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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."



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,

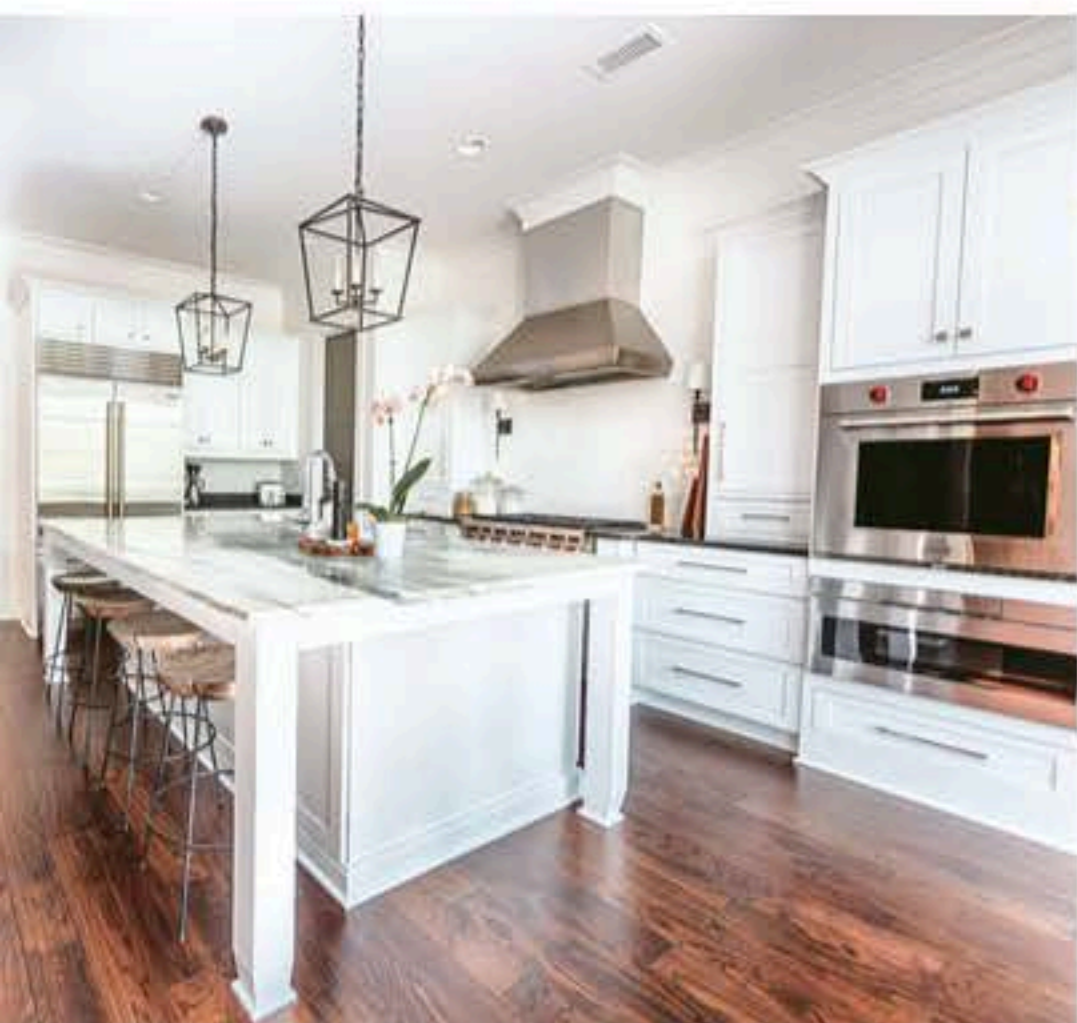


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