

Finding Your Niche

by Bob Kovacs

There's an old saying that you can't be all things to all people. Yet how many times have you seen ads for contractors that include the words "specializing in" and then go on to list every conceivable service from additions to professional dog-walking?

Of course, you don't actually need to "specialize" in anything. Doing so, however, does have its advantages. A niche can be as specific as "providing top-quality home-office environments using only renewable materials," or it can be as broad as "affordable interior and exterior renovations to houses old and new."

Project Niches

One way to define a niche for your company is to focus on a particular type of project. This isn't to say that you have to become a single-trade contractor, like a finish carpenter or a painter. Some of the most common niche projects are kitchen and bath contracting, additions, basement or attic fit-outs, decks, and such single-line specialties as replacement windows, roofing, and siding.

A good way to find a niche is to look at what you really enjoy doing and focus on finding that type of work. Or follow trends within — and without — the industry. For example, the number of people working from home is growing dramatically. These people need a place to work, so home offices are more popular than ever. Wouldn't it be great if homeowners knew you as "the guy to call" for all their home-office needs? From carving space out of their existing floor plan (or adding on), through design and installation of storage and workspaces, to wiring the room for high-speed networking and Internet access,

you'd be the person with the expertise to get it all done.

Other up-and-coming niches include exercise rooms, mother-in-law suites, spaces for the handicapped, and environmentally friendly building.

Market Segment Niches

Rather than specializing in a certain project type, you might consider creating a niche that serves a particular segment of the market. Perhaps you really enjoy working with wealthy clients, for whom cost comes second to getting their dreams realized. Or maybe the daily changes that occur with those clients drive you crazy, and you'd prefer to work where money is a concern and you need to be creative in giving clients what they want within a tight budget. In either case, you could create a niche for yourself by focusing on that particular type of client. Other possible client-based niches include performing handyman and maintenance services for seniors, creating accessible spaces for people with disabilities, and converting industrial space into loft units for young "dinks" (double-income, no-kids couples).

You may choose to base your market niche on factors other than demographics. For example, you could create a niche around a certain age of house — old-house renovations, say, or the installation of "options" in new homes (either for the builder or the new owner). Or you could focus on working with groups other than homeowners — maintaining properties for absentee landlords, working for condominium associations or property-management companies, or sprucing up homes prior to resale, through recommendations by real estate agents.

Advantages of Working in a Niche

Practice makes perfect: If you focus on a limited scope of work, you'll find yourself (and your employees and subs) doing that work more often, and therefore everyone's skills will improve. You may be able to create "standards" and checklists for your workers to use, ensuring that all projects are completed in the same fashion and come out as expected. Try doing that when you're framing an addition one week and replacing a kitchen the next!

Less tools and equipment. You also may be able to limit the amount of equipment required to do the work (and therefore the associated costs). You won't be needing those pumpjacks and scaffold picks if you specialize in basement renovations, and you can safely leave the 90-pound jackhammer at home if your new niche is creating home offices.

Focused marketing. However you choose to focus your niche — whether by project type or market segment — the mere act of specializing will allow you to target your marketing efforts more efficiently. Every dollar spent on advertising counts, and to be able to tailor your efforts to a particular audience will result in more effective use of those dollars.

"Expert" status. Do just about anything long enough and well enough, and soon you may find yourself being perceived as the "expert" in the field. Think how nice it would be to have potential clients calling you, saying, "We're thinking of adding on to our house, and my friend Mary said you're the only one in town to call."

Disadvantages

While repetition has its advantages
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over the long run, it can also be a drawback. Some people got into remodeling in the first place to avoid doing the same thing day in and day out. They want a job where every day is a new adventure. However, by choosing a broad enough niche (without getting so broad that it's not a niche anymore), you can keep your work interesting and varied.

Trends are just that — trends. The buying public is very fickle, and trends come and go. If you hitch your wagon to an emerging trend and, for whatever reason, it falls out of favor, you may find yourself marketing a service that no one wants. Remember when EIFS were the hot new siding material of choice?

Demographic shifts. Like trends, the demographics of an area are outside your control. Neighborhoods that were once composed of elderly empty-nesters can suddenly fill up with young, middle-income couples who are more interested in maintaining their homes themselves. The key here is to watch the market, and adjust your niche accordingly.

To Niche or Not

No one's saying that you have to create a niche for yourself — there are plenty of opportunities in our industry for everyone.

Nevertheless, try this: Take a hard look at your customer base and at your past projects. You may find you've already created a niche for yourself and just hadn't realized it. The key is to recognize the focus that's already there, and capitalize on it by directing your efforts in the right direction. Hopefully, this will help increase your sales.

Bob Kovacs is president of *Constructive Solutions* in Iselin, N.J., which offers estimating and preconstruction services to contractors and architects.

Looking Back at a Job Well Done

by Mark Scott

Like many companies, we hold an annual holiday party at the end of each year — a time to get together with spouses and significant others, relax, and enjoy one another's company. Several years ago, on a lark, I put together a PowerPoint presentation fea-

lation seminar and then developing a training module for the rest of the company. I make a point of including every employee at least twice. All of our team members are very proud of their work and get a kick out of seeing themselves and their achievements up on



turing some of the year's events — the company picnic, for example — and some of the jobs we had done. It was an instant hit, and I've been doing it ever since. It's a great opportunity for spouses to see the jobs their wives or husbands work on, and for office staff to see some of what goes on in the field.

I also highlight the accomplishments of different team members, like Jane and Norm completing a window instal-

lation seminar. New employees are always happily surprised. And I actually get calls from clients who are excited to hear that their projects were featured.

So what started as a lark has become a real morale booster and a great way to showcase the year's accomplishments. 

Mark Scott owns *Mark IV Builders* in Bethesda, Md.