

remodeling

YOUR TOOLBOX FOR SUCCESS

THE BIG 50

Best practices
from this year's
top remodelers




Darryl Rose,
Get Dwell,
Winnetka, Ill.

BIG

/ REMODELING STAFF, WITH JIM CORY, GEORGE LEVINES, MARTHA SPIZZIRI, AND CHELSEA BLAHUT /

Role models can be hard to find, much less emulate. You're so busy pursuing leads and managing projects that there's little time to track down and learn about the peers whose expertise, business judgment, professionalism, and financial success merit a second glance. That's why we do the searching for you. Every year since 1986, REMODELING has sought out people at 50 companies whose stories merit making them members of our Big50. We read their applications, ask for financial data, and interview each company in order to come up with a list of truly notable people. Read their stories on the following pages (and in more detail online) to find dozens of ideas, tips, and thought-provoking stories. While most on the list truly are big, with three-quarters forecasting revenue this year of at least \$1 million, there also are companies in this group that are far smaller. There's something to be learned from all of them.

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



CHILDHOOD PASSION

Matthew Breyer
Breyer Construction & Landscape,
Reading, Pa.

Full-service remodeling
Years in business: 13
2013 volume: \$1.5 million
Staff: 2 office, 5 field

Breyer has been working in construction ever since he could hold a hammer. He advanced from building decks to designing them and finally to selling them.

Today his company completes about 150 projects annually. He has ramped up marketing efforts and invested in design software that, he says, renders images “good enough to ... get prospects to say yes.” Breyer also added basement finishing as a way to mitigate the impact of seasonality.

As volume increases, Breyer aims to add staff, redefine his role in the business, and cut inefficiencies by building controls into production and cash flow. He takes advantage of manufacturers’ installation training and requires employees be industry-certified.

GROWTH SPURT

Andy Schafer, Greg Wade
Advantage Carpentry & Remodeling,
New Berlin, Wis.

Full-service remodeling
Years in business: 5
2013 volume: \$690,000
Staff: 1 field

Despite launching their company right after the economic collapse, Schafer and Wade have never been without work.

The “carpenter’s mindset” they started with—build the work for wages—soon gave way to a hunger to learn how to create and run a remodeling business. They started reading business books and joined Remodelers Advantage.

The company began to focus on interiors and gained a loyal client base. It’s now hiring staff as the owners shift from field to office. An open, up-front sales process aims to make a “positive, lasting impression” on customers. Both owners are involved in projects throughout, using an online project management system to streamline communication.

KNOW YOUR LIMITS

Adam and Julie Rossi
Blue Sky Remodeling,
Broomfield, Colo.

Design/build remodeling
Years in business: 8
2013 volume: \$2.8 million
Staff: 1 office, 5 field

“We win a lot of our smaller jobs and basement projects with our fun, flexible innovative designs,” says Adam Rossi, who owns Blue Sky Remodeling with his wife, Julie. Blue Sky excels in part by outsourcing: the marketing director works 40 hours a month, another business provides IT support, and bookkeeping is moving out so the office manager can focus on sales.

Blue Sky’s employees have iPhones and laptops, and the company uses BuilderTrend’s scheduling and communication tools to keep in touch with clients and one another.

The Rossis worked with a business coach for a few years to gain business know-how they needed but hadn’t learned while studying engineering in college. Now they aim for 33% growth this year.

TEAM PLAYERS

Charles Thayer
All Around,
Golden Valley, Minn.

Full-service remodeling
Years in business: 6
2013 volume: \$12.7 million
Staffing: 21 office, 1 field

While others stressed about the housing market collapse, All Around made the most of it by cleaning foreclosed homes.

Today, it operates a multi-service rehab company with six corporate clients, completing 400 to 600 projects per month that range from full-scale remodels to carpeting, roofing, and cleaning. Jobs average about \$7,000.

Because almost everything is subcontracted—only roofing work is done in-house—the company is picky about who it partners with: One in 50 contractors it uses works out long-term. Job coordinators receive incentives on top of their base salary. A quality-control employee with knowledge of the job goes out to the site with an iPad to ensure customer satisfaction. Real estate agents are loved; one job will often lead to 10 referrals.

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Photo: Colin Lenton



KNOWS HER STUFF

Alan and Tania Goodman
Majestic Exteriors,
Freehold, N.J.

Replacement/specialty contractor
Years in business: 19
2013 volume: \$2.4 million
Staff: 5 office, 21 field

Competitors hate seeing Majestic Exterior's trucks in a driveway because, according to owner Alan Goodman, "they can't bring the level of professionalism we bring." Another aspect that makes Majestic Exteriors stand out from the competition: company president and salesperson Tania Goodman. The Goodmans say that customers often are surprised when a woman arrives to sell them a roof, but that initial shock quickly translates into sales: Goodman has been so successful that Majestic has more women in training. In the early days this husband-and-wife team worked on roofs together. But thanks to an increase in business, the couple has split responsibilities, with Tania selling and making executive decisions and Alan running production. Over the last three years, Majestic has grown from one or two roofs a week to a four a day.

LESSONS LEARNED

Jonathan Penn
Distinctive Design Remodeling,
Lexington, Ky.

Design/build remodeling
Years in business: 7
2013 volume: \$3.1 million
Staff: 6 office, 3 field

Distinctive Design Remodeling (DDR) offers clients three products: additions, basements, and garages. No K&B, unless that's part of the addition. And when the company's salespeople—all designers/estimators—call on prospects, their goal is a signed contract that night. Penn bought DDR in 2010 after years working as general manager for a large replacement contractor, and the efficiencies common in the replacement world are now part of how DDR operates. It can turn a job in half the time it would take a competitor. DDR does this because Penn looks at the jobs like an assembly line; he doesn't start too many jobs at once and keeps crews on the job; and he retains a core group of 12 subcontractors, striving to keep them busy 365 days a year.



STAY THE COURSE

Chris Payson
West Chester Design/Build,
West Chester, Pa.

Design/build remodeling
Years in business: 7
2013 volume: \$1 million
Staff: 1 office, 4 field

Payson admits that if he had been able to foresee how bad the housing economy would get, he might have delayed launching West Chester Design/Build. But Payson persevered through the crash, even when customers in his pipeline let him know they couldn't move forward on projects. Today Payson says that staying the course proved to be a blessing in disguise because "It made us appreciate everything that came our way and work even harder." He believes that customers appreciate the "youthfulness, vibrancy, and energy" that members of his staff bring to projects. "That's how word has spread so quickly about us," says Payson, 32, who was just 25 when he started.

UP THE ANTE

Mark Watson, Joseph LeVecchi
Exterior Medics,
Alexandria, Va.

Replacement/specialty contractor
Years in business: 7
2013 volume: \$6.2 million
Staff: 5 office, 8 field

Watson and LeVecchi took a year to do some serious planning before opening Exterior Medics. Prior to their partnership, both men spent time in sales at roofing companies specializing in storm work, and both worked as suppliers to home improvement companies. So in putting together an exterior contracting business, they knew what they wanted to avoid. Their first major decision: not naming the business after themselves. "The industry is filled with that," Watson says. Instead, the pair thought about their company as a brand. Today 55% of Exterior Medics' business is roofing, and 20% of the company's sales come from repeat/referral business. The company is actively growing its commercial division, which specializes in servicing the property management side of things, such as condo complexes.

Photos: left, Jordan Hollender; right, Colin Lenton



RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Darryl Rose
Get Dwell,
Winnetka, Ill.

Handyman services

Years in business: 19
2013 volume: \$442,000
Staff: 2 office, 7 field

Rose daydreamed about making it as a handyman, and his initial plan called for selling home maintenance contracts. But he soon learned that what his suburban Chicago customers really wanted was someone reliable to replace doors, repair drywall, and rebuild stairs.

Get Dwell charges time and materials, and Rose has learned that it's critical to have clear communication. The company's project agreement establishes a scope, a schedule, what homeowners want done, costs involved, and how Get Dwell is paid. More than nine out of 10 clients are female homeowners, and in the beginning, before he could afford to invest in marketing, Rose plugged into "the Mom network" to get work.

Now, about half of Get Dwell business comes from repeat customers, much of the remainder from homeowners searching online for a tradesman.

SWITCH HITTER

Gary Carlson
Carlson Homes,
Scottsdale, Ariz.

Full-service remodeling

Years in business: 13
2013 volume: \$2.4 million
Staff: 1 office

Though he focused on custom homes when he started out, once the housing crisis came Carlson turned to remodeling and found he really liked it because it was customer-intensive.

That shows in his process: After an initial client meeting, Carlson and the trade contractors walk the whole house. "I've found that to be a very positive experience for [customers] because they know that they're dealing with people they can trust in their home," he says.

But Carlson doesn't do formal walk-throughs at the end of the job. "It puts the customer in the position of being an adversary," he says. Instead, he finds that by encouraging customers to ask questions during the course of the job, he gets more information that, ultimately, produces a better end result.

BRAGGING RIGHTS

Joe Pavone, Rob Quigley
Bradford & Kent,
Downers Grove, Ill.

Design/build remodeling

Years in business: 27
2013 volume: \$6.3 million
Staff: 15 office, 8 field

When Pavone started Bradford & Kent in 1987, his team sought to deliver one-of-a-kind designs and projects—a mission that they still strive for today. Quigley began overseeing the projects as general manager in 2002.

The company has architects and interior designers on staff, though most of the production is done by subs and is supervised by Bradford & Kent construction managers. Designers are also involved in the sales process.

Customers get personal service from both Pavone and Quigley, and the community knows Bradford & Kent as being a high-quality contractor, Pavone says. "They know we're not the cheapest [but] that we're a good value and that when [the job is] done, it will be something they're going to be proud to show their friends and neighbors."

CUSTOMER-CENTRIC

Brian Buresh
Buresh Home Solutions,
Clive, Iowa

Replacement/specialty contractor

Years in business: 11
2013 volume: \$2.5 million
Staff: 4 office, 3 field

Buresh grew up in a contractor family; his father is a custom home builder with almost 50 years of experience. But after graduation, Buresh strayed from the fold and worked in the corporate world.

Then a brief stint selling siding and windows inspired him to go into the remodeling business for himself. In 2003, he founded Buresh Home Solutions, whose services include installing roofing, siding, windows, decks, and patio covers.

Buresh prides himself on the quality of his company's customer service and client communication. To ensure consistent levels of customer care the company uses a manual it developed.

Sales and marketing are also company strengths. "We really focus on trying to help homeowners find what works best for them," Buresh says. "I know a lot of people say that, but we actually do it."



HOUSE DIVIDED

David Martin

Remodeling Concepts, Langhorne, Pa.

Replacement/specialty contractor

Years in business: 10
2013 volume: \$3.1 million
Staff: 2 office, 9 field

At the moment, Remodeling Concepts has 220 reviews on Angie's List. And not by coincidence—half of the company's leads come from Angie's members. The company's work is an even split between exterior and interior projects. Interior projects are done with the help of an in-house designer and a kitchen-bath showroom.

Owner Dave Martin knows a lot about building. The entrepreneur became a remodeler in college when a landlord asked him to construct an addition. He hired some buddies and in 2004 started a business that grew steadily until 2009.

Soon after the slump, Martin cut overhead by 30%, joined Remodelers Advantage, and consulted two marketing companies to determine if he should have two companies with two names. Both told him the same thing: Keep the name and figure out how to cross-brand it. He's still working on that.

LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Tom and Dawn Wotton

Home Sweet Home Improvements, Bealeton, Va.

Full-service remodeling

Years in business: 24
2013 volume: \$528,000
Staff: 1 office, 3 field

Tom and Dawn Wotton see themselves as guides, helping clients navigate the bewildering array of choices that come with a remodeling project.

Surprisingly, much of the company's business comes through volunteer activities in their small community. "Believe it or not, we run into our clients at those," Dawn says. "You're talking to people in everyday situations instead of [a situation where] I'm in their house trying to pitch a kitchen."

The company has started offering seminars, which helps get their name out and aids in finding promising leads. "We scrutinize the leads we get," Tom says. "We don't take them if we know they're not going to be profitable."

Staff expertise also gets high priority. "We spend a lot of time and money training our employees so they can answer homeowners' questions," Tom says.

FEEDBACK LOOP

Sarah Henry

Gaspar's Construction, Seattle

Kitchen & bath remodeling

Years in business: 41
2013 volume: \$3.5 million
Staff: 8 office, 11 field

When Rich Gaspar started Gaspar's Construction in 1973, it quickly became a family affair. His wife, Cathy, joined the company doing office work, then received a degree in interior design and started designing projects. Daughter Sarah Henry joined them in 2002 and is now the majority owner; Rich and Cathy—members of Remodeling's Big50 Class of 2000—recently retired.

One of Sarah's most coveted contributions was adding a handyman business about seven years ago. The business has grown to make up about one-third of the company's volume.

The company uses subcontractors on its construction projects, but Gaspar's Construction employees run each job. "They're swinging hammers while running the project," Henry says.

Additionally, Gaspar's is passionate about seeking detailed feedback from clients. Staff members meet weekly with customers during production to identify pain points.

LIFETIME OF LEARNING

Jeff Kuhn

Kuhn Construction, Islip, N.Y.

Full-service remodeling

Years in business: 28
2013 volume: \$3.7 million
Staff: 12 office, 14 field

Kuhn took a leave of absence from teaching high school English in 1986 when he began taking jobs in roofing and siding. He never went back to his teaching job, but he also never stopped learning. That's especially true with sales, which he did singlehandedly for the first 20 years of Kuhn Construction's existence.

Like a lot of full-service remodeling companies, Kuhn Construction saw fewer projects with the onset of the recession. So Kuhn bought into Liners Direct, a one-day bath product.

That new business was a challenge, Kuhn says, because success depends heavily on generating leads. So the company began putting marketers in big-box retail stores and setting up booths at local events. Today the company divides its energies between design/build and the liner business, with handyman jobs helping to generate additional large projects.

Photo: Ilona Oramnzi



TURNING PRO

Michael D. West
West Construction,
Avon Lake, Ohio

Full-service remodeling
Years in business: 35
2013 volume: \$1 million
Staff: 5 office, 4 field

West approached his first client on a whim. "I walked up and said: My name is Mike West. I do siding, windows, and roofing and you need all three." He got three more jobs out of that project.

A move from the city to Cleveland's suburbs forced West to rethink his business. For the first time he had to advertise and keep books. He soon found out that the two keys to building well were also crucial to operating a successful remodeling business: be organized, and communicate.

West Construction evolved the design agreement into a "partnership agreement." After an initial consultation, designers develop a budget based on similar projects the company has built. The designer prepares drawings plus selections. With a preliminary budget analysis in hand, clients are asked to sign a partnership agreement—"a letter of intent with tweaks"—committing them to work with the company.

OUT THE WINDOW

Tammy Whitworth
Window World (corporate),
North Wilkesboro, N.C.

Replacement/specialty contractor
Years in business: 19
2013 volume: \$446.3 million
Staff: 20 office, 7 field

Window World is not only the dominant seller/installer of vinyl windows in the U.S., with sales approaching \$500 million, but also the country's largest dedicated home improvement contractor. It's in the midst of a transition to a full-fledged exterior remodeler, offering siding and doors through its 150+ franchise units. Door sales at the company have taken off, increasing 42% last year.

Charity work is important. Window World is the No. 1 corporate partner of St. Jude's Hospital, the children's research hospital in Memphis, Tenn. The company also has volunteered use of its plane to Veterans Airlift Command, which provides free air transportation to post-9/11 combat wounded veterans and their families for medical and other purposes.

YOUNG GUN

Chris Fox, Matt Carlson
Fox Home Innovations,
Manhattan, Kan.

Full-service remodeling
Years in business: 4
2013 volume: \$514,000
Staff: 4 field

Fox sells, designs, selects, and orders materials, while co-owner Carlson "takes care of all the jobs while they're happening," Fox says.

The company does projects that range from handyman work to six-figure remodels. Small jobs can quickly get big: for example, a fix on a porch railing morphed into a \$65,000 bathroom.

Leveling with clients is key to gaining trust and preventing jobs from becoming unmanageable. Not long ago, Fox had a client who wanted the company to remodel a master bath and a kitchen simultaneously. Fox advised against it. "It's all about the experience our customers have with us," he stresses.

"Once a month we shut down to take an aerial view," Fox says. This frank discussion between the partners is valuable even when spare time is rare, he says.

NICE NICHE

Lucas C. Papageorge Jr.
LCP General Contractors,
Fairfield, Conn.

Full-service remodeling
Years in business: 4
2013 volume: \$802,000
Staff: None

A third-generation construction guy, Papageorge started his first company in 2000 while still doing side jobs. By 2005 its main focus was participating in the Connecticut-version of "Flip This House," a TV program that featured investors buying, remodeling, and reselling houses at big profits in four regions of the country. The 2008 recession, along with executive disputes, killed the program, and Papageorge and his business partner also parted ways.

Today LCP General Contractors, which does everything from siding jobs to whole-house remodels, has a niche, and the niche is a town: Fairfield, Conn., once a quiet bedroom community for commuters to Manhattan but now "booming," with two universities. Rethinking his approach to remodeling had Papageorge making some strategic decisions. His conclusion: Transform himself and his company into Fairfield's remodeler.



LOYAL BREED

David R. Miller
D.R. Miller Design Build,
Hartsville, Ohio

Design/build remodeling

Years in business: 11
2013 volume: \$5.7 million
Staff: 1 office, 3 field

Having started out in the remodeling industry 30 years ago by working for his father, Miller eventually struck out on his own with D.R. Miller Design Build.

High-end kitchen and bath jobs are the main source of business for the company. Other favorite projects include room additions and whole-house remodels. Miller sells and designs the jobs using Chief Architect, and a cadre of trade contractors ensure that quality work keeps the company's services in demand. Homeowners get a detailed copy of their job schedule to help manage expectations and keep jobs on track.

The company also offers a two-year workmanship warranty on all of its work, and will often fix something after even the warranty has expired just to keep clients happy.

HOW IT'S DONE

**Fred Finn, Stan Statkiewicz,
Anthony Navigato**
Euro-Tech, Bensenville, Ill.

Replacement/specialty contractor

Years in business: 22
2013 volume: \$7.5 million
Staff: 42 office, 1 field

Finn likes to compare his company to an octopus moving in the water. "There are three arms doing what they're supposed to do," he explains, "but five are going all over the place. You've got to get some of those arms under control."

Euro-Tech has never had a year when all eight arms were functioning perfectly, but there have been years when six arms were fully under control. Much of that stability has to do with the realistic attitude of its three co-owners about who can and should do what to ensure cohesion.

For instance, where some home improvement businesses use up to 60 lead sources to keep the sales team busy, Euro-Tech directs its efforts into fewer than 10, including canvassing, in-store demonstrators, purchased leads, and referrals.

SOCIAL GENIUS

Robert Gockeler
KraftMaster Renovations,
Chatham, N.J.

Kitchen & bath remodeling

Years in business: 5
2013 volume: \$1.6 million
Staff: 2 office, 1 field

KraftMaster Renovations is known for helping clients throughout the entire remodeling process, Gockeler says. "Literally, it's taking people shopping and laughing and having fun."

Most new customers find Gockeler's company on Facebook, where he posts photos of the entire process—from the first shopping trip to the finished remodel. "It really helps potential new clients," he says. "They see the exact same process on every single job." Additionally, Gockeler has a blog detailing their finished projects and offering design tips. He also posts and buys ads on Houzz, connecting both businesses and consumers.

When he's not connecting with consumers digitally, Gockeler is known for his community involvement. After Hurricane Sandy, he and his son Robbie parked a truck downtown and collected donations for relief.

BIG SPENDER

James Roland
Window World of Baton Rouge,
Baton Rouge, La.

Replacement/specialty contractor

Years in business: 12
2013 volume: \$43.1 million
Staff: 34 office, 61 field

For a guy with a window replacement empire, Roland is remarkably low-key. His company is called Window World of Baton Rouge, but it includes branch operations in New Orleans, Dallas, Houston, and Tampa/St. Petersburg, Fla.

Roland was drawn to Window World by the idea of going into the house armed with an itemized menu of products and options. It didn't take him long to thrive. By 2005, the Baton Rouge company was Window World's second biggest dealer. Then Hurricane Katrina happened.

Within three months, Katrina sent Window World of Baton Rouge sales skyrocketing from 1,600 to 2,000 units per month to 11,000 units. To cope, the company outsourced crews, moved into a larger facility, and poured excess cash back into advertising, transforming Window World into a brand in Southern Louisiana.

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Photo: LIVigni Photography



SOLE FOCUS

Lou Pagnutti
Decks Unique, Commack, N.Y.

Replacement/specialty contractor
Years in business: 27
2013 volume: \$2.3 million
Staff: 4 office, 6 field

When it comes to describing what makes Decks Unique stand out from the crowd, Pagnutti isn't shy. "We're the biggest deck builder in New York state, the biggest on Long Island, the eighth-largest Trex installer in the country," he says.

Decks Unique builds decks and only decks. Pagnutti has been a designer, seller, and builder of decks long enough to watch construction go from nails, bolts, and pressure-treated pine to the "jigsaw puzzles" that his crews assemble today.

Homeowners "think a deck is a deck—until you show them the products," he says. Company salespeople offer homeowners a slide show on a laptop equipped with a drawing program and a materials list.

If homeowners like the design, they come down to the Decks Unique showroom and select materials. "We want [clients] to pick everything," Pagnutti says.

HONORED GUESTS

Brad Fluke
The Honey Do Service, Bristol, Va.

Handyman/small projects
Years in business: 12
2013 volume: \$2.1 million
Staff: 20 office, 28 field

When Fluke's father started a handyman service called Tom's Honey Do, Fluke became its first employee, operating out of a two-car garage.

He then built The Honey Do Service by analyzing all the negatives that homeowners associate with remodelers and handyman companies, then addressing them one by one. He created a brand out of such lessons, so that Honey Do personnel would be viewed as "honored guests" in the home.

A major difference between Honey Do and other handyman organizations is that the handymen don't sell the job. When a homeowner calls, an estimator/salesperson goes out to estimate and sell the job, including collecting a deposit. And while most handyman organizations price their jobs on a time and materials basis, Fluke's works on a fixed cost per proposal "because that's what the homeowner wants."



VALUE ADDED

Ricky Scott, Robbie Edwards
The Kingston Group, Nashville, Tenn.

Full-service remodeling
Years in business: 7
2013 volume: \$4 million
Staff: 1 office, 7 field

Scott and Edwards work with three or four core real estate agents who supply them with referrals. That work, plus revenue from their Property Services division—for homeowner association boards, mainly—makes up the bulk of The Kingston Group's growing business.

With companies imploding during the recession, "We learned from what we saw," Scott says. He is particularly adamant about not taking on debt, and the company's approach to cash flow has allowed it to grow steadily. And while many companies with thinner margins have dropped their health care and 401(k) plans, The Kingston Group has recently beefed up its benefits package as it seeks to add talented staff. The company also no longer allows trades to charge time and materials, instead requiring that they provide a lump-sum bid. Kingston gets at least two bids on each critical aspect of a project.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Robert and John Kulp
The King of Stratford, Stratford, Wis.

Replacement/specialty contractor
Years in business: 29
2013 volume: \$5.7 million
Staff: 10 office, 29 field

Bob Kulp started his business at age 19, the same year he was married. Always of an entrepreneurial bent, he has at times branched out into ancillary product lines, even developing a substantial commercial business that eventually overrode the company's residential roofing work.

The company has made successful forays into solar and metal roofing—today metal makes up somewhere between 60% and 70% of the company's residential work.

Long active in the National Roofing Contractors Association, Bob today also sits in the Wisconsin legislature.

Where most roofing companies install using subcontractors, especially as a way of avoiding ever-rising workers' comp costs, Kulp's of Stratford installs with its own crews. The practice leads to "better control of the quality of customer service," president John Kulp says.

Photos: left, Jennifer Vaca; right, Chuck Arlund



REMODELING REINVENTION

Seval and Melinda Dzinic
Euro Design/Build Remodel,
Richardson, Texas

Design/build remodeling
Years in business: 16
2013 volume: \$1.1 million
Staff: 2 office, 5 field

Starting a remodeling company wasn't high on the list of career ambitions for mining engineer Seval Dzinic and his wife, Melinda, both originally from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The remodeling company they created was started to provide jobs for tradesmen arriving as refugees from ethnic conflicts in the region once known as Yugoslavia.

But if the Dzinics didn't know much about residential renovation when they started, that's all in the past. Both now have industry certifications and are active in industry associations. They work as a team: Melinda is an award-winning designer known for building lasting relationships with clients, while Seval runs the projects.

"We trained," Melinda says, explaining how a pair of outsiders transformed themselves into the owners of one of the Dallas area's premier remodeling companies.

STYLE MAVENS

Grady and Diane Portelli
Quality Home Renovators,
St. Petersburg, Fla.

Full-service remodeling
Years in business: 5
2013 volume: \$960,000
Staff: 1 office, 5 field

"If you can take one of these older homes apart and put it back together, you can build anything," Diane Portelli says of the historical homes that are the couple's focus. Beginning as little more than a hobby for the couple, their operation became so busy that it morphed into a real business in 2009.

Once up and running, Quality Home Renovators soon found itself competing with a ton of former home builders who had entered the remodeling market by default, but the Portellis weren't deterred. "It's two different lines of work," Diane says, "building new versus taking a house apart."

And though whole-house remodels are the core of the business, the Portellis developed other lines of work: insurance restoration and a substantial sideline in property rehabs involving 203(k) loans.

VERY, VERY SPECIALTY

Tim Brown and Tim Brown Jr.
Rain Gutter Specialties,
South Jordan, Utah

Replacement/specialty contractor
Years in business: 24
2013 volume: \$2.4 million
Staff: 5 office, 15 field

Imagine if your company's average job was \$1,100 and you did somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 jobs a year. Cash flow challenges? You bet, says Tim Brown Jr., owner of Rain Gutter Specialties.

That's why Brown, whose family has been involved with gutters for about five generations, decided to make some changes to the company business plan. To increase the average sale and net profit, he added a gutter cover product and heat cable installation. Next came the addition of siding. And, beyond simply having more products to sell, Rain Gutter Specialties started charging the right price, Brown says.

The result: The company's average sale increased by 22% last year—and in 2013 the company enjoyed the most profitable year in the business's history.

FAMILY AFFAIR

Rolf and Derek Schroeder
Rolf Schroeder General Contractors,
Ivlyland, Pa.

Full-service remodeling
Years in business: 32
2013 volume: \$600,000
Staff: 2 office, 2 field

For more than 30 years, Rolf Schroeder General Contractors has been exceeding homeowners' expectations in Bucks and Montgomery counties with its designs and finished construction, a fact to which its long roster of recent awards attests. Derek—who has worked on and off at the company since he was 14—returned after college in 2008 to work full time as office manager. He also designs, does the marketing, manages projects, and is a carpenter.

Last year the Schroeders revamped the company website with a content management system, allowing new material to be easily added without the need for a Web designer. At RSGC they "bring a detailed scope of work, and what it includes and what it doesn't include, so you know what you're paying for," Derek says. "That establishes trust up front."



REMODELING REALITIES

Everett and Patty Gray
DreamMaker of Bakersfield,
Bakersfield, Calif.

Replacement/specialty contractor
Years in business: 11
2013 volume: \$1.6 million
Staff: 2 office, 3 field

Before the Grays bought a Dream-Maker franchise in 2002, they were a truck-and-ladder contractor working out of their home. The franchise gave them access to the systems needed to manage and grow their business. And business did steadily grow, to almost \$3 million in sales, until the 2008 recession hit and sales fell by 65%. But the hard times proved instructive: The Grays found ways to manage, and operating with a smaller top line provided a chance to rethink how they do business. "I'd rather be at smaller revenue and a bigger net profit ... with fewer employees," Patty says.

The company is proactive on warranties, calling at three-, six-, and nine-month intervals after job close to check in with clients, and it offers two-hour seminars every other month on kitchen remodeling at a local appliance store that has working kitchens set up for demonstrations.

GET ENERGIZED

Skip and Lorenzo Wyatt
Mr. Handyman of Upper Fairfield
County, Fairfield, Conn.

Handyman/small projects
Years in business: 10
2013 volume: \$5.2 million
Staff: 6 office, 46 field

Skip Wyatt entered the handyman business with no experience. He'd been in sales and marketing, retired early from IBM, and was looking for something new to do. As a marketer, he saw a need for the service Mr. Handyman offers, and a contractor was born.

Skip's son, Lorenzo, joined the business about four years ago. The company has four lines of business: handyman; remodeling; and home energy, which has two components: energy audits and energy upgrades.

The home energy business grew rapidly and now makes up about two-thirds of the company's sales. Still, Skip expects the remodeling portion of the business to see substantial growth this year. He recently hired a designer to boost the franchise's capabilities.



BUSINESS BUILDER

Andrew York
ProDeck Construction,
San Marcos, Calif.

Replacement/specialty contractor
Years in business: 4
2013 volume: \$750,000
Staff: 6 field

Just scraping by in his first year of business, York caught his break after appearing as a contestant on the DIY Network building a gazebo is six hours. He won the nationally televised event, and one West Coast viewer who owned a beach house hired him.

At the time, Trex's composite deck marketing featured a lot of East Coast homes, so York pitched the West Coast beach house to the company. Trex agreed to supply the material in exchange for the rights to take photos. That led to ProDeck building several display decks in San Diego County, and York's business took off.

ProDeck uses fixed price bidding, and typically runs two jobs at a time, each job usually taking two weeks. In the future, York hopes to train another project manager so he can add one more crew and grow the business. He's also considering expanding ProDeck's services, but plans to use subs in those cases.

PERFECT PARTNERS

Neal Sciacca, James Anastasio
New Jersey Siding & Windows,
Randolph, N.J.

Replacement/specialty contractor
Years in business: 15
2013 volume: \$4.4 million
Staff: 13 office, 5 field

Sciacca was in clothing manufacturing before he ever sold a window, though he's been selling products his whole life. But when clothing manufacturing went overseas, he became part owner of a home improvement company, giving him the know-how needed to start his own a few years later. He partnered with Anastasio to run the production end.

Many home improvement companies are great at generating leads and converting them to sales. What they're often not so good at is ensuring consistent quality. With Sciacca as president managing marketing and sales, and Anastasio attending to production, New Jersey Siding & Window is now a sales and marketing machine. Anticipating an uptick in business, the company is planning to move and will transfer its operation to a larger location this year.



BEYOND THOROUGH

Chris Risher, Jeremy Martin
RisherMartin Fine Homes,
Austin, Texas

Full-service remodeling
Years in business: 4
2013 volume: \$3 million
Staff: 2 office, 2 field

College friends Risher and Martin parted ways after graduating—Martin worked in tech sales, Risher in production building. But when Martin took over his parents' business building spec homes, he invited Risher to join him as a partner. Two years in, the company found its identity in whole-house remodels and additions of \$350,000 to \$1 million.

The company offers general contractor and project management services, drawing on a network of hand-picked trades to build. Clients find their own architect, or RisherMartin helps them find one, but it doesn't subcontract design work.

The company distinguishes itself from competitors with its pre-construction services and fixed pricing structure; microscopic level of project pre-planning; and paperless office—all project managers carry iPads to communicate in real-time.

QUALITY, GUARANTEED

Ger Ronan, Leo Duplessis
Yankee Home Improvement,
Northampton, Mass.

Replacement/specialty contractor
Years in business: 11
2013 volume: \$4 million
Staff: 15 office, 35 field

Ronan, top producer at a local home improvement company, founded Yankee Home Improvement to implement his own systems and ideas. Well-trained salespeople, fresh approaches to marketing, and diligent customer service have propelled the company's growth. General manager Duplessis sees the company's website as the first step in familiarizing prospects with Yankee's services, thereby making the sales appointment all the easier.

Yankee offers five guarantees or warranties, among them the guarantee that if a customer finds someone to do the job at the same scope but for a lower cost, Yankee will give the homeowner the difference plus \$150; and the company's unconditional double lifetime warranty on windows and siding, as well as a manufacturer 50-year warranty on shingles.



BUSINESS THAT LASTS

Steve and Melissa Cunningham
Cunningham Contracting,
Williamsburg, Va.

Design/build remodeling
Years in business: 26
2013 volume: \$870,000
Staff: 1 office, 5 field

Steve Cunningham has never done anything other than construction. But for a long time that involved working for other contractors—and a certain degree of dissatisfaction came with it. Side jobs multiplied and Cunningham, at 21 years old, told himself, "I am going to create something from nothing, and it's going to be a business that lasts." Initially his company specialized in all aspects of flooring, but that evolved into the idea that it would be a one-stop shop for home renovation. Bathrooms became a bridge to full-on remodeling.

Owners Steve and Melissa are both hands-on, being personally involved in all aspects of the company. Continuing ed is a priority through acquiring certifications, training, and involvement in industry organizations.

MANAGEMENT MACHINE

Robert V. Quillen
Quillen Bros. Windows,
Bryan, Ohio

Replacement/specialty contractor
Years in business: 15
2103 volume: \$4.9 million
Staff: 8 office, 16 field

A true specialty retailer, Quillen Bros. Windows strictly sells windows and doors. Owner/founder Bob Quillen tracks and benchmarks every aspect of the business that's key to performance: 47% of demos (where a product is presented and a signature on a contract requested) were closed in 2013, a figure that has remained consistently high for the last five years; and the canvassing program is coming in at 7.8%—as in marketing cost—Quillen says. "That's where my growth is coming from."

Quillen Bros. recently opened a branch operation in Fort Wayne, Ind., and has plans for more: Quillen intends to soon be a major player in all of Indiana, not just in Fort Wayne. The company also has shown steady growth in Net Sales Per Lead Issued: an issued lead equated to \$1,620 in revenue in 2009, and \$2,088 last year.

Photos: left, The Mill Photography Studio; right, Kelly Mihalcoe



SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

August Bergdahl, Emilee Birrell, Todd Gits
Crescent Builds, Seattle

Full-service remodeling
Years in business: 7
2013 volume: \$2.4 million
Staff: 2 office, 7 field

Over time working in the field and as a project manager, Bergdahl identified the systems and processes that make up a remodeling company. Then he started his own. He began with small jobs because, with the onset of the recession, little else was available. Those initial small jobs allowed him to build the client base and architect relationships that today supply most of the company's business.

Bergdahl sells the work; wife Emilee Birrell meets with architects and clients to prepare for production; and partner/production manager Todd Gits manages the execution. An internal weekly status meeting ensures clear communication; and a \$250 charge for preliminary estimates helps screen out ambiguous leads. Crescent Builds also created a service division to manage smaller projects, which often plant the seed for larger projects later on.

MEETING OF MINDS

Brian Miller, John Gwaltney
Outback Deck/Virtus Services, Roswell, Ga.

Replacement/specialty contractor
Years in business: 4
2013 volume: \$2.4 million
Staff: 3 office, 3 field

Atlanta-area contractors Miller and Gwaltney had been running into each other at various local contractor networking events for some time.

Miller had a deck operation and remodeling business, while Gwaltney's company specialized in windows, siding, and roofing. When Gwaltney needed new office space, Miller invited him to relocate to his building. The two got along so well that they decided to combine their operations under the umbrella of Virtus Services.

The company is committed to the idea that in brand-conscious Atlanta, homeowners want to deal with a company that specializes in one aspect of home improvement, not a generalist. Since forming Virtus, the companies under its umbrella have added 30% to their volume and 29% to profitability, primarily by reducing personnel and cross-selling jobs.

MODEL MARRIAGE

Jeff and Lisa Walling
Re-Bath of Tucson, Tucson, Ariz.

Bathroom remodeling
Years in business: 5
2013 volume: \$2 million
Staff: 3 office, 9 field

The Wallings first interacted with Re-Bath when they hired their local franchisee to remodel their own bathroom. Years later, they bought the franchise in their area.

Lisa oversees marketing; Jeff is in charge of production; and their son, Austin, manages sales. All production work is done by employees.

Streamlined production is one of the company's strong suits. "We're able to get in and out in a very timely manner because [baths are] all we do," Lisa says.

The couple's goal is to grow the business by 10% each year for the next five years by boosting advertising. And they seem to be well on their way to further expansion, having recently purchased a second Re-Bath franchise in El Paso, Texas, and a 5 Day Kitchen franchise as well.

SHOW BUSINESS

Michael and Traci Tenhulzen
Tenhulzen Residential, Bellevue, Wash.

Design/build remodeling
Years in business: 6
2013 volume: \$2.3 million
Staff: 6 office, 7 field

Tenhulzen Residential has done away with traditional construction job titles in favor of film industry ones. Michael Tenhulzen is director, not CEO; his wife, Traci, isn't a salesperson but an executive producer; and on-site superintendents are location managers. The reason, Michael says, is that it helps staff and clients better understand the construction process: pre-production, production, and post-production. The org chart changed, too: It now has the client as its center, and job descriptions are given from the customer's perspective.

A popular event that the company hosts is "cooking without a kitchen," where a professional chef visits Tenhulzen's showroom and demonstrates how to prepare meals using just a microwave oven, fridge, and sink—handy for those in the midst of a kitchen remodel.

FINE DESIGN

Pam Kofsky
Elegant Interior Designs, Ambler, Pa.

Design/build remodeling
Years in business: 11
2013 volume: \$250,000
Staff: None

Past knowledge has proved helpful for Kofsky. A previous career as a tax consultant for large corporations prepared her well for steering remodeling clients through the budgeting process; and she tapped her early aspirations to be a fashion designer, parlaying them into interior design.

The award-winning designer first entered the remodeling world by volunteering her design skills. But soon she was truly in the game, with certifications.

Kofsky's designs aim to combine functionality and elegance. Much of her work comes via remodelers who approach her about designing a job they've been hired to build. "A lot of remodelers resist hiring a designer because they don't want to incur the additional expense," she says. "They want to knock out an update. But if they could give homeowners choices, it would be amazing."

FLEXIBLE ENTREPRENEUR

Mark Curry
Your Remodeling Guys, York, Pa.

Replacement/specialty contractor
Years in business: 7
2013 volume: \$8.3 million
Staff: 25 office, 60 field

When Curry sold his previous company, which manufactured and sold windows, siding, and sunrooms, the sales agreement's fine print forbid competing in the same market. So he launched a new company and shaped it as he saw fit. First he sold garage organization systems, then added closet organization. The economy tanked, and he took on cabinet refacing. Next came energy savings services.

YRG sets itself apart from its competitors by focusing on what the house needs and the clients want, making a point of providing lots of options rather than a limited product offering. Last year, when the non-competes expired, YRG got back into the window business. It was a year that produced better revenue, but flattened profits. "I look at it as a colossal failure," Curry says, "not to have that sustained growth on the bottom line." Time for the next adaptation.



TOUCH POINTS

Steve Zarndt
Re-Bath of Illinois, Decatur, Ill.

Bathroom remodeling
Years in business: 15
2013 volume: \$3.3 million
Staff: 6 office, 14 field

Re-Bath of Illinois aims to offer exceptional experience every time. Accordingly, the company's customer satisfaction system includes a minimum of nine communication points. Zarndt says it's worth it: it ensures that customers are happy, and from that follow the referrals that happiness brings.

The company handles all its own unlicensed trades work and does its own plumbing; only electrical is routinely subbed. "The client wants speed, choice, and convenience," Zarndt says. That means not only getting in and out quickly, but communicating well.

A customer advocate handles phone calls when clients have a problem. "It used to be part of the production department, but that's like having a fox in the henhouse," Zarndt says.

SMOOTH FINISH

Nick Richmond, Brian Darrick
Matrix Basement Systems, Arlington Heights, Ill.

Replacement/specialty contractor
Years in business: 5
2013 volume: \$7.8 million
Staff: 20 office, 64 field

Matrix Basement Systems, founded in 2009, manufactures, markets, sells, and installs in the Chicago area. Run by partners Darrick and Richmond, the company is now selling components to other home improvement operations as well.

While the other basement finishing companies were disappearing during the downturn, Richmond identified that it wasn't the product that was the problem, it was the ability of homeowners to finance the purchase. So he set about ensuring that customers could get credit.

In its first year the company sold \$2.5 million in basement systems. Last year, sales neared \$8 million. Managing growth and establishing a clear direction for the company have been the partners' priorities.



ALL ABOUT AUTHENTIC

Stephen Scott Ray
Ray Building Co., Birmingham, Ala.

Full-service remodeling
Years in business: 8
2013 volume: \$1.1 million
Staff: 1 office

After a career in the military, Ray worked as vice president of operations for a remodeling company before leaving to revive his father's old business, Ray Building.

A man whose ties to the community are many and whose passions run deep, Ray's projects tend to come from select neighborhoods in Birmingham, usually via referral. Projects tend to be on the larger side—often whole-house remodels—and Ray shows up every day to work on them, on point of principle. "Our clients like to see involvement with the actual contractor," he says. "They loathe the term 'drive-by contractor.'"

Ray's work in the community—particularly on behalf of disabled veterans—has made this company and its owner a standout.

NEW BEGINNINGS

Rick Messier
Messier Construction, Tiverton, R.I.

Full-service remodeling
Years in business: 28
2013 volume: \$3.3 million
Staff: 2 office, 15 field

Messier always played with the idea of working in construction because his father did. So when the United Automobile Workers strike forced him to shift careers, he took a chance on construction, starting his business in the back of a pickup truck.

At first, he concentrated solely on the physical work. Soon after, he started attending builders' conferences and remodeling shows to learn more about running a business. Eventually he built his business into the 17-person operation it is today, with whole-house remodels making up a large part of the company's work.

Going forward, Messier would like to add another niche related to remodeling—possibly insurance restoration, which he has done in the past.

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