

Presentation Books

by Lee McGinley

Presentation books were all the rage a few years ago. It seemed that everywhere you turned, someone was preaching the benefits of this marketing tool. I haven't heard much lately, but a presentation book is still one of the most valuable sales aids I know of.

Silent salesman. Some remodelers and builders refer to their presentation book as a "portfolio" or "pitch book," but I prefer to call it a "silent salesman." When presented to a prospect, a presentation book tells them who you are and what you do. It establishes your credentials, and can save you from having to recite the advantages of doing business with your company. A presentation book also helps to confirm your abilities and builds the homeowner's confidence in doing business with you.

From my experience, you can tell a lot about a prospect from their response to your presentation book. If they start asking questions about its contents, comment about the job photos, or compliment you on the book, it's a good indication that they are interested in your company. On the other hand, if they say nothing, it may mean that you won't be able to establish the kind of relationship you need for a successful project. Often, I left my first meeting with a potential customer knowing one way or the other, simply by assessing their response to my material.

Keep It Simple

The key to an effective presentation book is its simplicity. When I first started using a portfolio, I thought everything was important. I ended up including more information than necessary. Later, I realized I could add to it as new material became available, or subtract from it as material became outdated.

I kept the contents of my presentation

book in a D-ring view binder, which lies flat and holds more sheets with less wear and tear than a regular three-ring binder. The clear pocket on the view binder is perfect for slipping in a photo or text page by way of a cover. To protect the book's pages from smudges and tears, I used top-loading sheet protectors made of clear polypropylene. The binder and sheets are available at most stationery stores and office product supply catalogs.

Organization

I divided my presentation book into several sections, each separated by a labeled index tab. After the title page (a generic "Welcome" letter), came a company overview statement followed by a personal biography. The overview statement contained answers to all of the nuts-and-bolts questions homeowners are anxious to learn about: my business philosophy; the types of work I did; estimating and billing practices; payment schedules; hours of operation; and holiday and vacation dates.

You may also want to include a bio for



Labeled tabs organize the contents of your presentation book and remind homeowners of your qualifications.

each employee. Restrict the write-ups to a few sentences that relate to the work you do, such as "Bob Smith has been a Lead Carpenter for five years and specializes in finish work. Before joining us, he worked as project manager for Acme Construction. He builds furniture in his spare time." I've also seen some presentation books that include employee photos. This can be very effective in conveying a company image, providing your employees are well-groomed and wearing a clean set of work clothes the day you take the photos.

The next section contained my Certificate of Insurance for liability and workers comp coverage. This established my credibility as a professional concerned about the welfare of my customers and employees.

I followed with color copies of awards and certifications, as well as reprints from magazine articles I had either written or that had been written about my company. Don't overdo it here, or you will come across as self-serving. Limit yourself to two to four items that speak well of you and your company. Because they come from outside sources, these references give you third party credibility.

The same is true of a section that includes business cards from my subs and suppliers. These not only demonstrate my ability to handle complex jobs, but my reputation gets a boost by association with other reputable businesses.

Project Photos

When it came to photos of my work, I originally went overboard. After shooting hundreds of photos over a period of three years, I thought I had to include every detail of every job.

Too many photos, however, can be boring or distracting. You can achieve a more dramatic effect with side-by-side 8x10 before-and-after photos. Include one project for each style of house you build, and choose examples that demonstrate the range of your remodeling work.

Other photos can be helpful, but use them sparingly. For example, I included a photo of the temporary sink and stove hookup we used in all kitchen remodels. Since my company did a lot of kitchen

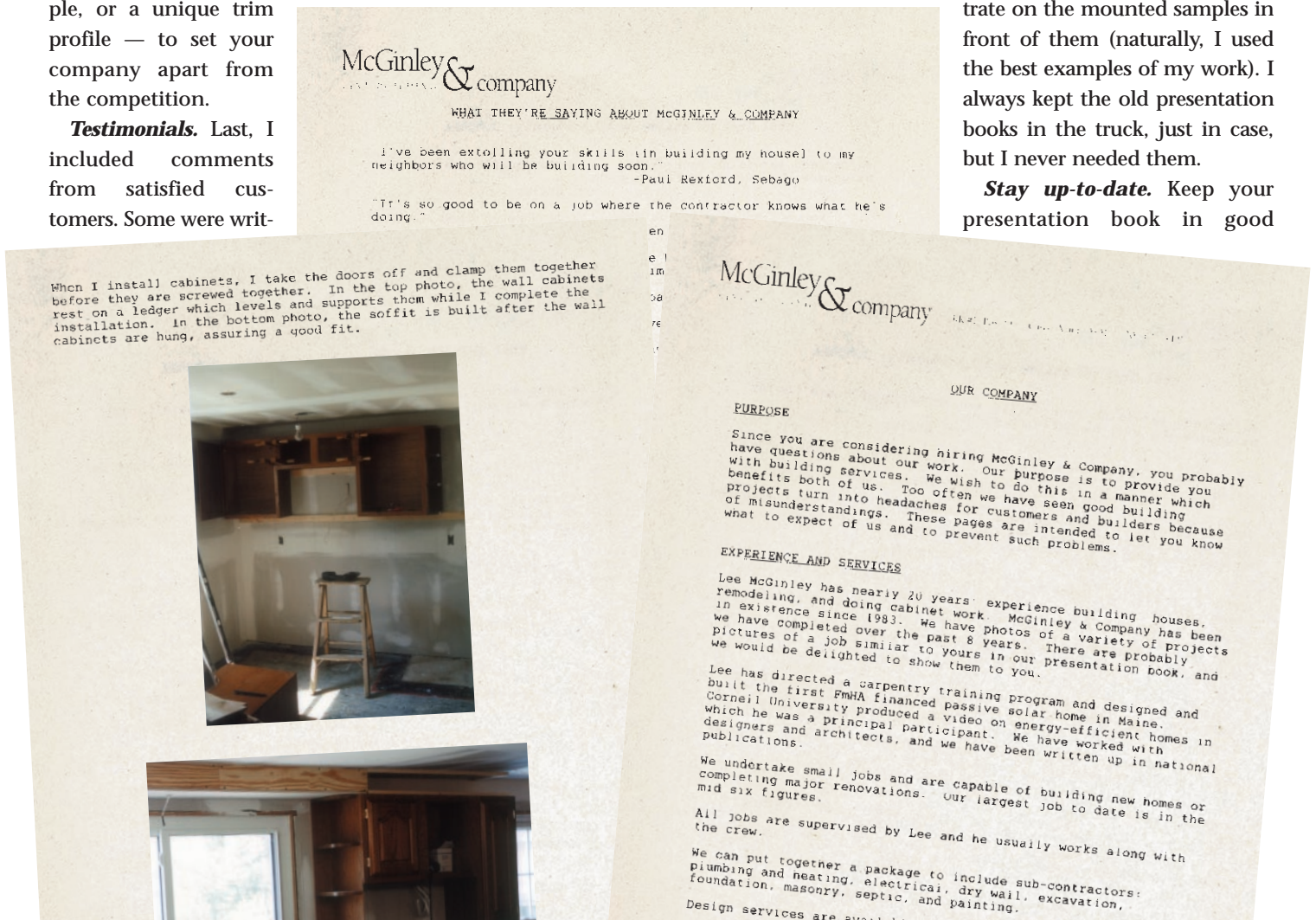
remodeling, this quickly set us apart from all the other contractors who just ripped out the old fixtures and suggested that the homeowners wash their dishes in the bathtub. Similarly, include any details you use repeatedly — the way you attach a deck to a house, for example, or a unique trim profile — to set your company apart from the competition.

Testimonials. Last, I included comments from satisfied customers. Some were writ-

tions and whole-house renovations; still another, custom millwork and small jobs. I kept these books separate from the book containing other credentials so I could take just what I needed to match the client's project. Then I stumbled onto something that made my presentations

At the interview, the homeowners' eyes lit up when I would show the presentation book containing my business credentials with the photos propped up on the dining room or kitchen table. Without the distraction of a lot of other photos, the clients-to-be could concentrate on the mounted samples in front of them (naturally, I used the best examples of my work). I always kept the old presentation books in the truck, just in case, but I never needed them.

Stay up-to-date. Keep your presentation book in good



To showcase your qualifications and talents in your presentation book, include a company profile (right), photos of your work (left), and testimonials (top).

ten on formal stationery; others, on notebook paper. They were all short and could be read quickly. If I wanted to use a letter that had a lot of typos, I retyped it with corrections. For a more artistic touch, use a color photocopy of several short notes grouped together.

Less Is More

Over the years, I created several presentation books, each based on a particular type of work. One contained photos of several kitchens and baths; another, addi-

easier and even more effective. In preparing for a home show, I had mounted enlarged before-and-after pictures on 12x15 Celtek, a rigid plastic used as a backer for vinyl signs. The response at the show was overwhelmingly positive, prompting me to revise the way I used my presentation book.

For each presentation, I selected two or three mounted photos that complemented the work the homeowners were contemplating, and carried them to the interview in an artist's zippered portfolio.

shape. As you win new awards or certifications, include them; update old photos with new ones. If you decide to specialize in one type of work, make sure your presentation book reflects this specialty. Remember, your silent salesman can speak volumes about your company. And you don't have to pay him a commission.



Lee McGinley is a Certified Remodeler in Casco, Maine, and an associate editor at the Journal of Light Construction.