

remodeling

YOUR TOOLBOX FOR SUCCESS

Texas Titans

How Chris Risher (left) and
Jeremy Martin earned this
year's Fred Case award



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Michael Thad Carter

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COVER STORY / FRED CASE AWARD

Chris Risher and Jeremy Martin, principals of Austin, Texas-based RisherMartin Fine Homes, won this year's Fred Case Remodeling Entrepreneur of the Year Award thanks to their paperless systems and rigorous planning. Read on to learn how they make it work—and for the stories and strategies of the award's three finalists.

Cover photo by Michael Thad Carter

ONLINE NOW



Make your voice heard! Our readers have taken part in surveys on everything from jobsite music to the new overtime rule. Now, as winter approaches, we want to know how your business changes with the weather.

Do you see an uptick in jobs right before the start of the season? How do you keep crews busy during the harshest months? Head to remodelingmag.com and let us know!

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Paperless Planners

Promoting a paperless office, Chris Risher and Jeremy Martin impressed judges with their strict adherence to systems and a rigorous pre-construction process / by **Curtis Sprung**

Listening to Chris Risher and Jeremy Martin, principals of RisherMartin Fine Homes, talk about systems, being paperless, finding the right clients, and developing their employees, it's easy to see why they were selected as this year's Fred Case Remodeling Entrepreneur of the Year Award winners. Their passion for each project and their drive to go beyond customer expectations proves that these guys are the real deal.

The two college friends both come from construction backgrounds, but took circuitous paths to join the remodeling field. Risher focused on home building with national builders, while Martin moved out west to work for tech giants like IBM and Intel. In 2010, the duo reunited and formed RisherMartin Fine Homes in Austin, Texas.

Today, the company works on high-end whole-home remodels that reach upward of \$1 million. Risher is the sales, estimation, and pre-build maestro, while Martin works out in the field directly. Martin is also the tech pioneer for RisherMartin, testing and evaluating the latest programs and equipment.

To start their company on the right foot, the duo looked to other titans in the industry. "I think it's funny that we're up for the Case Award," says Martin. "When we wrote our business plan in late 2009, we stole liberally from Case [Design/Remodeling]."



“That’s been our attitude from the beginning,” says Risher. “Let’s go see who the winners are out there and let’s emulate them. Not necessarily copy exactly what they’re doing, but just figure out what we like, what meets our personality, our goals, and grab the best practices and incorporate them into one organization.”

Risher and Martin wanted to make the remodeling process as smooth as possible and put clients at ease when spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on a project. “Where else do you spend half a million to a million dollars and not have fun?” says Risher.

For them, it was a given that the end result would be high quality—it was the journey that was the stressful part. To achieve a seamless journey, the duo decided right away to do something unconventional: take their internal operations paperless.

PAPERLESS PIONEERS

“You can’t have an 80% paperless system,” says Martin. “You can’t have a 97% paperless system; you have to go 100%. We took a ‘burn the boat’ mentality. We committed to it.”

Look at any of the desks at the RisherMartin office and you’ll find very little paper. There might be a Post-it notepad or a magazine, but the desks all are devoid of clutter. That’s entirely intentional. Each desk has a scanner so any physical documents can be converted to a digital format. Once it’s scanned and uploaded to the cloud, the original paper document is shredded and disposed.

“We think that projects take longer with a papered system,” says Risher. “The information’s not flowing as fast, but [also] inaccurate information is flowing in, and it takes a while for that to surface.”

Each document is stored in the cloud, and for RisherMartin, the cloud app of choice is BOX. Nearly everything the company does is stored in a BOX folder associated with each job including

plans, photos, and receipts. “We standardized on BOX because we feel it’s more enterprise friendly,” explains Martin.

BOX includes tools like version control so each employee can see who edited a file and why. It allows access to certain folders to be limited or shared depending on whether a client needs to see something or if the documents are just for internal use. And most importantly, communication inside the company is kept in the relevant documents, instead of in an email or text.

“People’s individual email inboxes are not a great place to store information,” says Martin. “Only one person can read that email. So we have a rule around here. My email inbox right now is down to 20 emails or something. It never gets above 50.”

BOX was selected as the cloud software of choice in 2012 because it was the best at that moment. Just because the system has worked out well so far doesn’t mean that updating or changing programs is out of the question. Martin’s technology background means he’s always exploring the latest apps or pieces of hardware to see how they could fit into, or replace, the existing system.

“I’m a big believer in finding best-of-breed software that very closely maps to how you’re running your company and then basically stitching together your own systems,” he says.

For that reason, all of the software utilized by RisherMartin is platform-agnostic. Windows, Android, Apple—it should be able to run on all of them. That also means the company has eschewed many of the all-in-one systems offered by tech companies serving the remodeling and construction industry. For years, those systems were software-based, requiring installation on a device and living on the computer. Many of those software systems are moving to the cloud now, and Martin is keeping a watchful eye on which packages, if any, are able to compete with their homegrown suite of apps.

The duo isn’t shy about sharing what apps they use for fear

of another company stealing their system. Apps like BOX or Corecon are just tools that are available to any remodeler to use; the real secret is the system those apps are a part of.

“The systems are pretty worthless unless you have some corporate culture and some plan on how to use them in a disciplined, consistent way,” says Martin. “I can’t have four project managers using [an app] four different ways, so we spend a lot of time training. It’s just like handing somebody a golf club: One person swings it well, the other one, not so well. We want everybody swinging it the same way so that each client, regardless of which project manager you get, gets the same experience.”

“All of our competitors have access to the same inputs,” he adds. “Our job is to take those inputs and get a better output. So what our black box looks like, that’s what we’re focused on. Our system. Our people. Our processes. Our platform.”

BY THE BOOK

For a company that prides itself on its lack of paper, there’s one conspicuous paper product Risher takes into every sales meeting and that has become a point of pride for the RisherMartin team. “The book,” as it’s been dubbed, is at least one binder (sometimes more!) filled with every piece of information a client could want about their project, including copies of plans and specs for each product that’s going to be installed.

The books are built specifically for and given to each client as part of the extensive pre-build process, before anyone steps onto a jobsite. This helps prevent any questions and codify certain milestones during the remodeling process. Since the client picks out many aspects of the project very early on and they have a copy of the book in front of them, all it takes is a quick meeting to ensure everything is on track.

“A lot of times, because the clients are making these selections early, this is a nice reminder to them,” says Risher. “Because they will probably make a change somewhere in the house, and this gives them the opportunity to make the decision more proactively—not wait until it’s installed and say, ‘Oh geez, it’s not the color I wanted.’”

Risher and Martin attest that it’s not uncommon for their clients to put their specific book on their shelves once the project is finished. In keeping with RisherMartin’s paperless manifesto, the company’s copy of the book is digital.

If this sounds like a lot of information to keep together, it is: These behemoths are regularly hundreds of pages long. “It’s funny, when we first started the business our specs were about three pages. They’ve just grown through the years, and now we’re at a point where this is what we’re producing,” says Risher.

As the company has grown, so has the book. Lessons learned on previous jobs have helped transform the book from its humble origins to its current incarnation, and the company adds information as needed so that any potential problem is anticipated. This includes provisions for items as wide-ranging as filling a pool if the house has one to how often the on-site toilet is emptied.

“We’re thinking about all of that because we estimate that way,” says Risher. “I can clean the toilet once a week for a month

i RisherMartin Fine Homes

PRINCIPALS: Chris Risher and Jeremy Martin

LOCATION: Austin, Texas

YEARS IN BUSINESS: 6

SPECIALTY: Whole-home remodeling

and I get charged \$123. If I clean it twice a week for a month, I get charged \$145.” Including all of this information in the book helps homeowners understand the cost breakdown for their project.

“This document is getting bigger and bigger the smarter we get,” Martin explains. “It’s a living document.”

Because the level of detail for each job is so great, project managers at RisherMartin are restricted to two simultaneous projects. If the project is more demanding, Risher and Martin will keep that project manager on just that one job to ensure quality results.

THE RIGHT PEOPLE IN PLACE

RisherMartin’s technology and the book are impressive, but the philosophy behind these tools isn’t just to wow customers. It’s to invest more heavily in the most valuable resource the company has: its employees. Many of the systems in place were designed to save their employees time, and that emphasis has continued with new endeavors like putting cameras on jobsites.

“You can waste a ton of time in this business driving around from job to job,” says Martin. “On most of our jobs right now, we’re running high-definition cameras ... that allows us to monitor a jobsite.”

The cameras provide a security benefit, and since nearly all of RisherMartin’s clients do not live in their homes during the remodeling process, this also lets them view the progress or show it off to friends. But the real benefit is to the employees. Instead of taking the time to drive to a jobsite to check on something, they can just check the camera.

“The most expensive part of our operation is our professional and construction management team,” says Martin. “And if I can save them 50 hours a year, it’s worth thousands of dollars for me. This camera costs 300 bucks.”

To keep that construction management team operating to its highest abilities, RisherMartin added an assistant project manager position to facilitate anything that might slow down work on a jobsite. A few “quick” runs for lumber or tools can quickly turn into an extra day on the job, so the assistant project manager is there to keep things going.

“I can’t afford to have our project managers running to McCoy’s to pick up 2x4s, or running to Home Depot to pick something up,



Above: “The book” regularly includes hundreds of pages, everything a homeowner could want to know about their project. Some particularly intense projects require multiple binders.

Left: RisherMartin has been paperless since its inception. Every employee is working paperless from day one; no acquiring a bad habit and then needing to break it. The company did have a drafting table, but recently sold it to free up office space.

or cleaning up a jobsite,” says Martin. “[The assistant project manager’s] job is to make our project managers more efficient. It’s these little daily disciplines of running a company—clean jobsite, safe jobsite, secure jobsite. It’s not sexy, but it really works.”

STEADY AS SHE GROWS

RisherMartin’s success has been partly attributable to Risher and Martin planning out its growth ahead of time. In 2014, RisherMartin joined the Remodeling Big50 with sales volume around \$3 million. Last year, it was around \$4.5 million, and for 2016, they’re estimating \$8.2 million. The duo is already prepared for that growth and planning if and when to move to the next level.

“We have this pro forma that says, this is what our company would look like in three years,” says Martin. “This is how much revenue we’d be doing; this is how much work we’d be doing. So we go through this though exercise yearly, really to say, ‘OK, we’re moving this three-year window forward. What does our company look like in three years, what’s the org chart, who do we need, what are the positions?’”

Much of that foresight has come from deliberate exposure to the industry and learning from already established leaders. Both Risher and Martin highlight their involvement in Remodelers Advantage as a turning point for their business, and they continue to be involved in local groups.

“Jeremy took the HBA route and I took the NARI route,” says Risher. “Yes, we learned some tips and some practices and things like that, those are great. But really, it is about the relationship and just learning little tidbits here and there. It’s an accumulation of lots and lots of tidbits. Let someone else go make the mistake first, and we learn from their mistake. And they’re learning from us too. This is definitely a two-way relationship.”

STRIVING FOR SATISFACTION

At RisherMartin, not every sales meeting is successful. Some highly qualified referrals just don’t fit within their wheelhouse. But Risher and Martin approach each meeting as an opportunity, searching for the right clients who will appreciate their rigorous, detailed approach.

“We don’t need 300 people a year to believe what we believe,” says Martin. “We need [about] 12. We need 12 people to have a philosophical fit with the way we do business.”

For those 12 clients, RisherMartin becomes less a remodeler and more a friend. And even though they work on some technically impressive and beautiful homes, at the end of the day, the product isn’t the building—it’s the satisfaction of the client.

“The satisfaction rate in this industry for clients who go out and procure remodeling services is embarrassingly low,” says Martin. “When you get [a review] back and it’s raving about your people, it’s dream come true stuff. They’re saying all the things we want them to say: ‘The process is great, the communication couldn’t have been better, your project manager was a total pro, the jobsite was clean.’ I’m just reading through here and I’m like, ‘This is it. This is why we do this.’”

About the Fred Case Award

Chris Risher and Jeremy Martin are the winners of the Fred Case Remodeling Entrepreneur of the Year Award, established by Fred Case, the founder of Case Design/Remodeling. This marks the 10th anniversary of the annual award.

Case founded his company in 1961 with a little money and a lot of ideas, seeking to create a business, not a practice, and to constantly elevate the level of professionalism in the industry. This award reflects his commitment to that idea. Nominees for the award are evaluated for their business acumen, company financial strength, community and industry involvement, and entrepreneurial spirit.

The award is open to all remodeling company leaders and recognizes specific individuals, not a company. This is the only industry award of its kind in that a cash prize is awarded to finalists as well as to the winner. The finalists this year—Stephanie Vanderbilt, Leo Lantz, and Andy Haste, who are profiled in the following pages—each received a plaque and \$2,500 prize check. As winners, Risher and Martin received an additional \$10,000.

Judging this year’s award were Bruce Case, president at Case Design/Remodeling and Fred’s son; Kermit Baker, senior research fellow at the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University; and Bob Gockeler, last year’s Fred Case Award winner.

Interested in applying for next year’s award? Want to nominate someone? Contact Darryl Crosby at Case for more details at dcrosby@casedesign.com

