



# MARKET LEADERS

BY VINCENT AVIANI

The 2016 Market Leaders are a diverse and accomplished group. After a rigorous judging process, we selected winners from two regions—East and West—in a variety of categories from customer satisfaction to business excellence to fine design. Our package includes a profile on each company leader that not only honors his or her

achievements but also reveals the best practices that make that remodeler great.

So whether it's employee management or tips for customer service, there's something here that will benefit every reader.

Congratulations to all the winners. Enjoy!

*Vincent Aviani is a freelance writer living in Los Angeles.*

BUSINESS EXCELLENCE

## F.H. Perry Builder

Hopkinton, Mass.

President: Allison Iantosca

According to Allison Iantosca, business excellence is directly related to empowering employees. “We think a lot about adult development and try to offer a platform for personal growth while also promoting an awareness of what each member brings to the team,” Iantosca says.

The business of developing employees is a path that Iantosca has carefully plotted since taking over as president in 2006. “The clients really pick up on this empowerment and feeling of collaboration,” she says. “Our employees know that if they fail, they have our support; and if they succeed, we celebrate their success with them. It’s what we’re all about. We love to build. We love craft. We love great design and cool products and brilliant trades. And most of all, we love consulting and educating and listening, just as we do with the people in our lives who we already love.”



### Takeaways for Other Remodelers

To achieve a true focus on customer satisfaction, Iantosca says that every company owner should step away from the business. This allows for better understanding of the market. She suggests volunteering with a local group, joining a board of directors, or taking industry association seminars.

She also feels that each employee should be a direct extension of the brand. Whether a plumbing subcontractor or designer, each member of the team must feel empowered to implement a better strategy if needed.

Finally, she recommends homing in on your specific niche and understanding how to communicate it to clients in a personal way, especially on your website.

By empowering her employees, Allison Iantosca (center) helps each member of her team express true empathy for clients and present bold ideas that are born from passion. “The clients really pick up on this empowerment and feeling of collaboration,” she says.

The Sowrys have dedicated more than 25 years to creating attractive, comfortable living environments. They’ve also developed an effective system for expediting the pre-construction process.

BUSINESS EXCELLENCE

## Virtuoso Builders

San Antonio

President: Mike Sowry

Owned by Mike and Molly Sowry, Virtuoso Builders creates beautiful, comfortable homes for its clients.

The Sowrys developed a strong system that has shortened the pre-construction process, Molly says. The concept uses a simple worksheet that allows the Virtuoso team to detail every aspect of the project. By noting specific plumbing fixtures, countertop designs, lighting, and tile, Mike and Molly create a detailed

plan that’s punctuated with copious in-person interview notes. The worksheet provides a comprehensive picture of budget, time frame, and client preferences.

“We can then contact the suppliers with a complete picture of the project ... It literally eliminates half of the showroom samples,” Molly says. Every issue is worked out ahead of time, whether it’s budget, design priorities, draw schedule, or materials selection.

### Takeaways for Other Remodelers

Many remodelers assume that the hiring process only works one way. However, Virtuoso Builders believes in evaluating the client to ensure they will be a good fit.

Also, the idea of improving listening skills as a course of good customer service may not be new or novel, but Virtuoso Builders has many examples of jobs won simply because the competing firm did a poor job of listening.

Finally, the Sowrys recommend finding a designer who can work quickly and efficiently. Designers are artists who sometimes have trouble putting down the paintbrush, but Mike and Molly insist that an efficient designer is one of the most important ingredients in the time/money mix.



CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

## Normandy Design Build Remodeling

Hinsdale, Ill.

President: Andy Wells

Normandy has been an industry leader for nearly four decades. President Andy Wells started out in the sales department and then in 2003 was named president and full partner along with founder Reg Marzec.

“Referrals are the lifeblood of almost every remodeling company, and Normandy is no different,” Wells says.

An example can be seen in the way Normandy recently handled a customer complaint regarding a door installation from 25 years earlier. The company sent a technician to the home and replaced the door; no questions asked. Today, the remodeler has a customer for life.

### Takeaways for Other Remodelers

According to Wells, one of the most effective ways to boost customer loyalty is to focus on your online reputation. To accomplish this, he recommends assigning at least one person to monitor online chatter about your company, including social media pages and crowd-sourced review boards.

He also suggests that when responding to complaints, always remember that diplomacy is the best approach.

Stick to short answers that aren't defensive or angry.

Most customers are lenient about mistakes and will be even more likely to forget any problems if you attentively respond to their concerns.

Wells recommends that remodelers get involved with GuildQuality, a customer satisfaction survey for building professionals. “We can measure the outcome of any customer interaction with our designer or superintendent, also making our staff aware that we will be asking the customer about their experience,” Wells says.

Finally, he emphasizes that customer satisfaction is a team effort: “It starts with the person who answers the phone, all the way through final inspection. We try to help everyone we encounter, whether they become a customer or not, and our staff has seen how doing the right thing almost always pays dividends.”



One of the ways that Normandy Design Build Remodeling leads the field in customer satisfaction is through a single-point contact strategy with clients. Here, Normandy Designer Leslie Molloy, consults with clients on materials.



Bill Simone (center) has used customer surveys to shape his company into a major force in the design/build residential remodeling world.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

## Custom Design & Construction

El Segundo, Calif.

President: Bill Simone

For Custom Design & Construction, the pursuit of flawless customer interaction has been the focus of the company's business

principles since its inception in 1986.

One important tool is the surveys that are collected throughout the entire remodeling process. This ongoing measuring stick helps the remodeler quickly identify potential “pain points” and develop rapid resolutions to any problems. As the project nears completion, Simone

encourages clients again to leave unbiased feedback.

“The key to surveying clients is to get them to feel comfortable that no one will ‘get in trouble’ or that we are just fishing for compliments,” Simone says. “The customer has to feel comfortable about really being honest about our strengths and weaknesses and allow us to learn from that feedback.”

### Takeaways for Other Remodelers

Identify potential problems early and figure out a solution, Simone recommends. He encourages other remodelers to experiment with various surveying techniques.

He also tries to align similar personality types when working with clients. Some homeowners like an analytical, math-based dialogue, while others prefer more personal insights. According to Simone, it's important to identify the various personalities among team members and to use these personalities when talking with clients.

TECHNOLOGY

## Mosby Building Arts

St. Louis

President: Scott Mosby

In 2015, Scott Mosby named Mark McClanahan as president. McClanahan had helped spearhead development of a proprietary customer relationship management tool for Mosby: “Right Touch” was designed to connect Mosby’s 100-plus employees to real-time information, integrate with the accounting department, and act as a multifaceted tool to analyze jobs from sales to completion. “Our IT guy wrote the program with input from many at Mosby,” McClanahan says. “He ended up moving on to the software industry.”

### Takeaways for Other Remodelers

Few companies have the resources to develop a CRM system, but every firm needs tools for tracking profitability, McClanahan says. He advises remodelers to use software, even for basic elements of their business. As the company grows, it can modify the technology.



He also recommends committing to new technology throughout the company. “No platform will work unless you invest time, treasure, and talent,” he says. “Technology doesn’t work with a top-down approach. It has to involve everyone.”

Mosby Building Arts has now licensed Right Touch to a St. Louis-based company called Readybuild. The firm employs the developer who built Mosby’s CRM, and Readybuild has modified the software to create a commercially available product for other remodeling companies. Readybuild launched this year.

Employees at Mosby Building Arts conduct a weekly project manager meeting. Every member of the team is equipped with an iPad and iPhone and follows Tyler Cluff, vice president of production (center), as he reviews each job.



SUSTAINABILITY

## The Alexander Group

Kensington, Md.

President: Alex Dean

Alex Dean is a clear leader in creating energy-efficient dwellings. His company was formed in 2003, and in 2009 designed and built the first Certified Gold LEED home in the Washington D.C., area.

Dean eats, sleeps, and dreams about sustainable building.

He has achieved the National Association of the Remodeling Industry’s Green Certified Professional designation and holds US Green Building Council (USGBC) LEED AP Homes certification as well. While many energy-efficient designs will add cost, Dean has a strategy to help clients accept the increased price.

“I divide the options into ‘good,’ ‘better,’ and ‘best,’” he says. “Then I explain how the higher-performing materials will add efficiency and comfort. Finally, I explain that each building component of the remodeling process should be installed in a natural sequence of the design process. Otherwise the customer will be paying 60 percent more in the future.”

### Takeaways for Other Remodelers

Dean believes that all new and remodeled homes should last 100 years. This is one definition of “sustainable.” To create that durability, he insists on doing every little thing correctly the first time.

He also says that all remodeling pros should find and take a class on sustainable building practices, such as USGBC’s residential program, the National Association of Home Builders’ sustainable building classes for remodeling professionals, or advanced installation classes from individual suppliers. And remodelers who have taken classes and earned certifications should charge more because of their additional education and knowledge of advanced practices in sustainable design.

FINE DESIGN

**J.S. Brown & Co.**

Columbus, Ohio

President: Jeff Brown

The key to creating beautiful, practical remodeling masterpieces is to combine experience with collaboration, says Monica Miller, design consultant and sales manager for J.S. Brown & Co.

According to Miller, one of the key differentiators for J.S. Brown is the vast experience that team members contribute to each project. This includes certified remodelers, certified lead carpenters, and certified kitchen and bath designers. The team also employs experts to streamline logistics, materials selection, estimating, and accounting.

“Our team has worked together for years and really understands our system of collaboration,” Miller says. “We rely on this checks-and-balances approach to find the best solutions.”

Founded in 1978, J.S. Brown helps keep design at the forefront as the team guides clients through a detailed proprietary production process that emphasizes collaboration at every turn. This can be more than a mental exercise. Miller recalls a job that took a surprise turn after she received a call from the project manager. While working on a pocket door, he had discovered unexpected plumbing and HVAC obstacles between the kitchen and mudroom. Because the project manager hadn't spoken with the client, he called Miller, who had a deep understanding of the client's expectations. The two collaborated to create a new layer on the interior wall where the door could slide without interfering with existing equipment.

“Because the PM called me, we were able to create a beautiful solution that solved the problem and gave the clients the pocket door they really wanted,” Miller says.

**Takeaways for Other Remodelers**

Miller says the biggest mistake many designers make is that they don't continue their education. She encourages every remodeling professional to look to Pinterest, Houzz, and magazines for inspiration; enter design



Above: This kitchen remodel emphasizes the home's 1920 motif by integrating casing and crown trim with Ubatuba granite countertops and glass subway tile. Left: The bathroom in this Prairie-style house was designed to reflect its traditional roots while providing comfort and functionality for the clients.

awards; join associations and take the classes offered; and say tuned in to design trends from around the world. “Sometimes I'll see a tile job in Abu Dhabi that I think could be applied to a client's home down the road,” Miller says. “You never know what will influence your design ideas.”

She also encourages designers to be open to learning from others involved in their projects, such as project managers, plumbers, HVAC experts, and finish carpenters. “I always make an effort to visit jobsites and to talk with the guys doing the construction,” Miller says. “I think that, as designers, we want to appear as if we know it all, but we don't. I will ask about what's under the floor, what's behind the drywall, what's in the ceiling, and how the various systems work. I listen to these guys because they know more than I do.”

FINE DESIGN

## Brewster McLeod Architects

Aspen, Colo.

President: Jamie L. Brewster McLeod

Jamie McLeod loves her clients. She loves her boutique firm that includes offices in Telluride and Aspen. But more than anything, she loves designing beautiful homes that bring happiness to the people who will live there. Together with a tight-knit staff of architects and project coordinators, McLeod has created one of Colorado's most sought-after architectural firms. She prides herself on affecting clients spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

"We are a small firm and we focus entirely on beautiful designs that reflect the true lifestyles of our clients," she says. "That's why we only take on three or four projects a year. Some of our projects last up to five years."

One of the talents that Brewster McLeod Architects brings to every project is a thorough understanding of each client and the individual character of their homes. "We spend a great deal of time getting to know our clients," McLeod says. "In many cases, this is their second, third, fourth, or even fifth home. We want our work to be different and we want the process to be fun."

Designing high-end homes means that McLeod must gain a deep understanding of how the house will work. Her designs are a true reflection of each



family. If the home will be used to host grandchildren, McLeod and her team work to create unique spaces for that experience. If only two people occupy the house, McLeod's design will create a feeling of intimacy, even with 15,000 square feet of living space.

"We never want to make our designs feel overwhelming," she says. "We really try to make the house function as a full living environment. We do this by highlighting sunshine, views, and even the materials."

### Takeaways for Other Remodelers

McLeod maintains that the only way to really make a difference and to impress clients at the highest level is to get into their lives. "You really have to understand the client at a deep level ... to know how they live and use the home," she says.

Excelling in one aspect of your business—perhaps through more education or certifications, or by paying close attention to detail—will help create a clear differentiator for the client, she says. Additionally, McLeod is an avid reader who is often inspired by magazines that cover a wide range of topics, including design. Other influences come from traveling. "It's important to travel as much as possible with an eye for how other countries and cultures design and build," she says. PRO

Above: This classic, rustic home is located on Highlands Mountain in Aspen, Colo. Jamie McLeod used repeated angular shapes and warm-toned stone to accentuate the dramatic mountain setting. McLeod (left) has created one of Colorado's most sought-after luxury residential architectural firms, known for harmoniously incorporating its designs into nature-filled landscapes. Below, left: A more modern design pays subtle tribute to the region's wood cabins.



