



Know Thy Market

by Patrick J. Galvin

Another year is winding down, and it's time to plan for '88.

In kitchens and bathrooms that can mean two things:

1. Building new kitchens and baths that are more in tune with what today's homeowners want (but don't blow costs sky-high).

2. Getting into kitchen and bathroom remodeling or, if you're already doing it, doing it more profitably.

In either case, it is a matter of getting to know customers better, adding to design expertise, and then selecting the best product mix. There are specific steps that you can take to further these ends, and the winter is the best time to take them.

Know Your Customer... Again

The first step in getting to know customers better is to get rid of the universal assumption that we already know them. What we really know is not the customers, but what we are used to doing within cost and time frames that usually were determined years ago. Few builders bother to update their thinking on any regular basis.

Here are some positive ways to get up to date on today's market.

1. Read magazine surveys. Several shelter magazines survey their readers on what they want in new homes, and several trade magazines survey kitchen and bath pros on what they are selling. One magazine, *Kitchen & Bath Business*, (Gralla, 1515 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10036) does an exhaustive consumer survey each year in addition to continual dealer and distributor surveys.

2. Talk to employees and subs. They are consumers also, and many deal with other consumers. You can set up a luncheon or dinner for a group discussion. Let them know you want to discuss consumer needs and wants and how to satisfy them. Prepare some questions to guide you in the discussion, including facts gleaned from magazine surveys.

3. Volunteer as a speaker at homemakers' or service club meetings. Be prepared to talk about what's new in kitchens and baths, and get their reactions. It might be fruitful to prepare your own survey form to pass out at the meeting.

4. Meet with former customers, perhaps everyone who bought a house from you in the past year or two. Find out what they liked and didn't like. You can gain knowledge, and they will appreciate the follow-up attention.

5. Make your own survey. Prepare a form and hire students or temps to talk with people in supermarkets while the kids are in school. Find out what folks like and don't like in their kitchens and baths, and what they wish they had.

Improve Your Design Know-How

Adding to design expertise is easy. The National Kitchen & Bath Association has schools regionally through winter and spring. You can get information by calling NKBA at 201/852-0033.

Local kitchen distributors or custom cabinet reps often will set up schools on request. Ask them, but tell them you are interested in design. Or invite a local kitchen dealer or custom cabinet rep to hold a design school for you and your employees.

Another way is to tour kitchen and bath showrooms to look for ideas. Or buy any of the several books on kitchens and baths and study the pictures. My own book, *Remodeling Your Bathroom*, a Popular Science Skill Book, is on sale at most book outlets, as is my *Kitchen Planning and Remodeling*. Or get Sam Clark's *The Motion-Minded Kitchen*, or Virginia Habeeb's *Thousands of Creative Kitchen Ideas*.

Finally, if the budget permits, hire a kitchen/bath design specialist. Many are available. Just be sure the person you hire is creative and imaginative. This requires more than an order-taker.

Mixing It Right

Selecting a more desirable product mix requires investing time and money in attending trade shows. You'll see lot of variety at local shows, such as in Boston, but in most cases these will reflect what local dealers choose to carry. Much more is available.

That calls for going to a national show. The next, and the biggest, is the annual convention and show of the National Association of Home Builders, in Dallas, January 15-18. Figure on at least two days there.

The Kitchen/Bath Industry Show follows: March 14-21 in Washington, D.C. In my opinion this is the best for kitchen and bath products. You can also register for the accompanying NKBA convention for seminars on design. Call NKBA for information.

Another excellent opportunity will be the International Kitchen & Bath Show in Toronto, May 26-29. It won't be as big as the other two, but it will be very worthwhile for new products and especially for design ideas. For more information, call 416/299-9888.

When you attend the shows, keep in mind what you learned from your customer surveys. Consumers usually want more and better than we have been giving them in new houses, and they prove it with their remodeling purchases. ■

Patrick J. Galvin is the former editor and publisher of Kitchen & Bath Business.