

kit**chen** & **bath** DESIGN NEWS[®]

The leading business, design and product resource for the kitchen & bath trade



SHOWROOMS • 40

INSPIRED SPACES

OUTDOOR KITCHENS • 34

Beyond the Walls

PRODUCT TREND REPORT • 44

Stylish Lavs

**+ DIRECTORY &
BUYERS' GUIDE**



KATE BRADY

How Disruptions Changed the Showroom

SINCE MARCH OF 2020, disruption has almost been the norm. First the pandemic had us worried about what would happen to our businesses, then it sent us scrambling to keep up. Remodeling boomed while at the same time supply chains fractured and employees found themselves pulled between work and caring for family. There is no denying it had a big impact, but can we now go back to normal or have things changed for good?

A comment I have often heard is that the pandemic was not so much a bringer of change as it was an accelerator of it. Things that were expected to take years to occur happened in a matter of months, even weeks. For example, prior to 2020 I had done a video conference maybe two times at most. The technology was there, but the demand was not. Now it is a valuable – and likely permanent – part of my work week because it lets me connect effectively with people anywhere. It saves me gas and time.

The pandemic forced us to do things we might have previously considered but were afraid to risk trying. But, has it made us smart-

er or braver about trying new things, or are we still practicing pre-pandemic thinking? How has life changed – long term – for us and for our customers?

they identified all the problems homeowners faced in the remodeling process and then pinpointed which of those they could use their skills to address. They discovered that two big factors facing homeowners were a lack of clarity about the process and the ability to find a good contractor for a small job, like a single bathroom. Using data, the company developed tools that allow them to quote and design projects, and match contractors to clients, before ever setting foot in the home. Homeowners who were cautious or unsure could now start the process by simply clicking through a website.

I imagine many people reading this will think, “Okay, that’s fine. But the people who sign up for remodeling online are not our customers.” Are you sure? Being able to offer a quality remodel wasn’t what made this company attractive – that was simply a basic requirement. What made them attractive was being able to better address two key hurdles homeowners encountered. By doing that, they made it easy for customers to say yes. They did not compete by showing they could do a better remodel. Instead,

time to step back and learn what new obstacles your clients are facing in the process.

I mentioned spending the afternoon at the showroom waiting for help. I know many showrooms adopted an “appointment only” policy during lockdown and discovered it improved the process for both the client and salesperson with no harm to overall sales. Most of us probably never would have implemented such a policy had we not been forced into it. But now clients can book a slot and arrive knowing they will be helped quickly and not have to consume their whole day in the showroom.

What other changes have you resisted because you think they won’t work or perhaps because you think they aren’t needed? Have you added a touchless or online payment option? What about offering a way for clients to get information after hours? It isn’t important for the changes to be big, but it is important for the changes to address your clients’ needs.

You can have great products and great people, but you can still lose business if your process is throwing obstacles into the path of your customers. Many of the ways our customers live and work has changed dramatically over the last two years and, with that, their expectations have changed as well. I have showroom salespeople whose contractor clients often need help after hours or on weekends. These salespeople work primarily with professional customers and come to the showroom only when they have appointments – the rest of their time is flexible. This allows them to schedule their time so as to be able to respond to their contractors after hours while also creating a better work/life balance for themselves. This practice never would have been tried if not for the lockdowns, but now we will keep this model for a few staff members, because it is meeting the new needs of both them and the client.

I think everyone has heard the definition of insanity as “doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.” Logical in a static world, but that is not the world we find ourselves in today. I believe showrooms can no longer assume that having great products and people will be enough. Today the definition of insanity may be, doing the same thing and expecting the same results. These last two years have shown us what we can really do, so let’s not stop now. ■

Kate Brady is director of Showroom Operations for General Plumbing Supply (GPS) and currently serves on the Board of Directors for the Decorative Plumbing and Hardware Association and on the Advisory Committee for the Luxury Products Group/IMARK. She joined GPS in 1995 and is located in the San Francisco Bay Area.

“The pandemic was not so much a bringer of change as it was an accelerator of it.”

they offered customers a better way to buy – they improved the process, not the product.

APPLYING NEW TACTICS

How does this translate to the rest of our industry? Good products are a requirement but not usually the differentiator. Successful showrooms, reps and manufacturers know that, in addition to quality, it takes service, knowledge and relationships to create success. Now we need to start considering whether the ways we’ve always done business will continue to meet the needs of our customers now, or have our customers developed new needs? Will people continue to be willing to spend an afternoon waiting for help at a showroom? Will other options come along that will lure some away with a better process?

Most independent showrooms and reps are not going to have access to the kind of money or big data that fuels most big online ventures. But we do have the ability to change quickly and to learn from our customers about how their lives have changed in the last two years. Maybe you can’t develop an expensive online tool to reach your clients yet, but you can talk to them. It has and always will be true that one of the best ways to win someone’s business is to show them you understand what they need. So now is a good

AN UPDATED APPROACH

How do you feel about buying a remodeling project online, getting an estimate, consulting with a designer and signing-off on the final presentation without ever leaving your home or meeting in person with your designer or contractor? It may sound unlikely, but here in California there is at least one company offering exactly this experience and doing it very successfully.

Opening in San Francisco in February of 2020, this company offered an online option just as people were becoming afraid to go into stores and offices. Being locked at home and unwilling to mix with a lot of other people likely made homeowners more willing to try this new format. Even so, how did this company convince people to sign a contract with only virtual contact? Maybe it was because they didn’t focus on the product, they focused on the process.

It might come as a surprise to know that this company was not founded by contractors or designers, but by tech entrepreneurs accustomed to working with data. With extensive research,