

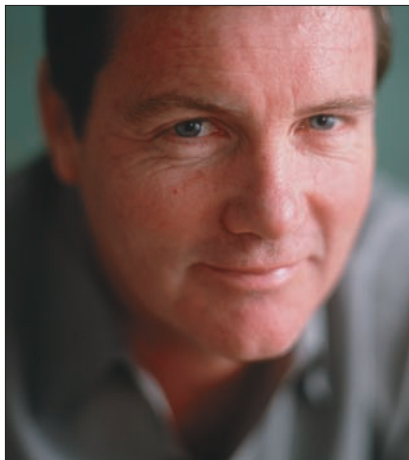
Commentary **Mark Richardson**

Mastering the Sales Game

Know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em.

There's more to winning at poker than knowing the rank of hands. A great poker player pays close attention to his opponents' behavior. He wins almost regardless of the hand he's holding because he can read his opponents' "tells" — small, almost invisible idiosyncrasies that betray the players' intentions. Depending on what he sees and hears, a great poker player decides to either meet or raise the stakes, or cut his losses and drop out early.

In the game of sales, the stakes are pretty high. There are many things that separate a good remodeling salesperson from a great remodeling salesperson. One differentiator that frequently pops up parallels that of the poker player: Great sales-



people know when to invest more time in a prospect and when to gracefully walk away.

It sounds simple, but the skills required don't come naturally to most remodeling salespeople.

As startup businesses, most remodeling companies take on all types of work from all kinds of clients. The goal is to keep work in the pipeline and to get as much exposure as

possible. That strategy works well for the first few years, but eventually its shortcomings begin to appear. Companies that have succeeded at establishing a reputation for good craftsmanship and attentive customer service find it increasingly difficult to maintain their high standards across such a variety of jobs types and sizes, and working for so many different types of people.

AREAS OF MASTERY

The solution is to be more selective, but that runs counter to everything a remodeler has learned while trying to establish a

fledgling company. As I have studied this subject, I have concluded that there are separate areas of mastery involved.

Recognizing the right client.

The right client listens to and trusts your advice. He or she is committed and enthusiastic about the project, but allows you to control the process. The right client is honest and communicates reasonably well with a spouse or partner. Great salespeople know they could close a prospect who doesn't fit this profile, but they also know the harm it would ultimately cause the company if they do.

Recognizing the right project.

A project needs to be of a type that the sales and the design teams are good at. It also has to be a good fit for the production team that has to build it. And it ought to be the ideal size (bigger is not always better), well-defined and predicable in scope, and in the right location in terms of geography, site access, and so on.

Having the courage to say "No."

We often let the quicksand rise to our waist, then find to our dismay that we can't escape. A great salesperson not only sees the signs but knows how to gracefully exit before there is no way out. When you're not seeing all green lights, the course most beneficial to all parties is to say, "I think you would be better served by working with another remodeling group." When I was still selling, I always used to ask what was the worst that could happen from making such a statement. In most cases, no reaction would have been as bad as hanging in and getting hurt.

Like a masterful poker player, you need to know more than the rules of the game. You need to know the odds and the difference between a good hand and a bad hand.

But you also need to be acutely aware of what the other players at the table are doing. If you look and listen carefully, your prospects will tell you when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em. Then you need the courage to walk away. —*Mark Richardson is president of Case Design/Remodeling and Case Handyman Services, Bethesda, Md., and author of 30-Day Remodeling Fitness Program. 301.229.4600; mrichardson@casedesign.com.*