

Pick a Business Model, Any Business Model



I get reader feedback from around the nation on a variety of issues. Often, it's about how something shown in the magazine wouldn't meet code in Wherever, USA. Our supposedly national building code is enforced in surprisingly varied manners. Consequently, I allow a fair amount of leeway when it comes to code issues.

That said, I have turned down articles that featured what seemed like major compliance concerns. For example, one respected Midwestern deck builder I know uses no joist hangers or even ledger strips. He simply end-nails the joists, and that passes muster where he works. In his defense, it's pretty flat out there and most deck collapses would mean a fall of about 4 inches. But if I'd published that article, well, you'd have filled the next issue with letters to the editor.

Regional differences in code enforcement grab our attention, but practically speaking, you build what's acceptable where you are. Plus, those differences are more or less thrust upon us by government, which makes them less interesting to me than the ways in which individuals choose to run their businesses.

There are essentially two types of construction-business owners. As many of you know, I spent 15 years as a contractor before parking my tail in front of a computer and making magazines. I'm predisposed to be what an old friend calls an "artisan builder." I became a contractor because I love building things on my own terms — that I could make a living at it just iced the cake.

Other business owners are entrepreneurial — they're in it because they love being in business. That it's construction may be incidental. An example of this is Larry, a home builder I used to subcontract to. Larry built good houses, but he found his true niche with a sweet deal on a corner lot on a

main street in my home town. No one else saw the value in that lot, but he bought it and built a deli that most folks said was bound to fail. It prospered, and Larry no longer builds houses.

Neither the artisan nor the entrepreneur is a bad model. What's important is that you figure out which one you are and then run your business that way. I struggled for years with that issue, and only after switching careers did I see my error. The downside to being an artisan is that your earning potential is limited by the amount of work one person can do. Because of that, I kept trying to be an entrepreneur. But I never was willing to lay down my toolbelt long enough to focus on running the business. I ran crews, hammered nails all day, made sales calls in the evening, and barely saw my family.

It's obvious now that I should have focused on small, higher-end jobs and worked alone. I'd have been happier and would have made enough money. I might still be building decks, among other things. Eventually, though, the stress of trying to be what I wasn't wore me down. Thirteen years ago, I became an editor. Don't get me wrong — running a national magazine is a good gig, and it comes with health insurance. Sometimes, though, on those fall days that are crisp as a fresh-picked apple, that worn toolbelt hanging on a hook in the basement calls my name.

Here's the point, and it's mainly advice to younger deck builders. Figure out what type of business owner you are and run with it. No one else's business model is likely to make you happy.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andy Engel".

Andy Engel
Editor

Built a great deck?
We want to see it.

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