

Remodeling



THE INDUSTRY SOURCE A Hanley-Wood Publication remodelingmagazine.com May 2003

50 Big

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Remodeling

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Big50

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Once again we shine the spotlight on 50 firms that stand out in management, marketing, sales, and design. For their outstanding business acumen, top-notch service, and ability to create exciting and dynamic companies that stand as models for the industry, REMODELING salutes the Big50 Class of 2003. Read on to meet them.



**Mark Brownlow and
Chuck Brownlow Jr.
Brownlow & Sons**
Marietta, Ga.

*Full-service remodeling
62 years in business
2002 volume: \$4.5 million
Staff: 8 office, 40 field*

Chuck and Mark Brownlow continue to build on the reputation of their grandfather's company, founded in 1935. Their father ran the company, too, and was named Big50 in 1986.

Chuck (front, left) handles commercial and high-end residential projects. Mark (front, right) runs the company's new small repair and painting division with two salesperson/estimators on staff. The brothers added the new division because though the company is well known in the community, there was a perception among homeowners that it only worked on larger projects. Also, the division is well positioned to thrive in a weakened economy.

Chuck recently decided to add a home maintenance division. He researched the idea using a focus group to find out how much homeowners might pay for this type of service.



**Anne and Jeff Tegeler
Tegeler Design & Remodeling**
Hiawatha, Iowa

*Full-service remodeling
20 years in business
2002 volume: \$3.5 million
Staff: 11 office, 11 field*

Anne Tegeler (front, right), who's worked at Tegeler Design & Remodeling since 1996, believes "it's up to the people to figure out how to make the company efficient, effective, and profitable." The people, in this case, are the company's employees. Her company's overall goal, she says, is to figure out how to keep expenses down and customers happy, in the context of a fun environment.

Salespeople set their own goals and are required, as part of their training, to work with carpenters on kitchen installations. Carpenters, in turn, are expected to show up every now and then on a Saturday morning for floor duty at the company's showroom.



**Bryan T. Bennight, CR
New Moon Builders**
Charlotte, N.C.

*Full-service remodeling
6 years in business
2002 volume: \$956,000
Staff: 2 office, 3 field*

Bryan Bennight's experience as a firefighter taught him how to quickly evaluate structures and people in emotional situations. But the 12-day-a-month,

24-hour-shift schedule also allowed time for small remodeling projects, setting the groundwork for his business, incorporated in 1997 with a name that conjures up remodeling's cyclical nature.

Bennight (right), president of NARI of Greater Charlotte, has been instrumental in NARI chapter changes, including increasing membership by 30%. "My whole business is built on relationships, with suppliers and clients, and NARI's impact is all about those relationships and camaraderie," he says.

50 **Big50** Industry Impact



Learn from others in this business and implement change when it makes sense."

Maurice Forde, CR **Forde Windows & Remodeling** Northbrook, Ill.

Full-service remodeling and window replacement
15 years in business
2002 volume: \$950,000
Staff: 2 office, 3 field

Maurice Forde would tell you that one of the reasons for his company's success is his ability to "learn from others in this business and implement change when it makes sense." After getting his start as

a window installer, Forde went out on his own, subcontracting carpentry and learning "by trial and error." It's a philosophy that's served him well — especially when coupled with more formal education. He provides ongoing training for the whole company, including himself.

Forde says he "grew the company by taking myself out of the field" and found out early on that alliances with manufacturers and distributors were a great way to generate quality leads. The remodeler and NARI activist says that for him, the most enjoyable part of owning a business is "putting the systems in place to have things run smoothly."



Michael Gervais, CR, CGR, CAPS **Prime Construction, Prime Handyman, DreamMaker Bath and Kitchen** Burlington, Vt.

Full-service remodeling, handyman, and kitchen/bath installation
11 years in business
2002 volume: \$2.5 million
Staff: 6 office, 20 field

Not counting a few sabbaticals here and there, Michael Gervais (right) has been around the remodeling industry a long time. He has worked in commercial as well as residential remodeling, and the companies he now owns and runs — which include full-service remodeling and handyman companies as well as a kitchen and bath franchise — run the gamut of residential construction needs in metro Burlington, Vermont, population, 200,000.

"I totally love what I do and will be expanding again," he vows.

Gervais, who has long been active in the local builders association, recently set up an apprentice program at his companies, where young people can come in on a part-time basis to learn different aspects of carpentry and other trades. "I am adamant about training," he says.

50 **Big50** Market Wise



"If we have a specialty, it's making places look like they've been around a long time."

John and Judy McCaleb **McCaleb Construction** Tucson, Ariz.

Full-service remodeling and custom homes

20 years in business

2002 volume: \$3 million

Staff: 3 office, 11 field

John McCaleb came to Tucson from Chicago almost 25 years ago knowing "just enough about remodeling to be dangerous," he recalls. His operation has evolved from a custom home spec builder to a high-

end remodeling company that specializes in delivering projects "with a certain feel" to his clients.

"If we have a specialty," he says, "it's making places look like they've been around a long time," he says. His company shines, McCaleb says, "in our finishes and in our ability to make things high quality and high class."

McCaleb Construction completed 76 projects last year, ranging from \$18,000 to \$925,000. The company does as much of the work in-house as possible. "It's one of the things that makes us costlier, but it gives the high-end client peace of mind," McCaleb says.



Photos: left, Patrick Gicaw; right, Joyce Hinson



"My guys are instructed to do just about anything a client needs."

Bob and Natalie Baker
Robert W. Baker Builder
Princeton, N.J.

Full-service remodeling
7 years in business
2002 volume: \$725,000
Staff: 1 office, 6 field

Bob Baker got his start 17 years ago at Williams Builder (Big50 1987). But when work slowed, the project manager took a voluntary layoff and contracted his own small jobs. When Williams asked him back, Baker decided not to take him up on the offer.

Natalie joined Bob to handle finances and marketing. They built the company to almost \$1 million, but after reflecting on personal goals, they brought it back to a manageable size. Baker still works in the field, on average \$70,000 jobs, like kitchens and two-story remodels requiring complicated roof lines.

Bob's associate degree is in architecture, but he uses an outside designer. About 95% of the company's leads are referrals, although the Bakers recently started advertising to those relocating to work at pharmaceutical companies and Princeton University.

"My guys are instructed to do just about anything a client needs," Bob says. "If my guy drives over the newspaper, I growl at him." That level of service has enamored many customers. Bob keeps staff loyal with quarterly incentives. To keep new blood coming in, he speaks to high schoolers, sharing the pride of being a blue-collar worker. Three of his field staff are teen-age helpers.

50 **Big50** Market Wise



Joy and Kirk Morris, CGR
Morris Builders
 Rockford, Mich.

Design/build remodeling
 18 years in business
 2002 sales: \$1.1 million
 Staff: 4 office, 2 field

Morris Builders, a design/build company, focuses on kitchens, baths, additions, and basement remodels. The company manages the typically five or six projects it has going at any one time through a production manager/

lead carpenter system. Turnover is 0%.

The company keeps its clients happy, too. It recently updated its Web site to afford customers access to job information such as contracts and pictures.

Two years ago, owner Kirk Morris had a peer group in town to do a case study on his company. That resulted in improved paperwork to the field, weekly production meetings, and a much greater focus on numbers. "What we found out from talking to other people in the industry," says Joy Morris, "is that bigger is not always better. We decided that if we're going to grow, we're going to grow profitably."



Candi Hilton, CR, and
Troy Hilton, CR
Hilton Enterprises
 Stilwell, Kan.

Design/build remodeling
 6 years in business
 2002 volume: \$340,000
 Staff: 1 office, 2 field

Candi and Troy Hilton live and work in a small suburb of Kansas City where the community prefers to hire only locals. Candi has a month-by-month marketing program and targets neighbors by sending out newsletters or postcards three to four times per year. The company focuses on kitchens, master suites, basements, and room additions.

In addition to the mailings, the Hiltons say their Web site has proven to be a great marketing asset. It helps potential clients determine if the company offers what they want in a remodeling firm. To turn leads into sales, the duo turned to the Sandler sales system. "You can tell whether they will move forward on a project in a short amount of time," Candi says of the system.

Four years ago, the company began asking clients to sign a design agreement. The Hiltons say it helps the team weed out tire kickers. The design fee is credited to the contract price.

50 **Big50** Market Wise



Jason Larson, CR
Lars Construction
La Mesa, Calif.

Full-service remodeling
11 years in business
2002 volume: \$5 million
Staff: 2 office, 2 field

Jason Larson (standing, left) finds his company's best projects are \$50,000 to \$100,000 additions, master suites, and kitchens. To capture this market, he runs prominent advertisements in the phone book and on the radio.

Larson also has some high tech help.

His new lead tracking software generates a lead form for the salesperson, sends a letter to the homeowner with the appointment details, offers direct mail capabilities, and helps him find out which ads are successful.

Larson has also created two niches for his company. Shea Homes, a large new home builder, contracted with Lars Construction to be their preferred remodeler. Larson includes marketing materials in the packages Shea Homes gives home buyers. He also formed a separate company for window replacement once he found that it wasn't cost effective to run window replacement jobs as part of his company's renovation work. His brother is the production manager of that company.

L. Keith Lay
Southland Remodelers
Oak Ridge, Tenn.

Vinyl siding, replacement windows
12 years in business
2002 volume: \$427,685
Staff: 1.5 office, 4 (subcontracted) field

Keith Lay doesn't solicit by phone, mass mail, or radio. He has built his business on referrals, and recently, on ads — testimonials from community leaders.

Twelve years ago, Lay was a school principal, tracking children's lives day and night. He then realized he was losing touch with his own kids. He moved to Oak Ridge, then ranked in the nation's top school systems, and sold product for a now-defunct siding company. "Out of 57 salesmen, I was number three, and I was doorknob dumb on how to sell," he says.

When his employer nose-dived, he sold siding on his own, convincing banks to finance jobs. He subcontracted the labor.

So now, instead of focusing on kids, Lay educates clients, providing information and answering questions. Once he's won them over (he closes half of his 162 leads a year), he sells more siding upgrades than any other company in his region. And he offers a lifetime labor warranty.



50 **Big50** Market Wise



Jeff and Melissa Easter **Jeff Easter Remodeling** Charlottesville, Va.

Design/build remodeling
16 years in business
2002 volume: \$2.5 million
Staff: 2 office, 6 field

Jeff Easter (second from right) learned his most important business lesson as a college football defensive end: If you get the ball, you'd better run with it.

He does all the design for his firm — a skill he learned through 25 years in the business, watching what other people “didn’t think through.”

The design intuition now serves him well on average jobs of \$140,000. His jobs are

high-end — he works in the country’s third wealthiest county — and his clients, all very particular. He offers them one-stop shopping, down to furniture and drapes, through a subcontracted interior designer.

Jeff has always relied on word of mouth. If he does marketing, it’s simply getting to know people at black-tie fund-raising events.

He logs an 85% close rate on leads qualified by a half-time office manager or his wife, Melissa (third from right), a real estate agent who helps manage the office.

A corkboard on every jobsite details schedule, listing day-starting and day-ending procedures. A strict subcontractor policy makes subs responsible for appearance and strict adherence to schedule and budget. “There isn’t one thing we don’t have systems for,” Jeff says.



Andy Wright, CR **WrightBuilt** Grass Valley, Calif.

Design/build remodeling
20 years in business
2002 volume: \$1.7 million
Staff: 5 office, 11 field

After remodeling rental properties and working in new construction, Andy Wright realized, six years ago, that his roots were firmly planted in residential remodeling. He and his wife drove around California, touring towns, and decided to settle in the foothills between Sacramento and Lake Tahoe.

It wasn’t just a beautiful countryside that helped them make the decision. It was the fact that half of the housing stock is over 25 years old.

Wright spends 2% of his sales volume on marketing and says he markets more consistently than other area remodelers. He has participated in a home show for six years, enters marketing contests, and writes a cover story every other month for the local paper’s home and garden section.

Wright recently purchased and renovated a building on a main street to use as an office. It will also have a showroom with universal design features.

50 **Big50** Movers + Shakers



Steve Taylor
Taylor Made Construction
 Edgewood, Md.

Full-service remodeling, waterproofing, and basement finishing
16 years in business
2002 volume: \$5.9 million
Staff: 18 office, 39 field

Like the name of his company, Steve Taylor (standing) offers service tailor made for his community. The former chef learned how to create a company from his experiences as a waterproofing salesperson. When his customers started asking him to do remodeling and basement finishing work, he augmented the company's menu. (A few years ago, Taylor purchased an Owens Corning basement franchise and became the third largest of the company's 44 nationwide franchisees.)

Full-service remodeling is the smallest part of the company. "I want to make the process as customer-friendly as possible. That speaks not to the product but to the process," Taylor says.

Jim Lang
Maine Window & Sunroom
 Kennebunk, Maine

Specialty remodeling
13 years in business
2002 volume: \$4.5 million
Staff: 25 office, 39 field

If you told Jim Lang (on ladder) in 1989 that he'd some day run a company known as a "mover and a shaker," he'd have laughed. Back then, he was an unemployed sales manager, downsized by a siding and window manufacturer, wondering what he'd do next.

From a basement office, he began selling siding and subcontracting the labor. By 1997, he hit \$1.2 million. He converted a burned-out restaurant

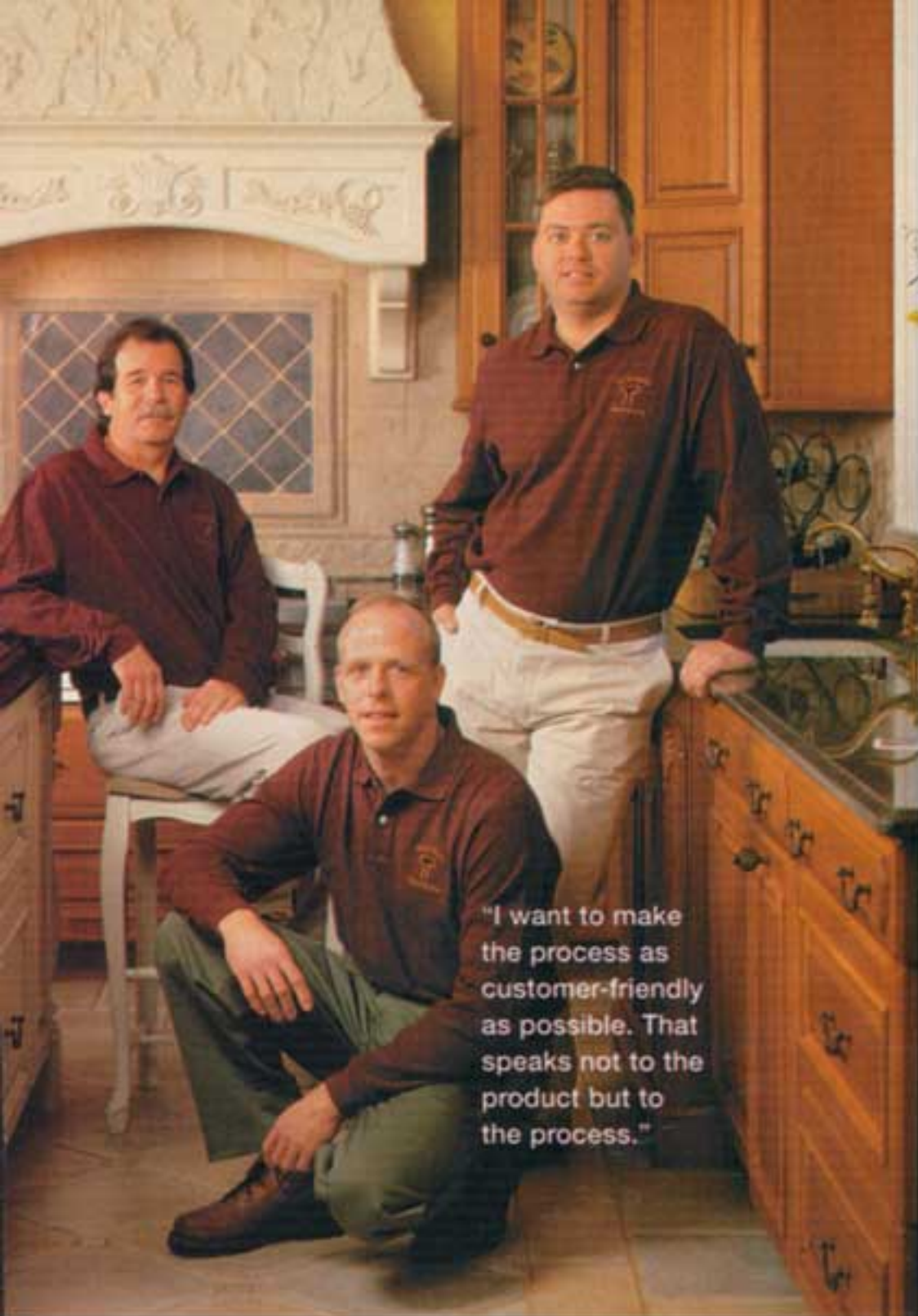
into a town landmark. He also added Betterliving Sunrooms to his mix of offerings; the product line now makes up 70% of his business.

Today, his company sells 625 sunroom jobs a year. With 8 feet of snow not unusual for Maine, why would someone buy something they use for only three months? Lang's reps tell customers the sunrooms, built with honeycomb roof panels to handle snow loads, double the length of the summer season.

Lang hired staff installers in the mid-'90s, a move he swears kept him in business. "We really try to develop a long-term approach," he says.

Aggressive expansion, including a basement finishing franchise, could speed Lang's team to the \$6.2 million mark next year.





"I want to make the process as customer-friendly as possible. That speaks not to the product but to the process."

**Jim Brewer,
David Parton,
and Hugh Harris
Dixie
HomeCrafters
Chamblee, Ga.**

*Specialty remodeling
12 years in business
2002 volume: \$79.3 million
Staff: 409 office, 226 field,
plus 75 contracted
installers*

Dixie HomeCrafters sells 100 and installs 100 jobs a day in a dozen states — that's 26,000 jobs a year. Their GutterGuard jobs average \$2,900, siding and window jobs average \$8,000, and they don't collect payment until final walk-through.

After David Parton (left) went broke remodeling, he called up Jim Brewer (right) to tell him he'd saved \$10,000 working as a condominium manager. Brewer

asked Parton to bring his cash and sell for his company, while Brewer did the installation.

"We built a set of policies that protected the customer because this industry has a terrible reputation," Parton says. "It formed the character and color of our company."

When they were offered a GutterGuard license in 1999, they were installing \$20 million in siding and windows each year, helped by the 1995 addition of Hugh Harris (center). With GutterGuard, Parton says, leads "fell from the sky." They've been falling ever since, making production training key to handling intense volume.

Their fast path to success hasn't spoiled their sense of humor: A running Web site ticker notes the number of homeowners' lives saved, prevented from falling from ladders during do-it-yourself gutter jobs.



**Scott McCollum, CGR,
and Steve Kasper
McCollum &
Associates
Dallas**

*Full-service remodeling
7 years in business
2002 volume: \$4 million
Staff: 3 office, 5 field*

Scott McCollum (standing, far right), once a custom home builder, was drawn to remodeling by an architect friend who presented him a particularly difficult project and told him that "if I did a good job, we'd never be out of that neighborhood."

Seven years later, having added staff, the company is growing rapidly. Last year's average project was \$200,000, and the company's \$4 million in sales included only one custom home. Growth, McCollum says, came from realizing "we are not sticks and bricks guys. We are in the people business." The company subs out 100% of its work and runs the jobs with project managers. "We take our plans, specs, and scope documents to the vendors and trades and get hard numbers before we prepare the proposal," McCollum says.

"We are a learning company," he adds. All employees are required to work toward CR or CGR designations.

Photos: far left, Chris Smith; left, Bill Slade; top, Bruce Stranger; right, Jamie Robinson

50 **Big50** Niches

Helmut B. Herrmann and Kenneth Connor, CR
Helmut's Remodeling
 Milwaukee

Full-service remodeling
38 years in business
2002 volume: \$1.7 million
Staff: 4 office, 6 field

If a niche is something specific, Helmut's Remodeling, a Milwaukee general remodeling company that takes on a broad range of projects, has what you might call an anti-niche: "Our niche is to help whoever calls us," says Ken Connor (left), a football coach before he joined the company 20 years ago.

Immediate response to the calls it receives has given Helmut's Remodeling a reputation for excellent service, both among Milwaukee homeowners as well as other, larger companies and fellow NARI members, which are happy to recommend Helmut's for jobs they can't squeeze into their schedules.

"We want customers to look at that job and see it as better than they thought it was going to be," says Connor.



"We want customers to look at that job and see it as better than they thought it was going to be."



Kelly and John Zoz, CMR
Paul Davis Restoration
 Lincoln, Neb., and Grand Island, Neb.

Insurance restoration
11 years in business
2002 volume: \$3.5 million
Staff: 6 office, 16 field

Paul Davis Restoration, an insurance restoration franchising firm, counts among its largest franchisees its Lincoln, Neb., operation, owned and run by John Zoz. With a degree in construction management and a background in home building, Zoz says he was always drawn to the idea of

owning a franchise. He looked at it "as a way of getting involved in business without the pitfalls."

Recently, Zoz expanded his operation by opening up Paul Davis Restoration of Grand Island, the state's fourth largest city, and by investing in a California Closets franchise.

"What we've really tried to do in the last few years is plan our business growth around our people," says Zoz, who spends almost half his time planning — reading reports and otherwise managing his businesses. At the end of last year, Paul Davis Restoration of Lincoln had the second highest market penetration among the company's 200+ franchises.

Photos: left, Richard Evans; top, Jonathan, Inc.; top right, Jim Prince; right, David Moulton

50 **Big50** Business Savvy



"I share ... the vision. I don't share the pain of the possibility of not knowing where the next job comes from."

Joe McKinstry
Joseph McKinstry
Construction Co.
Seattle

Full-service remodeling and custom homes
26 years in business
2002 volume: \$4.5 million
Staff: 3 office, 12 field

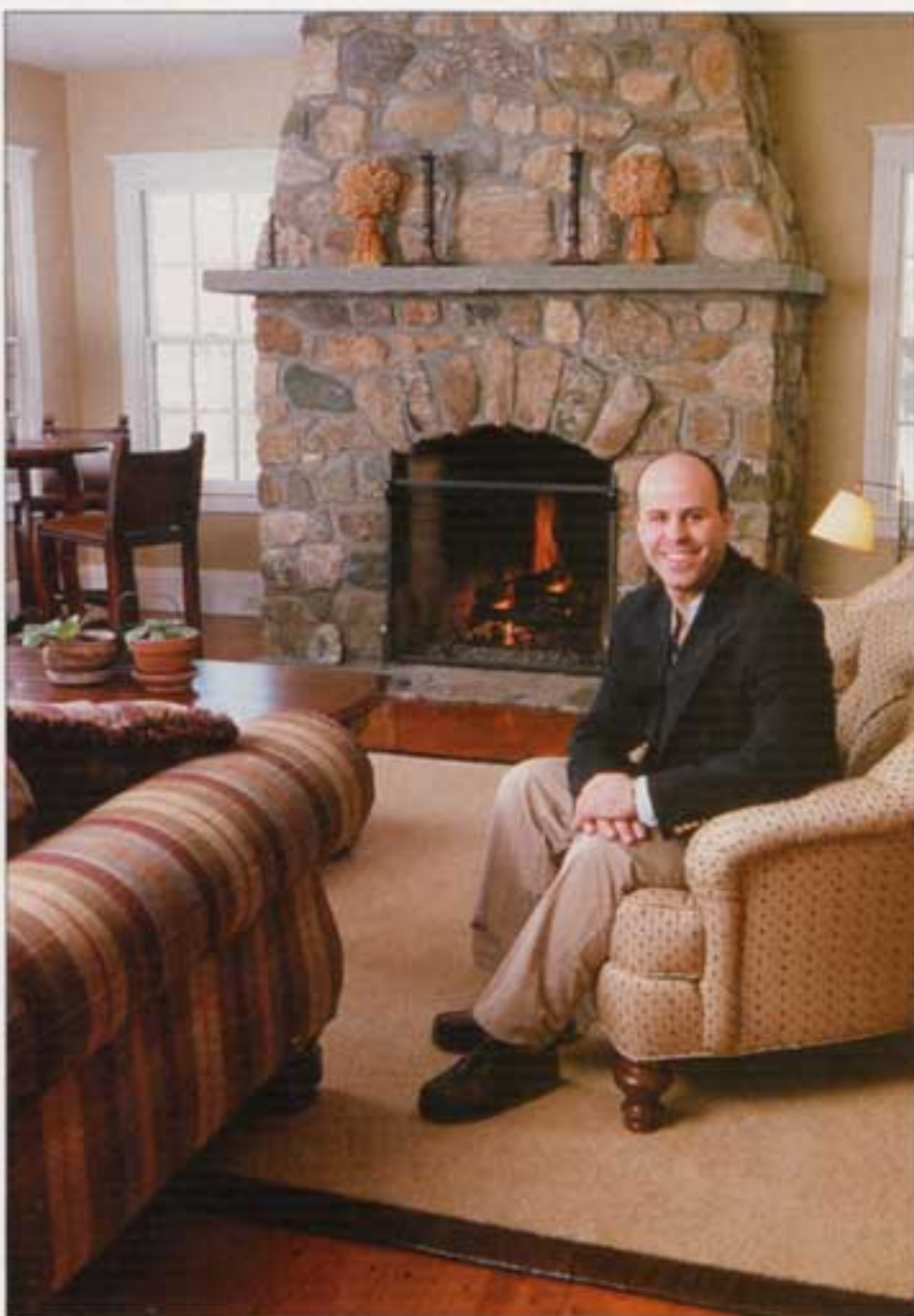
You don't stay in business 26 years without a superb understanding of market ups and downs and a sharp focus on overhead. Joe McKinstry (left) says these days leads are off, jobs are smaller, and hard-hit commercial contractors are plying his market. But he's made adjustments to take on projects below his \$300,000 average. He's retooling his crew focus so they survive Seattle's brutal downturn. Traditionally, foundation work, framing, siding, and cabinet work were subbed. Now, the crew does those jobs on half of their projects.

"I share with them the vision," Mc-

Kinstry says of his team. "I don't share the pain of the possibility of not knowing where the next job comes from."

McKinstry left the field years ago, but he maintains a long affiliation with Habitat for Humanity and a direct relationship with his clients, allowing communication issues to be heard immediately. Weekly, he "runs the trap line," to check job progress. His safety program helps him register a .60 experience rating (with 1.00 average), said by state officials to be "unheard of" in construction. It helps him keep overhead down and margins up, despite the market.

Photos: left, Mary Cairns; right, Jon Gordon Photography



George Strother Castlerock Homes

Denville, N.J.

Full-service remodeling

15 years in business

2002 sales: \$1.9 million

Staff: 1 office, 2 field

Clients who sign on with George Strother's Castlerock Homes for what is typically a whole-house remodel do so with the stipulation that they vacate the premises for the duration of the project. Working on a house without anyone in it cuts costs and time, Strother says. This was a decision the remodeler made several years ago, when he also decided to steer his company in the direction of taking on only large projects, mostly built by subcontractors.

"The biggest challenge was the whole delegation thing," Strother says. "Then you have to have projects that warrant the people not living there. I tell them up front that we take these jobs to do them the way we want to do them and to make the numbers work."

Dennis Blake, CR, CFE, CMRS Disaster Kleenup/Better Floors & Restorations

Placentia, Calif.

*Insurance restoration, floor replacement,
and full-service remodeling*

28 years in business

2002 volume: \$5 million

Staff: 12 office, 26 field

Dennis Blake (far right) felt his background as an insurance adjuster made him the perfect candidate for running, and finally owning, an insurance restoration business that also does remodeling. In the 28 years he's owned the company, Disaster Kleenup/Better Floors & Restorations has done more than 50,000 jobs, with an average size of \$2,900.



"I write my estimates so that anyone in my industry could do the job," Blake says.

He finds himself in court quite a bit, too. The company president/CEO is often called on to serve as an expert witness in suits.

Like many insurance restorers, Disaster Kleenup currently has its hands full taking on mold cases. It dispatches these with a machine that ice-blasts the mold off of surfaces. This year, the Orange County, Calif., company plans to open a branch in San Diego. In 10 years, Blake predicts sales of \$10 million from three operations.

50 **Big50** Niches



"We have enough crew and are able to pull people out at the last minute."

Sharon, Bruce, Greg, and Brian Bellamy **Bellamy & Sons Construction** Scotia, N.Y.

Insurance restoration and full-service remodeling
27 years in business
2002 volume: \$2 million
Staff: 4 office, 20 field

As volunteer firefighters, all four members of the Bellamy family have seen insurance restoration from both sides. They've battled fires and worked on repairing the damage caused by them. The company likes insurance work because it's steady. "That is the reason we decided to use that as a niche. It would make our business more level throughout the year," says Sharon (standing, front left).

Having multiple customers — the insurance company, the homeowner, and sometimes the bank — can be difficult. The work also involves more paperwork and last-minute scheduling. But the Bellamys are prepared: "We have enough crew and are able to pull people out at the last minute," Bruce (standing, front right) says. And the company uses Exactimate software to deal with the detailed linear foot and unit costs required by insurance companies.



"Our background was always in the front end, so the challenge was to hire people who understood that part of the business."

Brian Leader and Seth Cammeyer **Ohio Energy Corp.** Columbus, Ohio

Specialty remodeling with a focus on windows, siding, and sunroom installation
14 years in business
2002 sales: \$12 million
Staff: 70 office, 24 sales, 48 field

Brian Leader (right) and Seth Cammeyer (left) earned their spurs in canvassing and sales for other specialty contracting companies before moving to Columbus to start Ohio Energy Corp.

The pair started out selling, and they did it night and day. Subcontractors handled installation. "We came out of the gate like a rocket," Leader recalls.

Three years later, Ohio Energy began installing as well. "Our background was always in the front end," Leader points out, "so the challenge was to hire people who understood that part of the business."

A move into sunrooms in the mid-'90s gave Ohio Energy a big boost in volume, and the development of an in-house software program for managing all processes from lead procurement to punch list gave them the managerial tools to control and channel it.

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Big 50

Sales and Marketing

Jack and Marion McGrath
Jonathan McGrath
Construction
Longwood, Fla.

Full-service remodeling
18 years in business
2002 volume: \$926,000
Staff: 4 office, 4 field

Joining Metro Orlando's HBA and its Remodelers Council opened doors for the McGraths, who built a business based on Jack's keen design sense and hands-on supervision. Marion, now chair of the local Remodelers Council, joined her husband after a corporate downsizing, to help with finance and marketing.

A third of the company's business comes from leads from the annual Parade of Homes, which has recognized the company as a first-place winner two years running. Jack convinces the client whose home is slated for the Parade to upgrade to high-end lighting systems, electronics packages, or wood moldings (not the norm in Florida) — all at cost. He uses the home as a tool to sell average jobs of \$200,000.

By March, the McGraths had already contracted for \$1.2 million in 2003 business. "Before joining the HBA, we had tremendous knowledge but were unorganized," Jack says. "We've grown by leaps and bounds."



"Before joining the HBA, we had tremendous knowledge but were unorganized. We've grown by leaps and bounds."



Craig Tice
Tice Construction
 Spooner, Wis.

Full-service remodeling
 15 years in business
 2002 volume: \$2 million
 Staff: 5 office, 12 field

Craig Tice (standing, center) recently revamped his lead tracking system. He can now evaluate close ratios for all the types of marketing he uses — mainly billboards, jobsite signs, and informational posters at local restaurants and retail locations.

To generate additional leads, Tice formed a partnership with a large real es-

tate company. They send him the names of homeowners who are in need of remodeling work.

On the sales side, Tice uses his Web site to give potential customers an overview of his company. The site includes before and after photos, staff information, and an explanation of their design process. "Clients are sold on our professionalism. It shortens the sales process," Tice says.

Tice works on a lot of vacation homes, so he has many out-of-town clients. He uses his Web site to communicate with them. On a secure section of the site, he posts the contract, warranty information, pre-construction meeting documents, schedules, phone numbers for lead carpenters, and progress photos.



Anthony Cerami
Anthony James Construction
 Westfield, N.J.

Full-service remodeling
 13 years in business
 2002 volume: \$3 million
 Staff: 2 office, 6 field

Anthony Cerami says he survived the early '90s by doing any kind of job he could get — and "as much marketing as possible." Today, the company he heads has a clearer focus. It does additions and major renovations, stroking clients in his market with above-and-beyond-the-call-of-duty measures such as upgraded materials, a No Punch List system, and a homeowner's manual. Cerami also conducts a post-job walkthrough a month after the project is finished that smooths whatever wrinkles might have developed in finishing up. "We want the homeowner to think his is the only job we have," Cerami says.



Annette and John Greco
Greco Remodelers
 Manassas, Va.

Full-service remodeling
 17 years in business
 2002 volume: \$1.6 million
 Staff: 5 office, 11 field

This tennis pro husband and CPA wife had always wanted to start a business together. The Grecos had worked on their own house and felt they had a strong potential client base from their past work, so

they decided to pursue remodeling. They hired a business coach and sales consultant to take them past the basics and help them set goals and fine-tune the business.

Their marketing efforts have gotten a boost from Market Sharp. The software program allows staff to enter and track information from leads and set up appointments. It helps them prepare lists for their direct mail pieces and postcards. The company also uses jobsite signs and a mailbox on site that holds fliers. The Grecos advertise in the local paper and offer an incentive program for referrals from past customers.

50

Big 50

Sales



**Larry A. Schermick Jr.
and Theresa Schermick
Schermick Construction**
Wernersville, Pa.

*Full-service remodeling
16 years in business
2002 volume: \$525,000
Staff: 2 office, 4 field*

Four years of HBA awards have firmly lodged Schermick Construction in the minds of addition-minded homeowners. Winning at least two Remodelers Merit Recognition honors a year has landed project photos on the HBA of Berks County Web site, which serves 1,100 members and the public. This past year, Scher-

mick received 25 leads from the site; eight turned into jobs.

"Because they see a picture of a project, and we've won in multiple categories, people think we're an exceptional contractor," says Larry Schermick (second from left), whose average job is about \$50,000.

His team makes sure the company lives up to that perception. That includes Theresa Schermick (third from left), office/product selections manager and editor of a monthly newsletter that keeps the company in touch with 220 past clients.

A showroom, expected to open later this year, will bring more visibility. The company is converting a 1927 factory building, making it among few area contractors with a retail sales display.



Robert Pearson
Gill Construction Co.
Lubbock, Texas

Full-service remodeling and new construction
27 years in business
2002 sales: \$2.2 million
Staff: 3 office, 5 field

Gill Construction does a little bit of everything. Everything from siding — about 20% of its business — to storm and entry door installations to additions and interior alterations. “Our biggest job last year was a \$160,000 addition,” says owner/president Robert Pearson (right), a former president of the West Texas home builders association and a 30-year veteran of the construction industry.

The company uses television rather than telemarketing to promote itself in the west Texas city of Lubbock. It's cheap — 125,000 viewers can be reached for a few hundred dollars — and it "reminds people that we did a job for them 15 years ago," Pearson says. "If there weren't any problems and it went real smooth, they may not remember who the contractor was. If there were problems, they remember."

50 **Big50** Teamwork

Stephen D. and Susan Howell
Howell Design & Build
North Andover, Mass.

Design/build remodeling
6 years in business
2002 volume: \$2.3 million
Staff: 6 office, 7 field

When Stephen Howell's neighbor asked him whether he'd ever considered starting a construction company, Howell replied that he didn't want to wreck a hobby by turning it into a business. Six years later, that's no longer a concern.

The hobby-turned-business now boasts average project sizes of about \$200,000. Howell, with a background in electrical engineering, handles the design work. "The biggest benefit of design/build is that it makes the design phase much more efficient by bringing the budget into the picture from day one, in a real way," he says.

The company's leads work with a pool of production carpenters. "That way they get to work with all the different leads," Howell says. "We really stress mentoring and try to have the leads mentor the production carpenters."

"The biggest benefit of design/build is that it makes the design phase much more efficient by bringing the budget into the picture from day one."





Photos: left, Eric Roth Photography; right, Kathleen Ahern Photography



Darlene and George Gayler
Gayler Construction
 Danville, Calif.

Full-service remodeling
20 years in business
2002 volume: \$2.6 million
Staff: 5 office, 12 field

The husband and wife team of Darlene (front, third from left) and George (front, second from left) Gayler handle sales for their company. They also set up a great system so when the sale is finalized, wheels are put in motion to lead the client through all the steps of a project. A project coordinator makes sure the plans are accurate and organized and then takes clients through design and product selection and pricing. Then she turns them over to the production manager for scheduling and jobsite issues.

"It's the organization we do up front that makes it come together," George says. The crew and production manager have a say in the schedule and act as a team to diagnose and solve any problems, Darlene says. Once the team generates a schedule, they send faxes to trade contractors that include the scope of work and a start date. The Gaylers also have a subcontracted interior designer for clients who need more detailed space planning.

50 **Big50** Teamwork

Danny Feig-Sandoval, CR Small Carpenters at Large Atlanta

*Full-service remodeling
14 years in business
2002 volume: \$1.8 million
Staff: 5 office, 10 field*

For Danny Feig-Sandoval (back row, fourth from left), the idea of teamwork involves living in a community and caring about employees, customers, and the environment. He bikes to his office and some jobsites and limits the range of his jobs based on a combination of management and environmental concerns. "If I were a large company, I could not provide the kind of attention my jobs require," he says.

A few years ago, the remodeler hired a consultant to interview all his employees to establish the core values of the company. The consultant told him his employees wanted to build relationships and have their quality work reflected through those relationships. Feig-Sandoval and his staff work hard to fit designs into their customer's budget and like to work as a team all the way from design through construction. The study helped the staff focus on the company's goals. "You can't sell yourself unless you're clear on who you are," Feig-Sandoval says.



Dett and Julie Otterbeck Otterbeck Builders Castleton, N.Y.

*Design/build remodeling
15 years in business
2002 volume: \$1.1 million
Staff: 3 office, 8 field*

Dett Otterbeck (front, second from right) knows the importance of customer satisfaction, and ensuring it means nurturing his team. He does so through regular jobsite safety training and attending association and supplier banquets with crew members. Generous benefits boost average employee tenure to about four years. "We pride ourselves on our professionalism," says Otterbeck. His uniformed crews, each outfitted with cleaning equipment, keep jobsites spotless.

The team doubled when Otterbeck absorbed Butch Grignon's firm. Sales doubled, too. Grignon and Otterbeck split leads, running both sales and production for the 37 jobs they did last year, averaging \$30,000 per job. Julie (front, far right) handles billings and contracts. Her brother, Rick Wood, designs half of the jobs; outside architects design the rest.

Because of the team approach, few jobs sour. Almost all customers are repeats or referrals. In a tight economy, Otterbeck has customers lining up to wait four months for projects. "It's rewarding to know people will wait," he says.

Photos: left, Erica George Dines; right, Randall Perry Photography

50 **Big50** Teamwork



Chuck Green, CR
Four Corners Construction
 Westborough, Mass.

Full-service remodeling
18 years in business
2002 sales: \$910,000
Staff: 2 office, 5 field

Chuck Green's background is in film making, not in construction. That makes perfect sense, Green (left) says, because "the process of making a movie is very similar to remodeling — the visual orientation and actually making something."

Today his company focuses on large projects, many for repeat customers or referrals who come to his company to have the anxiety accompanying the average remodeling project taken off their hands. With its focus on leaving projects so perfect that they form a lasting legacy, Four Corners demands exacting standards from employees and subs.

Green says he gives "project directors" full authority to take on whatever aspect of the project they feel comfortable with and welcomes all input. "A helper I hired three months ago questioned me about whether or not this was the right way to do something. I couldn't have been happier."



Mark Troyer and John Scroggins
Mark Troyer Builders
 Plain City, Ohio

Full-service remodeling
16 years in business
2002 volume: \$1.5 million
Staff: 4 office, 10 field

In the past few years, management at Mark Troyer Builders set out to transform this mid-sized full-service company into one of the premier remodeling firms in the Columbus area. The company, which gets most leads from repeat customers, referrals, or the local Chamber of Commerce, put together a postcard marketing campaign that calls attention to the fact that it's working with a nationally recognized interior designer.

At the same time, management mapped out a series of measures to boost both efficiency and morale, such as weekly "toolbelt" meetings for field staff. "One of my goals was to lower the cost of goods sold," says John Scroggins (left), vice president/strategic development, "and one way to do that is to help the guys in the field become more efficient."

50 **Big50** Teamwork



Paul Morse, CR
Morse Constructions
Somerville, Mass.

*Full-service remodeling
with a cabinet shop
25 years in business
2002 volume: \$1.5 million
Staff: 4 office, 9 field*

Paul Morse (front, left) encourages his staff and crew to think as a team. When hiring, he looks for team members who will think of clients, stretch to reach their potential, and help others do their best. As part of his twice-a-year evalu-

ations, Morse helps each person identify their goals and then reach them. "It helps me and them see the possibility of advancement in the company," he says.

He reformatted his one-page company business plan into three parts to give the marketing, sales, and production departments individual goals. Each department also has key indicators that let Morse keep his finger on the pulse of the company at all times.

Morse doesn't forget the customer is also part of a successful team and says referrals are the best leads. "I take clients to lunch at least once during the process to make sure we're meeting their expectations," he says.



Michael Matrka
Michael Matrka Inc.
Columbus, Ohio

*Full-service remodeling
21 years in business
2002 volume: \$2.5 million
Staff: 5 office, 8 field*

You need teamwork to bang out a \$1 million remodel of a 12,000-square-foot mansion in six months. For most, it would take a year. But for Michael Matrka, pre-planning and scheduling that includes architects, subcontractors, and "beating projects to death on the table before you start the job" allows his team to deliver so much, so fast.

But this team isn't all about work. The office has ping-pong tables and an outside basketball court. "We really have fun together," says Matrka. "I have a passion for people and in creating an organization that can survive me. Part of that is treating people well."

He has offered health insurance since the 1980s and had a retirement plan when few in the industry did. If an employee's child gets sick, he is told to go home, and his work will be covered.

Employees' enthusiasm for their jobs translates well to demanding, high-end clientele. Their word-of-mouth provides Matrka, who does no advertising, with his sole lead source.



"Whatever we've got to do, we are going to hit the numbers."

Bob Sturgeon
Westside
Remodeling

Thousand Oaks, Calif.

Full-service remodeling
17 years in business
2002 volume: \$1 million
Staff: 3 office, 3 field

Bob Sturgeon (front) started his company 17 years ago with a partner, but the partnership only lasted six months. "Thank God it wasn't six years," reflects Sturgeon, who built the business up from "basically handyman-type carpentry stuff" to a full-service remodeling company doing everything from window installations to whole-house remodels.

With a family came a kind of epiphany, Sturgeon recalls, that made him look hard at what he was doing and why. "My mind got focused and I looked for ways to improve things, and it works," he notes.

Over the past few years, Sturgeon has worked to increase the size of his company's average job. A major focus has been gross margin slippage. "Whatever we've got to do, we are going to hit the numbers," he says.

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50 **Big50** Business Savvy



**C. Mason Hearn Jr., CGR
McGuire, Hearn & Toms**
Manakin-Sabot, Va.

*Design/build remodeling
9 years in business
2002 volume: \$2 million
Staff: 6 office, 8 field*

Over the years, Mason Hearn's partners have retired or left the industry, leaving him sole owner of McGuire, Hearn & Toms. He's made some changes to adjust to his new role. He is grooming his architect to take charge of the design side, bringing in a full-time estimator, and training his project manager to run production.

Until recently, Hearn charged a design fee of 3% of construction costs. He was prompted by his networking group to increase this amount. They told him the company's designs were as professional as those of a full-time architect and that they have the added benefit of providing a budget. Hearn now charges 7% and is testing the market to see if it will bear a 10% fee.

Hearn and his original partners came from a commercial construction background, which he feels started the company off with professional systems — especially in documentation. But, he says, he is reviewing and rethinking all the company's policies. By delegating responsibility, he has the time to spend on increasing the number and quality of his leads.



Matthew Harrigan
Timeline Design
Los Gatos, Calif.

*Design/build remodeling, kitchens
and baths
13 years in business
2002 volume: \$2.6 million
Staff: 5 office, 7 field*

In 1999, Matthew Harrigan's company was floundering. His employees weren't showing up. They weren't committed to his "on time, on budget, customer 100% satisfied" mission.

Meanwhile, Harrigan worked 70-hour weeks, picking up the pieces. He gave his employees an ultimatum: Deliver projects on time and on budget or be fired. They couldn't deliver. He fired six of seven employees, retaining only his architect.

Harrigan rebuilt the company, hiring committed people and training them to the tune of \$21,000 a year in costs. Since 1999, profit margins have zoomed to above industry standards. "I've spent the last three years, 45 to 90 minutes every Tuesday morning, training these guys how to take care of customers and how to handle technical aspects of their jobs," Harrigan says.

The former NARI of San Jose president is developing Internet-based software to chart every step a customer takes. He hopes it will speed production and improve field and client management. He took on a DreamMaker bath and kitchen franchise in October 2001 to offer services to middle-market clients, in addition to those Timeline typically serves on \$100,000 jobs.

50 **Big50** Business Savvy



Adele and Jeffrey Talmadge, CR
Jeffrey Talmadge Construction
Aptos, Calif.

Full-service remodeling
18 years in business
2002 volume: \$3.2 million
Staff: 5 office, 6 field

On an earthquake repair job in 1989, Jeffrey Talmadge (seated, right) broke his ankle. It was the best thing that could have happened to him. He got out of the field and started running his business, with the able help of his bookkeeper wife, Adele (seated, center).

The move allowed Talmadge to place trust in employees. They've delivered, moti-

vated by profit sharing and their boss's firm belief in self-improvement. Four leads are CLCs. Talmadge pays employees while they take seminars. One employee helped the company develop "environmentally friendly" options, including deconstruction services for tax credits. Production manager John Anderson, who came from a failed company in 1999, brought hard-won perspective in systems and business strategy. The entire crew has taken personality tests to improve office-field communications.

Talmadge's savvy also landed the company a steady contract with a property management firm, allowing him to add \$250,000 worth of \$10,000 jobs last year, atypical of the firm's \$100,000 projects. The small jobs fill schedule gaps. These days you might find Talmadge using his ankle in other pursuits, like Tae Kwon Do.



Brian K. Altmann
Dutchess Building Specialists
Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

Full-service remodeling
17 years in business
2002 volume: \$1.9 million
Staff: 4 office, 13 field

Fourteen years ago, Brian Altmann did his first deck job for \$20,000. From there, he "never looked back." Today, though, decks are only 5% of what Dutchess Building Specialists builds. Custom screened porches account for another 10% of their work, and the remainder is full-scale remodeling projects, both residential and commercial. The company is currently in the middle of its second large project for Vassar College.

Rigorous expense tracking and cost analysis ensure that jobs reach projected profit levels. More than that though, "we want to be known as a company that is very thorough, and very caring," Altmann says. The desire to mold the image of the company to that end shapes all its procedures — from a regularly staffed office to the use of detailed client satisfaction forms.

50 **Big50** Business Savvy



A. Lee Parron **Kitchen Center** Miami

Cabinet sales and installation
23 years in business
2002 volume: \$1.3 million
Staff: 6 office, 0 field

Working with long-time subcontracted installation crews, A. Lee Parron installs cabinets on jobs reaching from Manhattan to the Caribbean and South America — mostly from referrals. He gets paid in full before the cabinets, averaging \$40,000 for product and installation, ship. The client pays for crew lodging and airfare.

There's also enough work locally for

about 60 kitchens a year, plus bath and other business.

It's a business Parron began buying from his father, Al, on installment in 1996. His uncle and another owner operated the business back to 1965.

Parron, 34, a past president of his NKBA chapter, started at his father's reception desk at 17. He now closes 75% of qualified leads. Although sales were lower this past year, Parron's systems, an ad campaign in a Florida design magazine, and leads from contractors and architects, should put him on firm footing. He opened a European Living store inside a Kitchen Center showroom in Fort Lauderdale, which should mean more cabinet business.

His systems help him ride out the feast or famine of his market. And meanwhile, there's always business in the Bahamas.



"We market hard all the time. And we learn from going to other people in the business and seeing what they do."

Mark, Theresa, **and Chad Swimme** **Swimme & Son Building** **Contractors/ABC Seamless** Elizabeth City, N.C.

Specialty and full-service remodeling,
siding franchisee
14 years in business
2002 volume: \$2.6 million
Staff: 4 office, 4 sales, 14 field

In a city of 35,000, it's easy to imagine you've tapped out the local remodeling market. That's why Mark Swimme (right), owner of Swimme & Son Building Contractors, steadily diversified his business over the years, adding roofing and siding divisions, sunroom installation, and an ABC Seamless steel siding franchise to the company's original product offering of full-service remodeling.

Swimme, who grew up in construction and built a house "on the side" by himself at age 21, initially trained as an HVAC mechanic. He went to work for a local contractor and "woke up one day and said I was going to do it for myself."

"We market hard all the time," Swimme says. "And we learn from going to other people in the business and seeing what they do."

50 **Big50** Fine Design

"The strength of our company is in design: blending the old with the new, working out the myriad details."



Wallace Orfield **Orfield Remodeling** Minneapolis

Design/build remodeling
26 years in business
2002 volume: \$940,000
Staff: 3 office, 3 field

When he was 14, Wally Orfield (far right), following in his father's footsteps, purchased a burned-out building in downtown St. Paul, Minn., and rehabbed it. After a stint at the University of

Minnesota School of Architecture, Orfield struck out on his own, first as a condo developer, then as a design/build remodeler. "The strength of our company," he says, "is in design: blending the old with the new, working out the myriad details." Recent innovations include an in-house estimating system tied to supplier Scherer Bros. Lumber, which keeps estimates accurate by periodically downloading cost updates.

With an infusion of new blood into the business — namely his daughter as salesperson — Orfield says his plan is to grow in size and delegate functions to the point where the company can run itself.



Photos: left, Adair Soderholm; above, Greg Hadley; near right, Mark Usciale; far right, Tim Holmes



**Dean Brenneman and
Peter Pagenstecher**
Brenneman & Pagenstecher
Kensington, Md.

Design/build remodeling
6 years in business
2002 volume: \$5 million
Staff: 8 office, 10 field

Six years ago, Peter Pagenstecher (second from right) was running a successful construction company and Dean Brenneman (second from left) was running a successful architecture firm. The two had worked on several projects together, and the projects went well enough that they decided to team up to form a design/build firm. They now handle 30 jobs per year, of which three or four are large, \$500,000 whole-house projects.

One of their first steps was to commit to doing all their design work on a CAD system. "It's a powerful tool. We're developing a database of building details. It allows us to develop drawings faster than drawing them from scratch," Brenneman says.

One of the biggest benefits the pair has found with design/build is that the design process doesn't stop when drawings are handed to production. That's also one of the reasons the partners do not bid on jobs. "Our process is interactive. If they are strictly looking for price, we are not the cheapest," Brenneman says.

**William J. and
Kimberley Patrick**
William J. Patrick Inc.
Bird in Hand, Pa.

Design/build remodeling
14 years in business
2002 volume: \$800,000
Staff: 1 office, 3 field

Bill and Kim Patrick work in a community that is one hour from Baltimore, one hour from Philadelphia, and three hours from Washington, D.C. They say their sophisticated clientele has high expectations for design and service that can

only be satisfied with the design/build concept. "They value the process of concept to completion," Bill says.

Bill acts as head designer, but he considers design a truly collaborative effort with the homeowners. He recently hired a lighting designer who literally helps highlight the best of his projects. "Nothing affects a space more than light, whether it's natural or artificial," Bill says. "Now I notice if something is not lit well."

Last year the company purchased and remodeled a house on the main street of Bird in Hand. The Patricks are going to use it as a showroom and office. It will also have a selections/design center to make it easier for customers to choose products.



Jeff Metke, CR
**Metke Remodeling &
Woodworking**
Lake Oswego, Ore.

Design/build remodeling
13 years in business
2002 volume: \$1.4 million
Staff: 2 office, 11 field

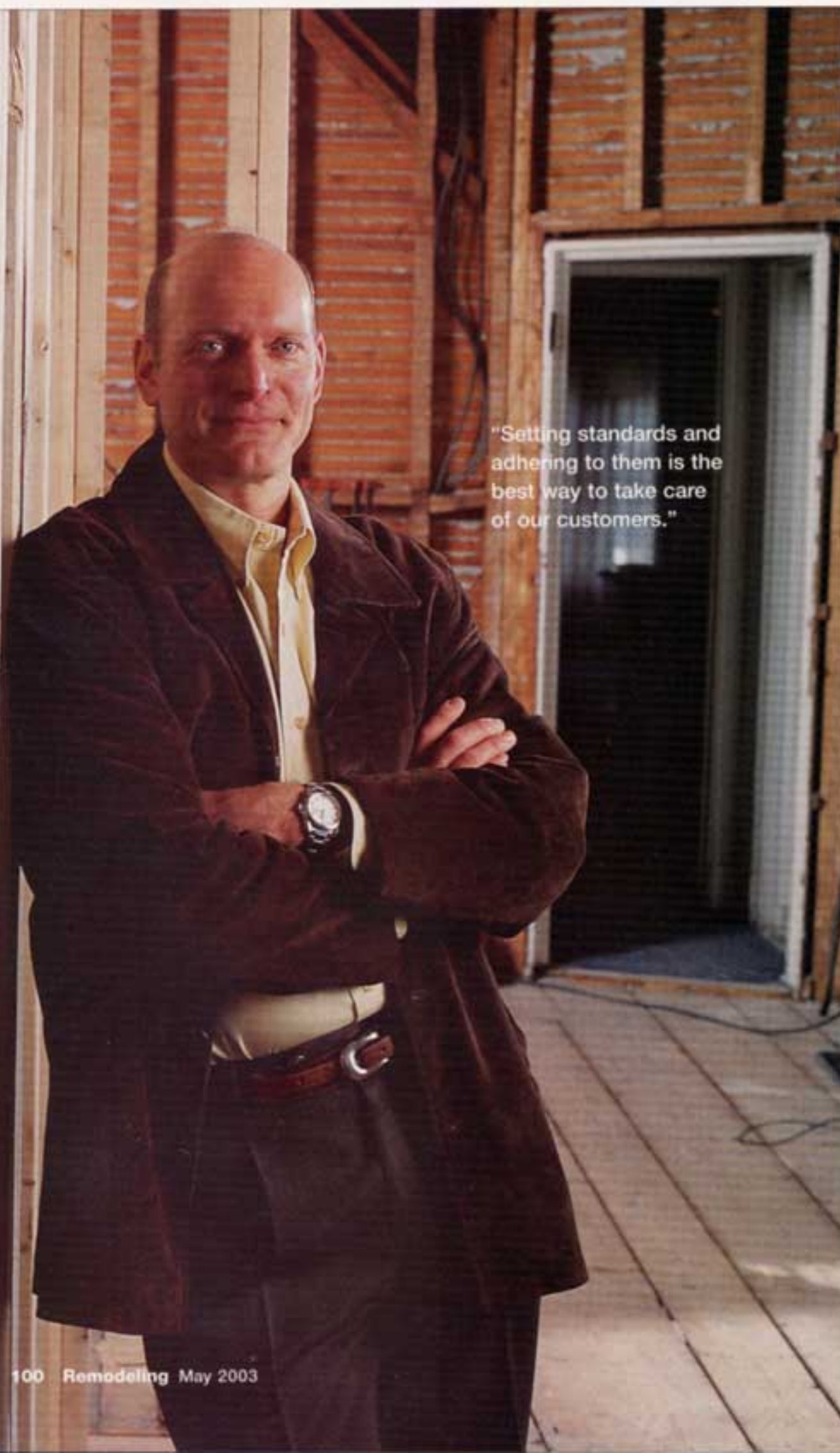
Most of Jeff Metke's work is on houses in and around a beautiful lake, many of them vacation homes. Metke (in blazer) describes his rustic, whole-house renovations as ending up having the feel of a lodge. Larger projects range from \$150,000 to \$450,000; smaller jobs run \$30,000 to \$60,000.

To capture his target market, Metke formed alliances with several architects and designers in the area. He prefers having a variety of designers to match with clients instead of one staff designer with a single vision.

He and his design partners refer clients back and forth, which makes for almost one-stop shopping for his clients. The customer signs a design contract and a contract with Metke that covers estimating and construction.

Metke does offer one type of in-house design: millwork, cabinetry, and architectural detailing, all of which is built in the company's cabinet shop. He can match or build whatever his clients want — be it kitchen cabinets of a 1910 farmhouse or a custom fireplace mantel.

50 **Big50** Industry Impact



"Setting standards and adhering to them is the best way to take care of our customers."

**Roger Gallagher,
CR, CLC
Gallagher Remodeling
Belmont, Mass.**

*Design/build remodeling
17 years in business
2002 volume: \$1.3 million
Staff: 3 office, 4 field*

Nearly two decades in business have afforded Roger Gallagher the opportunity to give back. His passion for his community and his craft has landed him at spelling bees and on local television programs about remodeling.

His company works with outside designers on \$40,000 to \$125,000 design/build projects, mostly for young families who appreciate intensive customer care.

Gallagher's insistence on continuing education has led to two carpenters earning their CLC designations. He believes in educating the public, as well, and has taught adult education classes on choosing the right contractor.

After pulling duty as youth hockey association president next year, Roger's stint as president of NARI of Eastern Massachusetts in 2004 should be easy — if he's elected. His NARI involvement runs back seven years. He's been instrumental in working with NARI and NAHB to get legislators to require contractor education credits, which would weed out less professional operators. "Setting standards and adhering to them is the best way to take care of our customers," Gallagher says.