

## Specialization

By Benjamin Thompson,  
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# Jack of All Trades?

Recently, I was in a room with a dozen or so other contractors and the issue of specialization was brought up. One contractor was asked if and what type of work his company specialized in, and what differentiated his company from others. His reply was all too common. As I remember, he said, "Oh Yes! We specialize in building custom homes, remodeling, we do some light commercial work, siding, roofing, decks..." and on and on he went. His company was small, with only a few employees. This seems to me to be symptomatic of the "Jack-of-All-Trades" syndrome. We all know the adage, "Jack of all trades, master of none," and it rings true in many cases.

We need to explore whether we should suffer our companies to be Jacks-of-All-Trades or should we limit ourselves to the type of work we are best suited for, find pleasure in doing, and can make a living at?

thing to keep our companies stable and our team members working. However, if we neglect to study our businesses it will only be so long before the blind lead the blind into a ditch.

Each of us is bound by time itself and our expertise. Honestly, most of us would rather work really hard IN our business instead of really working ON our business. The total number of hours our team members can work productively, and the specific expertise of our team members is one of the limiting factors of our companies. In his book "Good to Great", Jim Collins suggests that we need to

A key to differentiating your company from the hundreds of quality contractors in Western Michigan is by specializing the type of remodeling that your company does. Building custom new homes, remodeling, and commercial work are vastly different from each other and a company needs to be set up differently to tackle each type of project.

For the last three years, our local economy has been difficult, to say the least. Potential clients have been holding off on that remodeling project because their current situation is still workable. Most of us have been doing just about any-

thing to explore whether we should "suffer our companies to be Jacks-of-All-Trades or should we limit ourselves to the type of work we are best suited for, find pleasure in doing, and can make a living at?"

Before you really spend some time on the question above, let's focus in a little more. Does your company specialize in remodeling? What type of remodeling? Following are some possible specialties:

### HANDYMAN

The handyman is bound by the inefficiency of setup, teardown, and travel time but his market is large. Who doesn't have a "To Do" list around the house? Scheduling, time management, and properly burdening labor are critical to the success of this type of operation.

### LIFE-CYCLE MAINTENANCE

Roofs eventually leak and shingles need to be replaced. Vinyl siding and aluminum make the exterior of homes virtually maintenance free. The market is large and the work is relatively straightforward. There is a lot of competition in this segment of our industry, so low cost and speed are paramount.

### TRADE CONTRACTORS SPECIALIZING IN REMODELING

There are many plumbers, electricians, and heating & cooling professionals that cannot perform remodeling work. They prefer the open access of new construction to fishing wires & pipes through closed walls and working in finished spaces.

### REMOVE & REPLACE

Fixtures, bathrooms, floor coverings, even windows, can be updated by simply removing the old and replacing with new. A desire to update the cosmetic look and changes in technology drive this type



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of improvement. Stock kitchen cabinets and countertops can be updated in the same fashion. Fit, finish, and workmanship become more of a focus.

### KITCHEN & BATH DISTRIBUTORS

The element of design becomes quite important with kitchen and bath distributors. A majority of the time walls are left intact, but the layout is changed to make the best use of existing space. The products themselves – cabinets, fixtures, or other finishes, are the focus over the process, service, or design.

### FULL-SERVICE DESIGNED REMODELING

The most involved form of remodeling is full-service designed remodeling. Clients work directly with a design-build remodeling firm or an architect who specializes in remodeling. Design is solution based and the goal is to correct defects in the house and/or recreate the total living space to better meet the individual needs of the client. Projects are more complex and require more management than other types of remodeling. The products and finishes are an integral part of the holistic process of designed remodeling. Serving the customers (who most often are living in their homes during construction) is incredibly important, from the first feasibility study through the final punch list.

Let me shift here to an illustration. On my first and only experience squirrel hunting as a young teenager, someone in the group shot a squirrel with a 12-gauge shotgun. The tool certainly overpowered the animal. It was way too much tool for that particular

application. In a similar way, no single business is best suited to take on all types of remodeling projects.

Take time to study your company and discover what sets it apart from the hundreds of other remodeling companies in Western Michigan. Focusing your company's resources around its specific core competency will absolutely lead to greater success.

**WMRR**

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### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1) What type of work does your company do really well?
- 2) Does the expertise & size of your team appropriately meet the demands of the type of work you are currently pursuing?
- 3) How can you develop your team to better service the needs of your target market?
- 4) What [besides quality] sets you apart from the hundreds of other remodeling companies out there going after the same type of work you're after?

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