



Otterbeck Builders

Turning *Befores* into Fabulous *Afters*

Story by Craig Stevens

Photos by Randall Perry Photography

What are the qualities that make for a successful residential remodeling company? Opinions may vary, but after 15 years of observing and interacting with contractors who specialize in remodeling, I have come to the conclusion that there are four elements that are common to those that prosper:

Foremost is a kind of enduring passion for and a taking of pride in the business. It is a challenging and often tiring endeavor, yet every good remodeler I know looks forward to each day's work.

Second is knowledge of all the crafts involved. A remodeler need not possess all the skills applicable to remodeling, but he or she does need to be able to make expert determinations. And it is more than simply discerning good work from bad — we all can make that judgement — but superior work from the merely good or adequate. The level of quality is found in the details.

Third is the recognition that remodeling is a service industry. It involves working on and within a private home and it involves interpersonal relationships. Coupled with this awareness are the essential characteristics of fairness, honesty and a professional demeanor and conduct. If the remodeler also brings to this element a winning personality, he has an added asset.

Lastly is the possession of business skills and acumen. This is the part that largely goes unseen by a client, unless the skills fall short. It involves the know-how to administer projects (often several at one time) and to lead a team of employees, subcontractors and suppliers. In the latter's interactions with a remodeler's clients, they must mirror the remodeler's positive values. And, bottom line, the company must be kept solvent and profitable, for without a reasonable return all else will fall.



All Before photos courtesy of Otterbeck Builders, Inc.

Many contractors consistently demonstrate one, two or three of these characteristics, but relatively few maintain them all. Via peer review, client commentary and my personal observations, Otterbeck Builders, Inc. is one who does.

Development to this level of quality and success took time. Born and raised in Nassau in Rensselaer County, New York, Dett Otterbeck's interest in construction came naturally. His father, a brother, an uncle and a cousin all worked as carpenters. Upon leaving high school, Dett became a laborer for Wood Brothers, a home building and remodeling company owned by the father of Dett's future wife and partner, Julie. He recalls that "after a year I was laid off. For another year or so I worked two jobs, at Key Bank and Hess. Then I returned to Wood Brothers, working on and then running a framing crew."

By the time he was 25 and for a decade thereafter Dett was primarily a Wood Brothers framing subcontractor. Dett formally established

ON THE COVER: A two-story addition to a Cape-style home, featuring a family room downstairs and a master suite (shown at the end of the article) and office upstairs. Photo © Randall Perry Photography.

Otterbeck Builders, Inc. in 1988. Slowly he entered into remodeling and together with Julie he began to grow his company to its current strength. Despite being raised amid a family of builders, Julie Otterbeck initially worked in an area unrelated to the industry. At first their office was in their home. Julie would work her day job and "Until our first son Nick was born I would be there every night doing the invoicing and paying the bills." Nick's arrival followed by his brother Corey meant a transition to more space.

A bigger transition came when the couple decided to professionalize their burgeoning business. They opened an office/showroom on Route 20, Julie became the full-time bookkeeper/accountant and they began to add to their staff of capable employees.

Dett established his reputation and credentials by being willing to take small jobs. He says that "Replacing a door or a couple of windows" would begin a relationship with a homeowner that "would lead to a deck, a kitchen remodel or an addition." Instantly likeable, Dett's desire to do the work to perfection struck a harmonious chord with homeowners who would then call upon him for larger projects. He had earned their trust.



Before



After

This large two-story townhome addition built by Otterbeck Builders doubled the homeowners's living space to include the large retro-style kitchen shown on the previous pages, a family room and new deck, a master suite upstairs with the spacious bathroom shown above.

Today Dett and Julie employ a staff of about a dozen who collectively have more than 150 years of building experience. Together they complete 30 to 40 projects each year. The work is varied: additions, kitchen and bath remodeling, basement finishing, decks, porches and sunrooms, window and siding replacement and still a bit of home maintenance and repair work. And there are projects that defy simple description. For instance, in one neighborhood dominated by townhouses, Otterbeck was called in to insert a loft above a space that had risen to a cathedral ceiling. Then they repeated the process in another house on the same street. And then a third, which was integrated into the major addition shown in the accompanying photographs.

CUSTOMERS WHO hire Otterbeck Builders talk as much about how his crew goes about their work as they do the final product. One wrote:

These guys don't screw around when they get here in the morning they are working/ attacking the project right away and they never seem to stop right up to and beyond quitting time. These guys clean up every day and WOW, it is exciting to come home and see all that they have accomplished. I came home from work and these guys were working under a tarp in the pouring rain. It must take an Act of God to stop them!

Another commented:

We have received compliments from not only our neighbors but from complete strangers who have watched the progress of our addition. The recurring comment is how well integrated the addition is with our existing house. We were impressed with the work ethic of all involved. The carpenters produced a phenomenal quality and quantity of work. All [of them] were very polite, courteous and professional from start to finish.



The sunroom built by Otterbeck Builders for this colonial home expanded the living space and enhanced the back of the home architecturally.



The cleanliness of Otterbeck job sites is widely appreciated. Dett requires that sites be swept clean at the end of each day. There is no smoking within the homes and there is a penalty if he finds debris on the grounds.

The Otterbecks are proud of their staff. They are neither nameless nor faceless. Each is depicted on the company's web site along with a biographical sketch. And included are craftsmen who have operated their own businesses or held more titled positions but find working for the Otterbecks more to their liking.

It is not surprising then that in 2004,



Otterbeck Builders, inc. At-A-Glance

Founders and Principals: Dett and Julie Otterbeck (since 1988)

Services: Residential Remodeling, Light Commercial Remodeling

Service Area: Greater Capital Region

Industry Memberships: Capital Region Builders and Remodelers Association, New York State Home Builders Association, National Association of Home Builders

Office/Showroom: 4151 Route 20, Castleton, NY 12033

Telephone: (518) 477-1438

Web Site: www.otterbeckbuilders.com



Otterbeck Builders, Inc. received *Remodeling* magazine's "Big 50 Award" in the "TeamWork" category. *Remodeling* is the nation's leading trade publication for the remodeling industry and every year thousands of contractors vie for its recognition. The TeamWork category is especially prized as it rewards the efforts of the entire company.

OTTERBECK BUILDERS, Inc. is a design/build firm. In simplest terms, this means their customers need only deal with one company to develop, manage and complete their project. Otterbeck can create construction drawings using their in-house computer-assisted design (CAD) software or link with one of several residential architects with whom the company has ties. Doing so can save time, reduce or eliminate communications headaches,

and usually save money. Many customers experience all three. As alluded to above the crews surprise clients with how rapidly they move their project forward. Furthermore, many clients extol how quickly their phone calls are returned and how effectively their questions are answered. And many consider Otterbeck Builders "affordable" or reasonable.

The townhouse addition, depicted in the photos at the beginning of this article, is an excellent example of a design/build project. By their nature, townhouses do not easily take on additions. Lot sizes are often inadequate and there are structural obstacles to overcome. Still, the primary design task is to integrate the addition with the existing home in terms of both the street side façade and the flow and functionality inside.

This particular addition more than doubled the home's interior space and changed the use of some of the older space. The highlights of the new space are an expansive, unique, retro-style kitchen and a very classy master bath. The homeowners had very specific design themes in mind for both that offered the Otterbeck craftsmen an opportunity to demonstrate their superior "fit and finish" skills. And what did the ultimate judges of this work, the homeowners, have to say? From start to finish, "Everything went perfectly. If ever you want to show the work, please do!" The highest of praise.