



Designer Embraces New Business Model, Education

By Janice Anne Costa

CHAGRIN FALLS, OH — Independence means different things to different people. For designer John Hall, his own personal road to independence began in 2006, when, after 23 years working with the same firm, he decided to go out on his own.

"I didn't want to end my career without going into business for myself," he says, explaining his decision to open up his own showroom, the Ohio Design Centre, in Beachwood, OH.

And initially, Hall was quite content with his showroom. "Things went very well right from the start and times were great," he notes. "I employed two designers, a draftsman, an office manager and a bookkeeper. We also did installations and we had two installation crews."

But three years into the venture, Hall wasn't quite as happy. "I was spending 80 percent of my time managing the business and very little time working with the clients. As a result, I was losing what I truly have a passion for: design and working with the clients."

A friend's advice — "Don't be afraid to take a chance!" — inspired him to move to a new business model that would better address not just his business needs, but his need to spend his time engaged in work that would be truly fulfilling. The solution, he realized, was to give up the showroom in favor of a

"virtual design studio."

This time, Hall did his homework. He notes, "I hired a business coach who assisted me with making all of the smart moves needed for the business to be successful. I moved into a small office and picked up cabinet lines that not only offer a terrific product but also have state-of-the-art showrooms a simple drive away. I was also able to put displays into local appliance and lighting stores where I take my clients."

Also working to his advantage was his longstanding industry experience — Hall is a CKD and an Allied Member of the ASID, with 28 years in the kitchen and bath design industry — which contributed to a strong referral base. And eliminating the overhead costs of the showroom made it significantly easier to be profitable, while focusing on what he sees as "the best parts" of the job. Thus was born the Hall Design Group.

In his business' new incarnation, he still handles kitchens (with a specialty in Kosher kitchens), baths and other-room projects, but also has the flexibility to take on projects in different locations, or of different sizes. As far as products, he notes, "I am proud to represent several lines that not only fit my virtual needs but also offer the quality and flexibility that the clients expect," including Mullet, Berloni and Shiloh. He adds, "I also sell countertops, plumbing and all



other items needed for the project and am blessed to have terrific showrooms for these products located throughout the area."

ADVANTAGES OF GOING INDEPENDENT

Part of what Hall loves about working independently is the ability to take on any type of client or job — from the multi-room project to the 95-year-old woman with a tiny bungalow who's never had a dishwasher before. "These are the things that I would not be able to do if I had the showroom and had to worry so much about the bottom line," he notes.

He also feels that the clients enjoy the more "personal" feel of the new business model. "I will start the design process and then offer to buy them a nice lunch and travel to these showrooms. Not only do we get to utilize these showrooms at no cost to me, but the drive also gives me uninterrupted time with the clients to really get to know them on a personal level. I do not bring the cell phone along so it truly is quality time with them," he says.

Indeed, he believes there are numerous advantages to his



Hall takes advantage of local showrooms to offer clients everything from cabinetry to lighting.

business model, from the lack of overhead costs and minimal staffing needs to not being locked into having a showroom open when he needs to run appointments and not having to incur the expenses of keeping displays up to date.

He especially likes the way his partnerships with nearby showrooms promote a win-win for everyone. As he explains, "I bring my clients to the showroom to view cabinet displays [that I represent], and they end up buying lighting



With his new business model, Hall is able to spend more time creating personalized designs for his clients, like the kitchen shown above.

HALL DESIGN GROUP

AT A GLANCE

Location: Chagrin Falls, OH

Principal: John Hall

Number of Employees: Two

Major Product Lines: Mullet, Shiloh, Berloni

Design Specialties: Kitchens, baths, Kosher kitchens, and other-room projects

Design Software: AutoKitchen, AutoCAD

Business Philosophy: "Sell through education."



and appliances from these folks [so everyone benefits]."

DISADVANTAGES OF INDEPENDENCE

While Hall enjoys many benefits from his business model, there are still some challenges that come from giving up the showroom. For one thing, working alone can get lonely sometimes, and Hall admits that he sometimes misses being able to run things past fellow designers to get their input.

Perhaps a bigger challenge comes from the outside. Hall explains, "You can get lost in the cracks with regard to reps, and [sometimes it's a struggle] to get companies to take you seriously." He notes that at last year's KBIS, "there were people who would not give me the time of day when they heard I didn't have a showroom."

But he adds, "It is my belief that they will need to adjust their thinking in the future because I believe the industry is changing. Ask the people who have come on board with my business model and they will tell you that people like me are a major factor in the industry [and will continue to be] as time moves on."

High-quality materials and personalized designs that facilitate how the clients use the space are among the hallmarks of designer John Hall's projects, which include kitchens, baths and other rooms.

EDUCATION AS A BUSINESS

Hall's business philosophy has always focused on educating his clients, rather than just selling to them. So perhaps it's no surprise that his passion for education ultimately evolved into its own business, Just Educate Me. As part of this business, he teaches design classes to the public, both at adult education classes throughout northern Ohio and at B&B Appliance, and also gives seminars at various home shows.

He explains, "I teach a three-night class in which the students learn everything needed to be able to go out and make educated decisions as they move forward with their remodeling. I do this for both kitchens and baths, and will usually draw 20 to 30 students per class."

Cross marketing is a natural with his two businesses, and he notes, "I will give about 30 talks over the next 30 days. Between my classes and the shows, I will be in front of several hundred people who are qualified and in the process of doing their kitchens or baths." He also uses these speaking engagements as an opportunity to sell his book, *A Designer's Guide to Distinctive Kitchens*.

Aside from the joy his educational work brings him, Hall finds it so effective that between the classes and seminars he teaches and his strong referral base, he does not need to do any advertising at all for his design business.

He concludes, "You can see I've created a business model in which everyone wins and I do not have any investment dollars needed to run a successful and profitable business."

1/2 Vertical AD

4-9/16" X 12-1/4" AD

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