

LOW-COST, HIGH-VALUE Upgrades

I'm a custom home builder in Flagstaff, Ariz. Most of our customers appreciate quality work but don't have the luxury of a sky-high budget. In response, we've developed a wide-ranging assortment of inexpensive upgrades and enhancements that have helped us to stand out in a very competitive marketplace.

by Dennis Dixon

Balancing Quality and Value

Buyers in our area want a house that's a little out of the ordinary but that still has a traditional feel. The key for us has been to think of things that cost little, but have a high perceived value to the customer.

We tend to focus on the spaces that people really use in their homes today — the kitchen, the master bath, the family room, and the laundry room.

For example, instead of using 1/8- or 1/4-inch plywood panels for cabinet doors, we use 1/2-inch panels. It doesn't really cost much more, but it makes for a more solid-feeling door.

Or take hardware, for example. Here in the Southwest, people love antique hardware that has a hand-rubbed or rusted finish. We won't spend \$700 for a set of hand-forged door hardware, but we might buy hand-forged knobs or cabinet pulls at \$3 to \$5 apiece. It's a great way to jazz up a relatively inexpensive cabinet job, and gives your customers something they don't get from the builder down the street.

Upgrade Your Marketing

The photos here illustrate some of the upgrades that have worked well for me. They're geared to my specific market and work force, but even if they don't apply to yours, I hope you'll get ideas from them that will work for you.

Whatever upgrades you adopt, be sure to tell your customers what you've done and how it benefits them. Don't be shy. If a customer doesn't know about something, you won't get credit for it. Summarize the value-added items in your homes, then make sure that realtors, appraisers, and even your carpenters and subs know exactly what they are.

These interior
enhancements delight
customers without
beating up the budget



Adding some 2x2 base molding to the bottom of a stock cabinet provides a nice finished look at little added cost (above). If the budget allows, you can add a run of crown molding along the top as well. The display shelves at the end of the cabinet are another custom touch (right).





An upgraded tile backsplash costs very little, but really jazzes up a countertop. Here we stacked the tile and capped it with 1/4-round molding. The diamond cutouts were marble offcuts from another job that we cut to size on the wet saw.



In a laundry room, we sometimes take a simple set of knotty pine cabinets, mount them side by side, then take some extra crown molding and run it across the top. Even if you splice the crown molding — as we did here — it can look great.



This is a kid's bathroom with two sinks on a big long counter. A vertical cabinet at each end provides a place to store hairbrushes, toothpaste, or even clothing.



You can also modify a stock cabinet by adding a "back door." For this bar peninsula, we took two little individual doors from a box that was defective, mounted them on a piece of plywood, and turned them into a door slab. The owner had us run wiring into it, and it became a stereo cabinet.



How many calls do you get from customers whose kids have pulled the towel bars or toilet paper holders off the wall? We like to attach a bar for a hand towel to the underside of a cabinet. Another trick is to put up a layer of plywood before the drywall goes on, so you have a solid backing no matter where the customer wants the towel bars. If the customer plans to hang photos or paintings in a hallway or some other area — we always review this early in the job — we'll use plywood backing there as well. This isn't an expensive detail, but it's one that your customers will remember.



To give a bathroom a custom look, take a standard 24-inch vanity, mount it 8 inches in front of the cabinets on either side, and cover the splice between the boxes with an angled piece of trim. The water and drain lines are stubbed out as necessary; a short pony wall fills the gap between the back of the vanity and the bathroom wall.

No one likes those little 3¹/₂-inch-deep medicine cabinets. We've thickened up the framing of this end wall to accept a 12-inch-deep cabinet and wired an electrical outlet into it. It's no more work for the cabinet shop to build a deeper box if they're supplying the cabinet anyway, but your customers will see this as an important benefit.



Increasing the depth of the backsplash in the master bath is a great way to add a raised shelf for things like cosmetics. After the subtops are installed, you just build a little 2x4 or 2x6 wall, screw it down, cover it with more subtop, then tile over it as usual.



A plywood wall cap trimmed with the same oak edging is another good-looking but inexpensive countertop option.



This plain laminate top has been dressed up with 2x2 oak edging. It looks great, and it's a lot less expensive than most of the proprietary edging materials on the market. The antique brass bottle opener is a nice touch that costs just a few dollars.



There's a guy in my area who makes plastic laminate signs. He'll engrave names on switch plates for a dollar apiece. When I get them back, I take a can of putty that matches the woodwork, rub it into the letters, and wipe it down with lacquer thinner. When you're done, the homeowner doesn't have to hunt for the right switch on a 6-gang box. This is an upgrade that customers love, and because it only costs \$30, you can easily afford to give it away.

Another upgrade that costs nothing at all is to wire 3-way switches — for the bedroom lights and maybe some security lighting — 36 inches above the floor in the master bedroom, so the owners don't have to make a long reach for the switch when in bed.

I also have the laminate guy make a sign for the main shutoff valve, and make sure the plumber puts the valve where it's not going to be buried in a cabinet or hidden by furniture. That way, even the kids can easily shut off the water in an emergency. I also tell my vacation-home clients to turn the water off when they leave for the season, in case the water supply to the icemaker starts to drip five years down the road.



A message center in the garage lets the homeowner answer the phone and leave a last-minute note while heading out the door. A shelf by the garage entrance is also a great place for a battery charger for a cell-phone or laptop computer.



Custom shelving doesn't have to be costly or elaborate. This closet shoe rack is made from melamine plywood and edged with butt-jointed screen mold. It's not fine woodwork, but it works well, and the customer loves it.



Need more hanger space? It doesn't get any easier than installing a \$5 handicap bar as in this laundry.



Melamine plywood is also a good choice for pantry shelves. We cleat the wall after the dry-wall is in but before it's been painted. Once the painter's been through, we put up the shelving and finish the edges with a pre-stained half-round bullnose. Besides producing a better product — the melamine is easy to clean and much more durable than modern enamel paint — I can keep my painter busy finishing doors instead of painting shelving in the closets.



A soap dispenser is not a big-ticket item. We like to put two of them by the kitchen sink — one for hand soap, the other for dishwashing liquid.



Everyone hates cleaning the shower doors, so you can make your customers very happy by showing them how to avoid it altogether. We always suggest “raindrop” glass, which is smooth on the inside, textured on the outside, and never needs cleaning. It costs about the same as regular glass.



You can buy manufactured, ready-to-install wainscot panels, but the price is almost unbelievable. Our approach is to mount $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch plywood paneling against the wall, and nail on additional strips to give the appearance of recessed panels. Finally, we picture-frame the panels with bolection molding (above). The final cost is about 10% of what I'd pay for the ready-made wainscot panels. We have also used plywood and stock moldings to build a paneled baluster at the end of a stair rail (left).



People recognize quality in a door, so it's often worthwhile to at least upgrade the most frequently used doors. In my area, a prehung 6-panel fir door costs about \$230, but a much better custom door, like the one pictured here, is only \$100 more. I find that I recover at least part of that cost, because my painter has to spend far less time prepping them. No matter what door we use, we always use a $\frac{1}{2}$ - or $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch doorstop instead of that little ruler doorstop. It's easier to install and looks much more substantial.



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