

Selling Remodeling With Energy Audits

Weatherizing homes is a serious specialty. Do it well, and it can pay for itself in reduced energy bills, with improved comfort as a bonus. Do it poorly, and it's a waste of time and money, or worse, a cause of moisture and indoor-air-quality disasters. Either way, weatherization work is nickel-and-dime stuff: Most of business ranges between \$5,000 and \$15,000.

But it doesn't have to stop there. For some weatherizing pros, weatherizing is also a marketing tool that opens the door to a broader marketplace for larger custom remodeling work.

Vermont contractor Jim Bradley and Maine contractor Josh Wojcik are two good examples: Both run businesses that leverage their weatherization competency to help nurture thriving general remodeling practices. For each company, good weatherizing work is a way to prove itself to clients and to build a loyal customer base.

SURVIVAL STORY

"Weatherization work," says Portland, Maine, builder and remodeler Josh Wojcik, "is our gateway drug." Wojcik's company, Upright Frameworks, is a success story for the 2009 federal stimulus package's weatherization program. In 2006, Wojcik gave up a New York City career as an "environmental infrastructure policy wonk," he says, and moved home to Maine to build houses.

The son of a lifelong builder, he teamed up with his father ("who has forgotten more about construction than I'll ever know," says Wojcik) and his mother (who knew how to keep the books), and started a company to build energy-efficient new homes using structural insulated panels (SIPs).

He was off to a good start—until the crash came, about two weeks after he opened his doors. "Overnight, five or six new-home projects we had on the schedule



Upright Frameworks weatherization tech Zachary Rogers installs dense-pack insulation through the soffit of a house and into a cathedral ceiling from the roof. Professional work practices on weatherization jobs help build the company's credibility for more-extensive remodels.

Photos: Ted Cushman

disappeared," says Wojcik. "We were dead." But the influx of weatherization money brought the company back to life.

When the stimulus package was at its peak, doing weatherization work was like sipping from a fire hose, says Wojcik. "We didn't do what some people did, though," Wojcik says. "I didn't buy a bunch of trucks and expensive equipment. We stayed lean."

The company focused on quality control and customer satisfaction, developing an S.O.P. that it still uses. "We test-in, and we test-out," says Wojcik, "so you can measure the improvement. And we spend a lot of time up front talking to the customers. We explain the principles behind the work we're planning to do. And we ask them about their experience in the house—what's comfortable about the house and what's not—and we address those comfort issues. So they can feel the difference when we're done."

Wojcik also makes sure that his crews represent his company well. "We hire people who are friendly, personable, and polite," he says. "Often they'll get to be friends with the client."

The big surge of federal weatherization money has dried up, says Wojcik, although there are some modest state-level incentives available. But with five years of weatherization work under his belt, Wojcik now has a database of 500 or 600 satisfied customers—a solid foundation of repeat clients and referral sources. He still does a lot of weatherizing, mostly at unsubsidized market rates, and mostly based on referrals by previous clients (or from energy auditors and home inspectors).

But with the economy back on its feet, Upright Frameworks is back in the business of major remodeling and new construction—working almost entirely for previous weatherizing customers, or people they've referred to Wojcik. "Other than continuing to do weatherization, we don't do a lot of marketing," says Wojcik. "Word of mouth keeps the phone ringing."

A known quantity. The strategy depends on happy weatherizing clients. "A lot of the people we work for have had an unsatisfying experience with another contractor before," Wojcik says. "We make sure we don't disappoint them. We schedule the jobs



An open cathedral roof on a Vermont house is shown after the removal of failed insulation (top). Above, a Caleb Contracting worker seals a weather-barrier seam on the roof after re-sheathing. A significant fraction of Caleb Contracting's weatherization referrals end up as roof reconstruction jobs on homes built in the 1970s and 1980s.

Photos: Chris West

months in advance, but we show up the exact day we said we would. We allow enough extra days in the schedule so that we can finish on time, even if there's bad weather or we find an unexpected problem. We're friendly, we're polite, we protect their house during the work, and we clean up at the end of every day. We leave the place as clean as we found it, or cleaner."

Wojcik is careful to match the customers' expectations to reality. "When we fix their house," he says, "they can feel the difference. And we use good energy auditors and accurate data, so if we promise that they're going to see a difference in their utility bills, they really do see one. So now, if they sell the house and buy a different house and they want to remodel the new house, or if they decide to build a new house, who are they going to call? The contractor they already know and they already like and trust—us."

TROUBLE IS HIS BUSINESS

In Vermont, remodeler Jim Bradley tells a very similar story. Bradley's business, Caleb Contracting, specializes in home-performance work in northern Vermont. A steady stream of small and medium jobs keeps him busy, with much of the work coming his way by referral from Efficiency Vermont, the state's energy-efficiency utility. In the past six years, Bradley has won nine awards from Efficiency Vermont for small home-performance jobs, including weatherization work with price tags in the \$8,000 to \$12,000 range.

But a surprising fraction of those referrals result in contracts for much more extensive work. Like Wojcik, Bradley follows a "test in, do the work, test out" S.O.P. And fairly often, a thorough "test in" investigation reveals major defects in the building—issues that can't be properly addressed with simple air-sealing and insulation. Often, Bradley ends up doing serious structural repairs, such as replacing siding, roofing, or even roof and wall framing assemblies.

This summer, Bradley is reworking all the walls of a country house where settling cellulose in the 12-inch-thick walls left much of the house without insulation and plagued by moisture, rot, and pest infesta-



A Caleb Contracting crew member vacuums cellulose insulation out of a failed double-stud wall on a 1980s house in northern Vermont. Jim Bradley's crew is reconstructing the wall system after infrared and blower-door testing revealed major settling of the insulation, moisture damage, and pest infestation.

tion. With a cost of \$130,000, the job scope is far beyond the typical home-performance project; but without home-performance diagnostics—namely, infrared thermography and moisture testing—the extent of the problem wouldn't have been revealed.

In another case, Bradley's crew came in to weatherize a house where a previous contractor had left the clients unsatisfied. "The contractor spent \$8,000, but he hardly reduced the building's air leakage at all," says Bradley. "We spent about the same amount and cut the air infiltration

in half." The following year, the clients called Bradley back to insulate and finish a living space over the attached barn. The improvements to the attached structure, which adjoined the home's kitchen, made the kitchen cozy and livable for the first time. "And now that they're spending more time in the kitchen," says Bradley, "they're talking to me about a gut-renovation of the kitchen. It's a foot in the door that keeps going, especially if you do a great job."

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Photo: Tim Healey