's either too hot or cold, too muggy or too buggy," Paul says. "It opens up the market to people to want these porches to be used year round."

The company has tapped into that growing market. Last year, it completed 494 jobs, and this

year is on pace to overtake that number. Transforming a porch to a more functional room varies from job to job, from homeowners who want a fully-furnished sun-room to those who simply want to keep out dirt and other evidence of the elements, Paul says.

Now, his challenge is how to grow appropriately. "Our claim to fame is that though we've grown, we're still mom and pop," he says. "I haven't had turnover in five years."



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SCOTT MCCOLLUM SR.

McRoof

Oklahoma City

Years in Business: 7

2015 Volume: \$2 million

Staff: 2 office, 3 field

The last thing Scott McCollum wanted to do was chase a storm. But after Oklahoma City got hit with a major hailstorm in 2010, McCollum was asked to help four storm victims. Two of those became his first customers, and from those humble beginnings, McRoof was born.

"I've spent the last five years trying to keep a lid on this business," McCollum says. But now, that lid is getting blown. McRoof is an insurance company-preferred contractor, and the first in the state to be credentialed for the MadSky Managed Repair Program network. "We'll be the first boots on the ground after a storm," he says. "And when you're a recognized name, you automatically capture a certain portion of that neighborhood."

Using MadSky, McRoof can go through the entire process of inspecting, estimating, and getting insurance adjuster approval from an iPad. "It's the future," McCollum says.

WES CROCKET & MATT LEDERER

Mahogany Builders

Chicago

Years in Business: 16

2015 Volume: \$2.4 million

Staff: 7 office, 13 field

Over the last three years, Mahogany Builders has doubled its luxury remodeling business. What's really remarkable is that it has spent less than 1% on marketing to do it. How did the company achieve such great ROI? By taking a high-end hotel approach to remodeling, says Wes Crocket, the company's business manager, who has a background in chichi hotels. Crocket and company use the hotel approach to resolution: Restate the problem; empathize; solve the problem; then follow up. And above all, always make sure the customer looks good.

For Mahogany Builders, which works in a lot of tight-quartered high rises, that means leaving a bottle of champagne on a neighbor's doorstep, talking them through the renovation process, and going "above and beyond" to be considerate. "That makes the homeowner look good," Crocket says. "And there's nothing better you can do."

DAN & JESSICA WEBBER

Webber Development and Construction

Watkinsville, Ga.

Years in Business: 11

2015 Volume: \$600,000

Staff: 2 office, 1 field

When Dan Webber decided to pivot from home building to kitchen and bath renovation in 2008, he knew he had a secret weapon: his daughter, Jessica. "It's a huge advantage to have Jessica with me," says Dan. "People like to see a dad and daughter working together."

Of course, Jessica is more than just a comforting presence; she's also the only accredited kitchen designer in the area. "That lends the team a lot of credibility," Dan says. Adding to that credibility is a rock-solid schedule every customer receives once a job starts showing what's going to happen each day. As work progresses, daily emails review the day's work and what to expect.

Dan says the company has only missed the schedule once in the last three years, and that was due to an ice storm. But even then, the team came so close to making the schedule that the customer gave them a surprise. "That's the only time we've gotten an unsolicited cash bonus of \$2,000," Dan says. "We were just flabbergasted."

One reason the company can hew to schedule is that it also makes its own cabinets. That, plus Dan's secret weapon. Jessica works with clients to pick out all materials and plan the project down to the smallest detail. "We work really hard on the front end to finalize those decisions," Dan says. "We try to eliminate surprises."



Kaskel Photo; Rustic White Photography

"It might be cheaper to use subs, but we're not willing to sacrifice the quality we're able to achieve."



MATT MARTINI
OnSight Construction
Cincinnati

Years in Business: 6
2015 Volume: \$470,000
Staff: 1 office, 3 field

After a series of fits and starts, Matt Martini thought he'd landed the perfect job with Procter & Gamble. "When you grow up in Cincinnati, that's a dream come true," he says. But it turned out being a corporate exec wasn't Martini's dream after all. So he started a handyman service that quickly morphed into his full-service remodeling company, which is making other people's dreams come true.

Turns out, that's where the money's at. Last year, Martini says, he more than doubled his business. How has he made the transition? It's all about providing good value for the quality of the work; for Martini, that comes down to who he hires. "These are all people I'd trust in my own home." That's crucial, he says, because as much as it is a business, remodeling is a relationship. "We have to cohabitate with our clients, so we have to respect their privacy and even get to know their pets," he says.

SKIP LABELLA
Closet America
Lanham, Md.

Years in Business: 7
2015 Volume: \$7 million
Staff: 32 office, 29 field

Closet America has its business down to an exact science. Using specialized software, designers show customers what their final closet will look like on a tablet, where they get signoff and payment. Those specs are then sent directly to the company-owned factory, where parts are labeled with the customer's name and address.

"What the homeowner sees on the screen is what they get," says Josh Kiernan, the company's marketing director. "There's zero room for human error." But that doesn't mean Closet America has lost its human touch. Building customer trust and loyalty has been a cornerstone of the company's success. Kiernan credits much of that success to the company's commitment to do all work with employees rather than subs. "It's a huge value proposition for us," he says. "We have 100% control when they work for us."

MARK QUIGLEY
Mark W. Quigley General Contracting
Newton, Mass.

Years in Business: 30
2015 Volume: \$600,000
Staff: 1 office, 4 field

Being based in Boston, Mark Quigley has learned a lot about historic restoration. "Boston, being one of the older cities in the U.S., has a very old housing stock," he says. Due to the specialized nature of the job, education is important, so Quigley and his staff participate in courses that focus on historic preservation.

On a recent renovation of a 1920s Tudor house, Quigley restored about 70% of its exterior wood but found a 12-foot-long piece rotted at one end. To ensure the client was happy, he special-ordered a new beam from Canada. "A lot of times you can get lucky with wood that's available for decoratives," he says. "The structural and decorative pieces are different." That cost and time might be intimidating to some, but Quigley says most of his clients appreciate his dedication to accuracy. "You're living in an antique, something that has a lot of value. If it's done wrong, it can ruin the value of the house."



**JIM COLLINS &
TRACY CORRIVEAU**

Kitsap Kitchen and Bath
Poulsbo, Wash.

Years in Business: 7
2015 Volume: \$1.2 million
Staff: 6 office, 3 field

Kitsap Kitchen and Bath was formed to give clients a one-stop shop so they didn't have to make a long drive or ferry ride to get to Seattle. "We're the only ones who have [a showroom] over here," says lead interior designer Tracy Corriveau. Founded as a subsidiary of local general contractor Collins Homes, attention to detail has helped Kitsap forge its own identity and relationships with customers. "We're very attentive," Corriveau says. "We jump and things get resolved, no questions asked."

The company keeps customers engaged throughout the process by using a digital sketching program to provide real-time updates and show a 3D rendering of what the project will look like. "We used to do hand drafting. Now, we hand off to a designer who has the SketchUp program," Corriveau says. "It's a great presentation program. It sells the jobs."

GARY & CATHY HALDEMAN

HC Remodeling and Design
Council Bluffs, Iowa

Years in Business: 4
2015 Volume: \$680,000
Staff: 3 office, 3 field

Used to be, Gary Haldeman loved his job, but hated getting paid. "Anytime we had to deal with money was stressful for him," says wife and business manager, Cathy. So she decided to change the equation. Using Co-construct project management software, HC Remodeling and Design keeps clients updated regarding project costs, scheduling, and change orders throughout the job, rather than surprising them at the end. "We get to the end of the job and people pay us, and that's that," Cathy says.

The benefits don't end there. A companion mobile app connects the team in the field with access to all project documents and details. Another app-based solution, TSheets, allows the Haldemans to keep track of the crew throughout the day. Cathy and company use all of this data to improve estimating—and the customer experience. "The more data we have, the more we learn how to get better," she says.

MILES WILKINS

The Board Store
La Crosse, Wis.

Years in Business: 26
2015 Volume: \$4.8 million
Staff: 19 office, 22 field

If you live near La Crosse, Wis., chances are you recognize Miles Wilkins. First off, Wilkins' main billboard is a profile of him pointing customers to his store, with his trademark bald noggin sticking above the top. But what makes the billboard—and Wilkins—so memorable are the different hats he puts on, depending on the season. For example, for the store's annual anniversary sale, Wilkins' billboard persona wears a birthday hat. "I'll be out in public and people will say, 'When are you going to change your hat?'" says the marketing-savvy 71-year-old.

Even if you miss the billboard, you're likely to spot Wilkins on one of his long-running TV spots, which have been filmed right in the store he's owned since 1991. "That's part of our brand. Plus, I'm cheap talent," he jokes.

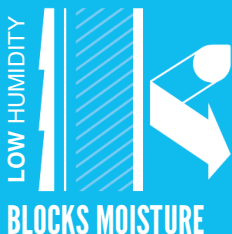
If you're a cord cutter, you can see Wilkins in the local newspaper, where he pays to write a regular advertorial educating customers about new products or trends. "I've had people come in and say, 'I read your column' all the time, rather than thinking it's an ad," Wilkins says. "It just gives us an identity in the community. It's all about trust."

One way Wilkes gains that trust with a 10-year workmanship warranty on everything the company does—even if the manufacturer's warranty doesn't cover it. His approach is paying off: Since taking over the store in 1991, he's grown from \$450,000 in annual sales to about \$5 million today.



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JACK CROCKER
Classic Home Improvements
Escondido, Calif.

Years in Business: 6
2015 Volume: \$3.5 million
Staff: 11 office, 4 field

Jack Crocker's father owned a remodeling company when he was young, so when he was ready to leave corporate America, he knew what he wanted to do: Classic Home Improvements was born, marrying the best practices of both big and small remodeling companies. "We wanted to be able to offer whole packages, not just services, and be a contractor for a lifetime," says Crocker (pictured, center, with wife Nicole and staff).

A recent addition that's been popular with customers is a personal shopper. Growing from salesmen offering advice to clients, it became a formalized position for someone with a background in design. "The personal shopper talks about their style, gets a good feel for their space, and guides them down the road," Crocker says. The service has generated positive feedback—and while referrals are still the heart of the company's leads, Crocker knows the days of a good word by itself are in the past. "It's the ultimate compliment, but it's naïve to rely on that alone."



EDWARD CHMAR
Homelife Remodeling
Towson, Md.

Years in Business: 7
2015 Volume: \$1.3 million
Staff: 3 office, 14 field

Edward Chmar formed the policies of Homelife Remodeling to fight back against what he calls "fly by night" contractors. He's aware of a stigma against contractors and wants his clients to feel safe having him work on their homes. "I don't take a deposit up front. I do this because I want people to trust us," says Chmar.

To ensure that his clients are at ease, Chmar makes himself available at all times. "I probably care more than I should," he says. "I'm very involved and talk to all the customers. They know if there's an issue they can reach someone who can make decisions and get things done. It just avoids major problems when things can be handled quickly."

Chmar also ensures that Homelife utilizes the best technology—not for novelty, but for its efficiency. "I could run my entire business from the backseat of a car if I needed," he says. "It's all right there as long as you have an internet connection."



ANTHONY OBEDOZA
Southern Maryland Kitchen,
Bath, Floors & Design
California, Md.

Years in Business: 7
2015 Volume: \$3.7 million
Staff: 7 office, 9 field

Anthony Obedoza, lead designer and general manager at Southern Maryland Kitchen, Bath, Floors & Design, understands that

remodelers have to complement excellent final products with exceptional customer service. It's a key tenet that's helped the company excel.

"We spend a lot of money to try and catch mistakes to ensure customers are happy throughout the process," Obedoza says. To that end, the company handles everything with an intense focus on customer service. "We can select all the material at the show-

room, design it for them, and then construct everything from start to end of the project," he says.

The company was created to handle a full range of projects and fill a void in the local area, says Obedoza. "There's plenty of remodelers out there who can do contracting work, but no design/build firm that covered the full gamut—a one-stop shop to help them design the room they desire and help create it for them."

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Property Claims Solutions

Eagan, Minn.

Years in Business: 10

2015 Volume: \$14 million

Staff: 7 office, 13 field

The folks at Property Claims Solutions don't just believe in climate change, they bank on it. "Now, when it's hailing, it's like, 'Oh my God, money!'" says marketing manager Eric Kollauf. That's because as the name suggests, PCS is all about storm damage, especially when it comes to aluminum clad windows, a style popular with builders in the late '80s and early '90s, Kollauf says. These windows are "like a pop can" in a hailstorm, he adds. Though damage may not be noticeable, it can cause other problems with windows that warranties cover.

PCS handles all aspects of storm damage: roofing, gutters, siding, insurance claim management, and damage assessment. But Kollauf says windows are where the company really sets itself apart, simply because most contractors "don't want to deal with that hassle." Willingness to do so has proved so successful for PCS, it's now opening offices in Wisconsin, Colorado, and Illinois, with more to come. "We're trying to take our model and share it with everyone," Kollauf says.



SCOTT LISENO & STEVE MEIERDIERCKS

Omnia Construction

Cornelius, N.C.

Years in Business: 5

2015 Volume: \$540,000

Staff: 1 office, 1 field

Though Scott Liseno saw the 2008 housing crash coming, he wanted to keep working in construction. He took a job working on commercial properties—and quickly learned a lesson. "Commercial and residential are completely different animals," he says. "I enjoy being on the jobsite and dealing with trades. As a project manager I didn't get to do that."

Liseno returned to residential remodeling in 2009 and started Omnia Construction in 2011, taking the lessons he learned to forge a better business. "I learned a lot about scopes of work: figuring out what's in the job, parts and pieces, trades. We scope out the job so we know ahead of time all the parts and pieces."

At the second job check—after a verbal commitment but before an official price—it's not just Liseno; the trades talk with clients as well. "The end result of the visit is accurate trade pricing, feedback from the subs on the best approach to the work, and increased client confidence in our company," Liseno says.



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Intellectual Property

Design Group Three draws a line on the value of design

BY BRUCE D. SNIDER

Nobody likes getting ripped off, and as design/build architect Alan Freysinger waited his turn at a local design review board session, he realized in a flash that he had been. Among those seeking plan approval that day were a couple of Freysinger's former clients—presenting one of his designs.

"We had met with the owners and charged them a relatively small amount for the preliminary design," says Freysinger, who assumed that this would lead to a design/

build contract for his Milwaukee-based firm, Design Group Three. Instead, he says, "they took the drawings, finished them to a buildable level, and elected to act as their own general contractor. The board loved it, but we got paid \$700, and the owners walked away with the design."

The experience served as a wake-up call. Freysinger and partner Robert Prindiville developed a new way of charging for design that not only protects their creative output but also

boosts their closing ratio, helps manage their workflow, and allows the design side of the business to generate a profit.

DEMONSTRATING THE VALUE OF DESIGN

A perennial hurdle for any supplier of architectural services is that clients tend to think that ideas are free, so design should be cheap. "When people hear the dollar amount for stand-alone design services, they think, 'Man that's a lot of money. I could do something else with that,'" Freysinger says. As every producer of intellectual property knows, ideas are hard to protect, and architects and designers face their own version of that problem. "The minute you charge someone for a design, they have a right to the design," Freysinger says. Because he had charged his clients a nominal fee, "they were entitled to a copy of the drawings."

In walking off with Freysinger's preliminary design, the clients were skimming the icing off the cake. "People come to us for our design expertise," Freysinger says. "We've done this kind of work long enough that we can solve the puzzle creatively and relatively quickly. That's what sets us apart from everyone else." Architects may charge by the hour, but not every hour of an architect's time is created equal: The initial design solution is where the greatest value lies.

To keep clients long enough to sell them the whole cake—a full design/build package—Freysinger and Prindiville resolved never to release usable plans until after the owner has committed to have Design Group Three build their project. The key to the company's process is delivering only enough design in the early stages, free of charge, to establish the scope of the project and build enough trust for the client to sign a construction contract.

MAKING ARCHITECTURE INSEPARABLE

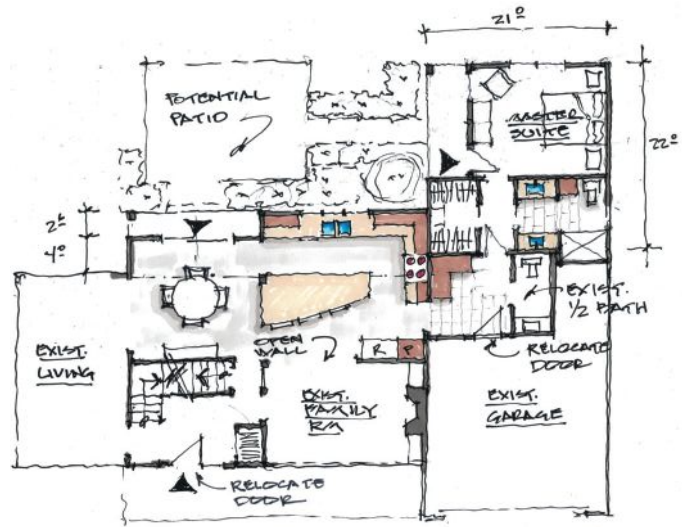
At his initial client meetings, Freysinger gathers the owners' ideas and goals for their project and sets a date for a second meeting at Design Group Three's office. "We put together a quick concept sketch—drawn to scale, but freehand. Everything we do to that point is a free service. We consider it kind of a loss leader, but we figure that we haven't invested more than two or three hours at most at that point," he says. When the meeting ends, the drawings stay with the architect.

Along with the concept sketch, Freysinger says, "we put together a written cost proposal that includes an outlined scope of work and what the costs are, plus or minus between 5% and 10%." At that point, he says, "it's the beginning of design development. But our concept sketches get out on the table what the potentials are. And it gives them a sense of what the budget's going to be, barring any changes they make to the scope of work."

If clients like what they see, the next step is to sign a contract that includes all further design and construction. "We'll do a much more thorough survey of the house and detail everything out from there," Freysinger says. "At that point, it's a package. They've committed to work with us all the way through the project."

COORDINATING SCHEDULES

After some 20 years of working with this process, Freysinger is familiar with its advantages. "One is that we don't give away any preliminary design," he says. It also identifies serious prospects



Sketch it Out Design Group Three offers freehand concept sketches like this one for no charge, along with a cost proposal. Clients sign a contract for all further design and construction.

and gently encourages them to move ahead toward construction.

"I tell people, 'You need to decide right up front whether you're comfortable working with us—our process, how we do things—before you sign the cost proposal,'" Freysinger says. "But once you sign that proposal, you want to do the project. That's a commitment. The process weeds out people who aren't serious very quickly, and that saves a lot of time."

It also gives the construction side of the business a view over the horizon. "Once people commit to our cost proposal and to starting on design development, now we have our work queue filling up with projects we know are going ahead," he says. That's a great help in planning the construction calendar. He acknowledges that a client could always back out of the construction contract, but "in 20 years, that's happened maybe three or four times."

SELLING THE WHOLE PACKAGE

Perhaps as important as protecting the company's preliminary design from getting poached, the process also circumvents any haggling over architecture fees by folding design development, working drawings, and oversight into project overhead.

That addresses the problem that got Freysinger's attention in the first place: Clients appreciate architectural quality, but they have a hard time paying for it. "Most people don't realize the value of good design," he says. "Some do, but generally, if you were to tell clients what the line-item cost for design would be, most of them would choke on that number."

When design is simply a part of the project's overall cost, as it is with any other consumer product, that problem essentially disappears. "We've had people say, 'We can't afford it. We love your design, but we can't afford you,'" Freysinger says. "Well, okay; I can accept that. But our close ratio is still one out of four to one out of five, so we must be doing something right."



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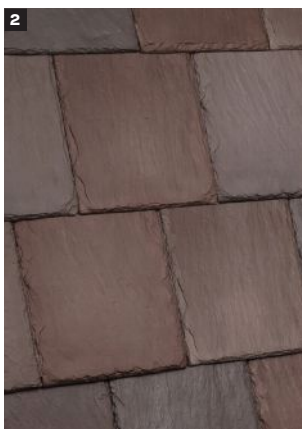
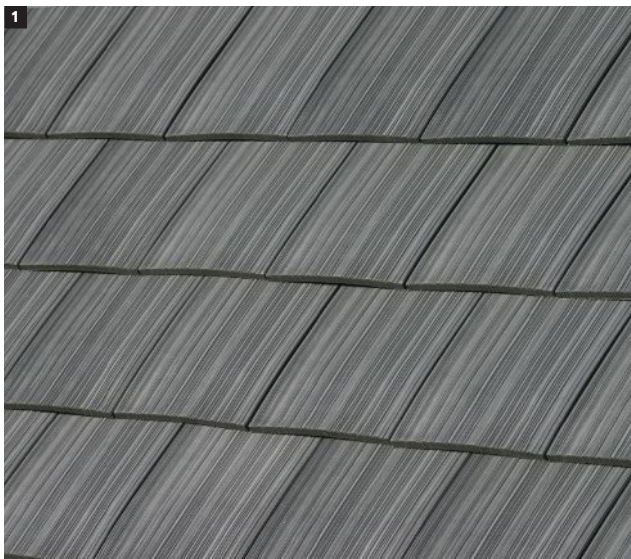
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Raise the Roof

BY MARISA MENDEZ

After another winter of heavy snowfalls and cold temperatures, your clients may be looking to update their home's exterior. While it might not be the most glamorous project, the roof may be the item in need of the most work. These four products blend beauty and function.

1. HAIL CEDAR

Ply Gem's new engineered cedar roofing is inspired by real cedar shingles, but is made from the same proprietary polymer formulation as Ply Gem's engineered slate roofing. The company says the roofing can be scored and cut with a utility knife and either can be attached with a nail gun or nailed by hand. The roofing is also eco-friendly, made almost entirely out of recycled resins. plygem.com

2. WELL BLENDED

DaVinci Roofscapes has expanded its EcoBlends offerings with Tahoe, Mountain, Slate Gray, and Brownstone (*pictured*) blends. The EcoBlends line, certified by the Cool Roof Rating Council, repels the sun's rays to help keep homeowners' heating and cooling costs down. The synthetic tiles are also fire- and impact-resistant. davinciroofscapes.com

3. TRIPLE THREAT

GAF says that its Glenwood Shingles are the thickest triple-layer asphalt shingle on the market. The shingles are made to look like real wood shakes but are available at a lower cost than their wood counterparts. The shingles have a Class A fire rating and feature StainGuard protection and Dura Grip adhesive. gaf.com

4. STING LIKE A BEE

National Nail has expanded its line of Stinger roofing products to include EXO25, EXO35, and EXO50 synthetic underlayments, which are UV-resistant and can remain exposed for up to six months. The fabrics offer high tear strength and proprietary, non-skid additives. Each roll has pre-printed nailing patterns and overlap lines, covers 10 squares, and weighs 20 to 28 pounds. stingerworld.com



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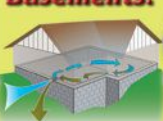


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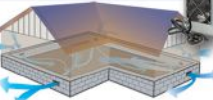



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OUTDOOR

Back to the Beach

BY ERIN ANSLEY

After designing this La Jolla, Calif., home's back landscape, Kate Wiseman, principal of Sage Outdoor Designs in San Diego, was asked to transform the front exterior into a welcoming and usable space for the family. There was only one specification: a modern, beach vibe. What was once an understated, grassy front yard now is a sophisticated beach retreat. Simple lines, light colors, and colored concrete provide the backdrop for various amenities often reserved for the backyard: built-in flat screen TV with

retractable cover, fire feature, water element, multiple seating areas, even heat. The entertainment center is accompanied by built-in heating and three glass-enclosed flames that provide ambiance and a serene escape. A sleek fence and stylish door offer just the right amount of privacy for the street-facing yard.



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Ed Gohlich Photography



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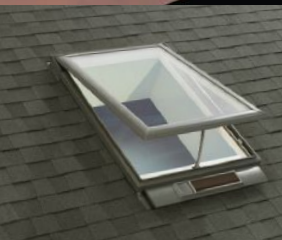
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