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Design Dream Teams

Recognizing that it often takes a team of professionals to create and deliver a client's dream space, designers share their tips for forging successful collaborations.

BY KIM BERNDTSON

A client may start a dream kitchen, bath or other-room project by walking through the doors of a design showroom to enlist the talents of a professional whose forte is space planning, and creating purposeful and beautiful layouts. However, given the extensive laundry list of elements and features to be included in these highly detailed and critically functional spaces, sometimes the totality of a project goes beyond the expertise of a kitchen and bath designer.

For that reason, kitchen and bath designers oftentimes collaborate and partner with other industry professionals – including architects, interior designers and decorators, builders, remodelers, fabricators, lighting specialists, plumbing, tile and hardware specialists, and more – all of whom may provide additional knowledge to help the designer create the client's dream space.

This month *KBDN* asked those who work in the kitchen and bath industry to share their thoughts about collaboration, the benefits profitable partnerships offer and tips about how to ensure each collaborative project is a success.

COMBINING INDIVIDUAL STRENGTHS

Understanding and appreciating each other's strengths is a critical component to a successful collaboration, according to Paul Greenspan. The general manager for Central Kitchen & Bath in Winter Park, FL, often collaborates with custom home builders and interior designers on many new construction projects. "We are known in central Florida as the company to go to if you want to collaborate," he says. "Those we work with understand what we bring to the table, marrying our expertise in designing and installing kitchens with their expertise in overall home design."

The greatest beneficiaries of those collaborative efforts are ultimately his clients, he notes. "We may get a plan where an architect has created a kitchen," he says. "But it may not be to the liking of the homeowner because [it doesn't mesh with] their individual taste. When we meet with the homeowner, we get an understanding of their wants and needs to create the kitchen of their dreams. They get the expertise of someone who knows kitchens and baths, since it's all we do, whereas an architect is more focused on the entire house."

There are additional advantages as well, he adds. "When we collaborate with home builders, they want a reliable source who they know can provide quality work. They don't have to worry about getting it done right, or on time. When we meet those expectations, we gain the benefit of repeat business. In the end, product is product, but people buy from people... from friends. It's about establishing relationships and a rapport so your collaborators don't want to go anywhere else. They know how you work and vice versa."

KEEPING UPDATED

Keeping updated on new products and trends is another benefit of collaboration, according to Danielle Bohn, CKD, and Hollie Ruocco, CMKBD, of Creative Kitchen Designs in Anchorage, AK, who specialize in custom cabinetry and design for new construction and remodels. Because they don't do any install for their designs, they are always collaborating with others, enlisting the assistance of other NKBA members when possible and, oftentimes, working with the same core group of people with whom they have developed strong relationships.

Jay Young worked collaboratively with several suppliers, including his countertop fabricator to create a special island top for this client. 'The trend in our area right now is for a monochromatic, tonal look,' he says. 'But clients still want some drama and interest in the space. In this case, we worked in great detail with our countertop fabricator, who was able to take a photo of the slab, then lay it on top of the digital template to see exactly where the movement is located. That is critical in showing our clients how the countertop will look when it's installed.'



Photo: Lance Holloway, Holloway Productions



▣ This modern Palm Beach home combined the talents of an architect and a designer. Architecturally, the axis lines worked and had a very clean look, according to designer Sarah Blank, but she notes that it was important that the proportions worked, too, and that all of the cabinets were the right size and that appliances were incorporated in such a way as to keep the look as clean as possible. Two equal-sized Gaggenau towers (one all-refrigerator, and one refrigerator/freezer) were designed in to meet the client's need for ample food storage.

"I would say every project is a collaboration for us," says Bohn. "We work with flooring installers, countertop installers, etc., and Hollie on many occasions also works with interior designers and architects, depending on the size of the job. Using other professionals' expertise is ideal for us because we can't be perfect at everything. We know the ins and outs of our cabinet lines, but there are details others can help us with, such as a contractor who may point out that a particular countertop needs extra support, or an appliance rep who may know that a certain model requires an extra 1/8" beyond what is listed in the specs."

The two also collaborate with product suppliers, including those for tile, appliances, lighting, etc. "This makes it easier for our clients because they don't have to shop around for someone to trust," states Ruocco. "We can make referrals and give them ideas about what products to use."

But trying to keep updated in an ever-changing market can be difficult. "I haven't sold appliances for about 17 years," she continues. "Trying to keep updated can be challenging because products change so frequently. The lighting market has changed so much as well. Specialists within these areas know their products, so we rely on them to keep us updated on trends and new models, and they rely on us for our specialty. It works out well."

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Sarah Blank, of Sarah Blank Design Studio, in Greenwich, CT, realizes and appreciates the benefits of building and nurturing relationships as well. Since she started in the kitchen design industry in 1981, she has worked to build trust in the select group of architects and interior designers she wishes to partner with.

"From a business standpoint, some of the most important collaborations I have are with my colleagues...with architects and interior designers," she says. "When I opened my business in 1999, I set out to collaborate with some of the finest architects and designers in the country, so I have studied – and still study – classical architecture to understand the integration of a kitchen or bath into the architecture of a home, while making sure it functions for the homeowner in the 21st century."

Collaboration is the key to creating the very best projects imaginable, she continues. "When you combine a high-end decorator who understands fabrics and textures, with someone like me – a kitchen and bath designer – who understands the function of the space, then add an architect who helps integrate everything together, you end up with a fabulous team," she maintains.

Blank has developed close relationships with many of her vendors as well, noting that loyalty is critically important,

Photo: Stacy Bass



↑ Sarah Blank credits the success of this classical architecture home to Sheldon Kostecky, the architect she worked with to design its kitchen. 'My client brought me the plans from three architects, none of which she liked,' says Blank. 'I referred her to Sheldon. He 'listened' to the home and put on an addition that made it beautiful. My job as a kitchen designer is really easy when I have a chance to work with a great architect.'

especially when executing the high-end kitchens and baths she creates. "I am very loyal to my vendors," she says, pointing out a 15-year relationship with her stone fabricator. "When I need something, they perform. My stainless steel fabricator is always there for me, too, as are my mill shops and cabinet makers. I have developed a team that really strives for excellence, just like I do."

EXTENSION OF THE BUSINESS

Jay Young, CKD, Toulmin Cabinetry and Design, Tuscaloosa, AL, considers his collaborative partners to be an extension of his business. "We rely heavily on suppliers we collaborate with, and we value their opinions," he says. "We really couldn't do what we do without them. It's a team that makes everything work."

In particular, collaboration gives him the ability to deliver spectacular design elements to his clients, such as stunning countertops. "My fabricators can take a photo of a specific slab and lay it on the digital template to see exactly where the movement is," he says. "I can give that information to my clients so they can see exactly how the stone will look, especially where cutouts will fall. These types of collaborations are huge when you are looking to add drama and interest."

Young also notes that relationships with other professionals can serve as a valuable resource for product information to ensure product packages meet client needs, acknowledging that kitchen and bath designers may not be experts in every aspect. As specialists within their particular niche, Young says his collaborative partners also know what is on trend, citing plumbing fixture finishes as an example. "Unlaquered



Photo: Dave Davis with DMD Photography

▣ Collaboration was critical in completing this home, which was located 2.5 hours from Creative Kitchen Design's studio in Anchorage. 'I needed to place a lot of trust in my collaborative partners for this project since I could only be at the jobsite three times during its construction,' says Hollie Ruocco. 'Trust is something we are very reliant upon because of where we live.'

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Photo: Michael Lowry Photography

Paul Greenspan worked extensively with Steve Robertson Construction to create this dream kitchen for his client. The design required removal of a couple of walls, along with relocation of plumbing and electric. 'Our relationship with Steve allowed open conversation on how to best accomplish what the homeowner was looking for,' says Greenspan.

brass is coming back," he says. "Not every manufacturer offers that particular finish, so our suppliers can help direct us to those that do."

Ultimately, working in collaboration is beneficial to clients, he believes. "They get a sense that there are a lot of people trying to help them achieve the best end result," he notes. "They feel like they have a team of industry professionals who are helping them build their dream space."

FOCUS ON PRODUCT SELECTIONS

Even those who specialize in design/build realize the benefits of collaboration and seek out the expertise of other professionals for many of their projects.

"Collaboration is a constant for us," says Bryant Boyd, J. Bryant Boyd Design-Build, in Georgetown, TX. "Even though we do a lot of our own design and construction internally, we work a lot with interior designers and, certainly, trade designers...people like cabinetry, countertop and plumbing suppliers. I would say every project has some type of collaboration. I don't think we can do a job without it."

Boyd especially appreciates joining forces when he can take his clients to kitchen and bath product showrooms, and collaborate with designers who can help sort through the nearly endless array of products.

"We can take our clients to, for example, a plumbing showroom and work with designers to make selections," he says. "They are so familiar with their products that they can quickly narrow down the choices. If someone has a particular design style in mind, they can help figure out what to eliminate so they can focus on things to look at. That's true for lighting, countertops, cabinetry, etc."

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Because collaborations and partnerships are such an integral part of many kitchen and bath designers' businesses, ensuring their success is critically important. When asked for what they see as the most important factors in successful collaborations, the following topped their lists.

Hone communication skills:

"When you have the amount of people collaborating on a project that we do, we need to make sure everyone is on the same page," says Bohn. "We are in constant communication with everyone involved in the project so everyone knows what is going on. If someone doesn't know what they are responsible for, it all falls apart."

Young agrees, emphasizing that it's all the more critical given the overlap in job duties between professionals in the industry. "For example, someone may sell and fabricate, but



Photo: Lance Holloway, Holloway Productions

This kitchen design, completed by Jay Young, was done in collaboration with a structural engineer and contractor. The previous kitchen was tiny, so the trio worked to create a new floor plan where some walls could be moved without creating load-bearing issues.

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Photo: Carlos Barron Photography



Photo: Carlos Barron Photography

for a particular job, maybe they are only selling so it's important that everyone know the scope of the work they will do on each project," he says.

A tool he uses to keep everyone connected is Basecamp, a web-based program that organizes projects, internal communications and client work in one place. "It's private, so messages, pictures, to-do lists, reminders, comments, etc. are only shared with people we invite," he says. "We can also share certain parts of the collaboration with clients and they can provide feedback. It's an easy platform for communicating, and it's the best thing we use within our team."

Learn to listen:

Designers emphasize the importance of listening as a vital part of communication as well.

"Always be a good listener," says Greenspan. "When you listen well, you can often hear things between the lines. Most people are happy to tell you what they want. If you stop talking and start listening, you'll find out what that is, and then you can work it into the design."

📸 🏠 Bryant Boyd collaborated with interior designer Linda McCalla of Linda McCalla Interiors to select finishes for this new-construction home. 'It's a beautiful space that is elegant, yet comfortable... something that is livable,' says Boyd. 'That is a result of working with Linda and her team to select just the right finishes.'

"You have to listen, and be a good team player," agrees Blank. "Learn to give and take, and be willing to let go sometimes. Put your ego aside, and be understanding and compassionate."

Give credit:

Young suggests offering praise for a job well done. "Give credit to others," he says. "Everyone likes recognition when they pull off an awesome project."

Be patient:

"Relationships take time," says Greenspan, who adds that being active in associations affords an opportunity to meet people with whom you can build relationships. "They won't happen overnight. Keep going, keep calling. Ask to bid a project so you can show the value you offer."

"A lot of people expect business right away," he continues. "But it takes time to build trust in people to bring you jobs. There isn't someone out there just waiting to give you a job. You have to do something to earn it."

Blank agrees. "I am honored to be brought into some great teams," she says. "I have worked hard on building relationships, and I have spent a great deal of time developing trust."

"I recently worked with an architect who said he would never work with a kitchen designer," she continues. "But one of his clients asked specifically that one be brought into the project. I also work with the Institute of Classical Architecture and Art, and because of that association, he knew about me. I worked with him on the project and he told me partway through that I brought so much to the table. Now I am working with him on another project. But it has taken 10 to 15 years for that to happen." ■