

Upscale

Remodeling

DESIGNING AND BUILDING AT THE HIGH END
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hanley wood

Agents of *beauty*

One man endeavors to bring consistency
and service to the craft of remodeling.

By Nina Patel

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TreHus Builders' mission statement includes a reference to the company's employees as "agents of beauty and order." "In everything we do, from the way we dress, to our Web site, to the way we answer the phones, we want to communicate this," says David Amundson, president of the Minneapolis company.

He started TreHus, which means "house of wood" in Norwegian, almost 25 years ago. For the first 10 years, he wore all the hats. Now, Amundson has a staff of 12 office and 11 field employees. The company has a sales volume of more than \$3.5 million and completes about 35 jobs per year ranging from \$20,000 bathrooms to \$500,000 whole house projects.

The remodeler says it is important that, as a design/build firm, his staff remains an advocate for the client throughout the process. "Clients are putting a lot of trust in one company. We need to be worthy of our calling," he says. The company tries to mitigate clients' lifestyle disruption by adhering to consistent and detailed processes. "This includes how we write specifications and contracts, the quality of our blueprints, and the cleanliness of our jobsites," Amundson says.

SELLING DESIGN

The company has always wooed clients who appreciate, and will pay for, good design. Up until last year, TreHus worked with outside architects and a few in-house designers certified by the American Institute of Building Design. However, Amundson realized that his target clients prefer to work with architects. "The only way to attract clients to pay what it takes for great work is to have people on staff who they will trust with a higher level of design," he says.

Now the firm has an in-house architect and an interior designer. During the process of hiring, Amundson was pleasantly surprised that so many younger architects were looking

for an opportunity in residential remodeling. "Traditionally, a lot of architects feel it is beneath them to be aligned with a builder. I hope this is a sign that in the future [this] will be more acceptable," he says.

The interior designer's role is to guide clients through selections. "People get bogged down in the selection process," Amundson says. "Now our clients are spending the same amount of money, but are making better decisions and are happier with the end result."

PREPPING FOR GROWTH

Amundson is the primary salesperson at the company. At the first meeting with clients, he presents the TreHus process and takes photos and notes. He turns this over to one of two design/sales managers. "They are responsible for having the client sign a design agreement," he says.

The managers work with the design staff to develop the design; then create a budget and contract, schedule the project, and communicate with clients. "They act as project manager of design," Amundson says, "and then we also have project managers of construction."

Having the company owner first meet clients prevents the two managers from wasting time on prospects who will not ultimately sign with the company. But Amundson plans to give up this role and hire a salesperson. "It is not ideal for me to be the primary person promoting the company," he says. Especially when he expects the firm's 200 leads to increase with its new marketing plan.

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Today's upscale clients are more aware of aesthetics and brand names, but need guidance to create beautiful projects like this bathroom (left). TreHus is located in an 8,000-square-foot building (below), with 3,000 square feet of office space.



Amundson has been working with a public relations consultant, a graphic artist, and a Web site vendor to increase the company's presence in Minneapolis. "In the past, I've relied too much on referrals. To increase our volume, we need to have more of a voice in the community," he says.

The consultant has helped Amundson with a new print ad campaign that pairs the words "art" and "craft" with high-end images. "We want to reflect the idea of design/build, but say it visually," he says. This reinforces the firm's mission to be an "agent of beauty and order." The company is also redesigning its Web site, and next year plans to promote its 25-year anniversary.

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MASTERS OF CRAFT

Amundson's processes extend to the field crew. Instead of using the lead carpenter system, which he believes unduly burdens carpenters, he created a Master Carpenter program.

"We would rather carpenters focus on their craft," Amundson says. The company mostly focuses on older homes with a lot of detail work. "It's

not wise to take our best craftsman and put that person on the phone," he explains.

The Master Carpenter system defines job descriptions for a carpenter-in-training, carpenter, master carpenter-in-training, master carpenter, and senior master carpenter. Amundson's master carpenters are primarily responsible for building and providing quality control for work by trades. A senior master carpenter provides supervision for projects that are more than \$500,000.

"You can spend the rest of your life working next to a master carpenter, but unless you are willing to take the initiative, you will always be a helper. We provide information for employees who have the hunger to improve themselves and take on more responsibility."

Project manager Steve Groff has been with the company for 18 years and has seen firsthand how well the Master Carpenter system works. "It helps to have it in writing. There are some facets of the work they have not thought about," he says. Carpenters often feel they have the technical skills for the next level, but, Groff tells them, they also need the ability to plan ahead. He says the company often gives

carpenters who are close to the supervision level a small job, such as a bathroom. "We give them a feel for what it takes."

The firm's carpenters meet once a month to go over the company's core values. Every other month, one carpenter is charged with expounding on the practical aspects of the company's 25-item "principles to live by" (for a list of these principles, visit www.trehusbuilders.com). On alternate months, Amundson explains two items. "It helps everyone understand our principles and how to live them out on a job," Groff says.

He says the company also has checklists that staff can use as a tool to meet expectations. TreHus uses checklists for pre-construction meetings, pre-mechanicals, pre-drywall, the pre-finishing stage, and for after the job is completed.

Subcontractors also play a role. They receive job start notices with their start and completion date and the price of the job, as well as a list of behavioral expectations that are also posted on every jobsite. "If TreHus sets the tone, we can control the process. If we are not setting the tone, other people will do that for us," Amundson says. ■■



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