

What's Good Enough

**Time. Budget.
Quality.**

These three elements represent the Holy Trinity of remodeling. Given enough of the first two, the third is relatively easy to produce.

The trouble is, hardly any remodelers have any time or money to spare. The remodeling process is usually a push-pull affair that packs a lot of work into a little time and stretches budgets as far as they can go.

When it comes to this triumvirate, Steve Farrell, president and CEO of The Farrell Co., is as close to ideal as one can be. The Los Altos, Calif., remodeler does work for high-end clients, averaging high-six-figure jobs on multi-million dollar homes. "We use nothing but the best products," Farrell says.

"It's easy to convince people who pull up in their \$80,000 car that it's worth it," Farrell says.

SET THE STANDARD

However, The Farrell Co. is the exception, not the rule. At most remodeling firms, quality standards as they pertain to craftsmanship are not absolute. While no professional remodeler will tell his clients that his work is merely "good

enough" (just as no self-respecting homeowners will ask for an "adequate" job to be done on their house), the fact remains that, due mostly to budget constraints, quality standards are set from job to job.

"Quality standards are dictated by the client," says Andy Hannan, production manager at Mark IV Builders, in Bethesda, Md. "When you go to buy a car, most of the cars you look at will run for 100,000 miles. A lot of the decision is made based on style, what you look best in, what the Smiths have."

Similarly, in remodeling, the decision to use, say, stain-grade materials rather than paint-grade is ultimately the homeowners'. The re-modeler contributes by providing technical expertise and pricing information.

STANDARDS ON DOWN THE LINE

Once the contract is signed and the quality standards for the job have been set with the client, the final step before breaking ground is to communicate those standards to your employees. The means



Defining, communicating, and monitoring quality standards is vital to producing projects that satisfy remodelers and homeowners alike

for doing this vary from company to company based on organization, but at most remodeling firms, it's done through meetings with personnel key to the job. Typically, this includes the company owner, the salesperson on the job, the designer, the production manager, and the lead carpenter or site supervisor.

At Mark IV Builders, the salesperson meets with Hannan and the project supervisor to go over the sales notes before the job starts. Because an important part of the discussion is describing the client's personality and tastes, it's a good idea to leave the home-owners out of meetings like this.

Subcontractors always seem to present a challenge to remodelers, and the area of communicating quality standards is no exception. Buckborough provides "scope of work" documentation for most of the trades on a project and notes the quality standard there.

Still, perhaps the most important way to extend your quality standards to your subcontractors is to find trade

partners that place importance on the same things that you do.

When Alphin meets a subcontractor for the first time, he will often tell a story about something that went wrong on a past project. From the sub's response, Alphin can generally tell if he'll be a good fit or not. "I don't say 'no' to my clients; I just explain to them the ramifications of the question they're asking," Alphin says. "If the subcontractor does the same thing" - if he immediately starts trying to solve the problem rather than talking about how it can't be done - "then we're probably going to be a good match."

It's also a good idea to break a subcontractor in slowly, in order to evaluate their potential. The Farrell Co. has a separate team to handle smaller projects, and subcontractors working with Farrell for the first time usually start there. Farrell says he can take up to a year to get comfortable enough to put a subcontractor on a bigger job.

Michael McCutcheon, of McCutcheon Construction, in Berkeley, Calif., is all for trying

out new subcontractors but cautions against doing too much at once. "One new sub is great," he says, "but five new ones are not."

The logic is simple: Subcontractors require a little more management the first time around, and so it's too much of a strain on your production staff to have too many newbies on a job at once.

STAYING ON IT

After the quality standards are set and communicated and the job has begun, it's important that standards are monitored regularly. For many companies, that means weekly walk-throughs, performed by the supervisor, project manager, lead carpenter, or whoever is responsible for overseeing the quality of a job. That person should evaluate the work that he sees finished or in progress (and making any resulting changes in project scope or schedule) and should also talk to the homeowners to get a feeling for their overall impressions of how the project is going.

If something is going wrong, it's best to know early on. "We try to make it an open forum," Hannan says. "We tell them, 'If you've got something to say, say it. Get it out of your system before it builds up.'"

Tim Faller, a production expert and industry consultant, says that a good rule of thumb is to "do it right the first time, or fix it by the end of the day, before the client sees it."

Sometimes, however, that's just not possible. Simply informing your clients of the situation before they ask you about it often diffuses the situation. At Premier

Builders and Remodeling, for example, customers are called if the company is leaving something unfinished that evening, so they aren't surprised by it upon their arrival. "If there's a problem, we want them to know before they get home," Feigeles says.

Clients who keep a particularly keen eye on the progress of their project often require a little more attention. They need to be educated. "We do this stuff daily," Hannan says.

"Homeowners don't. They have no idea why that crack is so big, or why that 2x4 has sap in it and the others don't."

Patiently listening to their concerns and then explaining, for instance, that siding shrinks in winter and that the cracks will disappear when it gets warmer is often all it takes to assuage and reassure a potentially angry customer.

THE END GAME

Quality craftsmanship is essential for remodelers, but it's only part of the story. Providing a quality service — giving the homeowner an overall experience that turns them into a "raving fan" and a source of repeat business and referrals — is just as important.

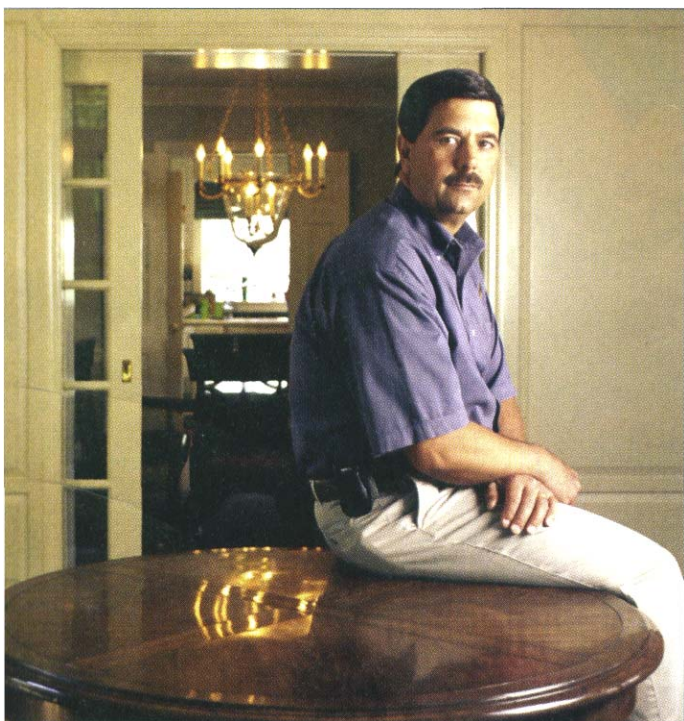
When the homeowner finally does get it, there's no better marketing tool. "Those stories become legend," Baldwin says. "They spread like wildfire."

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A TRADITION OF FINE HOMEBUILDING
AND REMODELING



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