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DESIGN/BUILD

Why You Can't Afford to Neglect the Selections Process

How to streamline the product selections process to optimize efficiency

By **Bruce D. Snider**

Imagine two design/build remodeling projects, both beautifully designed, both flawlessly constructed. But while one finishes on schedule, with a happy client and a profit on the balance sheet, the other bogs down, goes over budget, and leaves raw feelings all around. The difference? A well-planned and well-managed selections process. Mundane as it seems, directing the flow of all those discretionary bits and pieces can make or break any project. Influencing client decisions in a positive way requires a combination of structure and finesse as subtle as anything in design and construction.



Courtesy of Feinmann Inc.

In simple designs like this kitchen remodel by Peter Feinmann, the details make a big difference.

Control the Process

Remodeler Peter Feinmann, president of Lexington, Mass.-based Feinmann Inc., says that taming the selections beast requires a clear chain of command. He streamlines the process by assigning each job a "project developer," who coordinates all the other professionals involved. Depending on the project, this key role can be filled by one of Feinmann's in-house architects, a project manager, or Feinmann himself. The crucial part is that the project developer sets the pace—and the expectations—for the selection process.

"In our company," Feinmann says, "the project developer is the key point of contact, and the architect and interior designer serve under the direction of that person." Without someone assigned to direct traffic in this way, selections can resemble the Abbott and Costello routine "Who's on First?," he says. "Who's in charge of the relationship with the client? To me, the project developer is always on first." That means making sure that clients know where and when to shop for their appliances, countertops, tile, and fixtures, and that the design team's renderings show only materials or products that are in the budget.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Bruce Snider is senior contributing editor at *Custom Home* and *Residential Architect*. He's also a frequent contributor to *Remodeling*.

Cape Cod-based design/build architect John DaSilva, design principal of Polhemus Savery DaSilva Architects Builders, applies an additional layer of control to manage his firm's large-scale remodeling projects. "Most of our homes are second homes," he says, "and many of our clients have interior designers that they bring to the table."

To organize a multitude of selections from various sources, DaSilva adopted the computer project management program BuilderTREND. Early in each project, DaSilva's designers identify every selection item and assign a deadline. Clients receive password-protected access to the entire project schedule, and the program generates an email reminder as each deadline approaches.

"The architectural project manager is prompted as well," DaSilva says, which allows for additional prodding if necessary. "You can't force a client to stay on schedule, but BuilderTREND is the best scenario we've found for prompting that. Occasionally client inaction changes a schedule, but we have a very well established process. We never miss our contractual deadlines."



Eric Roth / courtesy of Polhemus Savery DaSilva Architects Builders

This addition by John DaSilva pairs striking details, such as a unique weather vane and skylight, with a neutral palette.

Control the Product

DaSilva is equally focused on controlling the supply chain for every item that goes into a project. "We can't take responsibility for something we didn't purchase, that we didn't vet," he says. "If somebody buys something themselves, no matter where it comes from, we will only install it if they indemnify us." Few of DaSilva's high-end clients want to source products themselves just to save a few dollars, he says. "More often, they will find some specialty item that you can't buy any other way. They might be on a trip in Europe and see something they like, and they buy it and give it to us to install. When that happens, we make it clear that our accepting it depends on that indemnification."

With the range of available products growing by the minute, clients may have difficulty making a final choice. Feinmann, who became a kitchen dealer more than 10 years ago, maintains a selection center where his designers help narrow the focus. "But there's no such thing as a set universe of selections," he says. "We can show clients a lot of things we work with, but that doesn't mean it's going to fly. There's something called the Internet."

Online research gives clients instant access to a vast range of products and project images, which can help designers zero in on their tastes and preferences. But that browser window can just as easily become a Pandora's box. "We give our clients kind of a shopping list, if they want start looking at products and getting a feel for what's out there in the marketplace," Feinmann says, but he insists they limit their use of the Web to window shopping.

"We want to buy all the products except for appliances, whether it's lighting or tile or knobs," he says. "We always send our allowances and plans to our favorite vendors, so they're prepared when the client walks in. In this business, you have to control the product, own it, and make a profit on it, because you're going to be working hard on it."

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Courtesy of CG&S Design-Build

Bright blue tiles and coordinating drawer pulls provide a pop of color in this bathroom remodel by Mark Evans

Buy Local

Mark Evans, project designer at Austin, Texas-based CG&S Design-Build, points out another potentially significant pitfall of shopping online or at low-cost retailers. "A lot of times the product will be of lesser quality," he says. "It will be the same company that makes the faucet, say, but the insides are different from what you'd get at a showroom. ... You get the same look, but it's not the same quality."

Online shopping creates chain-of-custody problems too, Evans says. "Someone will say, 'I'll just buy that light fixture online, and you'll install it, and I'll save X amount of dollars.' And the light comes in with the glass broken, and we don't have any control over the Internet company to get that glass in a hurry. We try to get clients to understand that it's not in their best interest. The quality won't be the same; if there's any kind of problem with the thing, it's going to take longer to fix it; and if it's something important, it can really slow down the job."

To get the best result from both the remodeler's and client's standpoint, Evans makes selections an integral part of the design process. "We meet the clients at their house," Evans says. "Seeing what they already have, you get a little hint of their taste. We get ideas about how they'd like the kitchen to function. Do they bake a lot? Do they need a place for their mixer to live?" People used to collect folders of clippings, he says. "Now with Houzz and Pinterest, they just give us their password."

As the design develops, Evans' architects and designers work with clients as early as possible to fill in product categories with specific selections, rather than with lists and allowances. "We try to minimize allowances," he says. "We want them for things like door hardware ... small things." For larger items, he prefers to keep budget categories fluid, so clients can economize on lower-priority items and splurge on a few special things, while still meeting their target figure.

Most important, Evans and his designers chaperone clients to the firm's favorite suppliers and showrooms. "There are some very savvy clients that really know what they want," he says, "and we're there to just take them to the showrooms and show them where these things are. Other people have no idea and really want our help. But we've visited with them; we know what their furniture and art is like. We get to know them as well as we can, and then we go shopping."

Bruce Snider is senior contributing editor at [Custom Home](#) and [Residential Architect](#). He's also a frequent contributor to [Remodeling](#).

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