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Continuing education and a good staff have kept Robert Criner, GMB, GMR, CAPS, at the top of his remodeling game and on the path to becoming NAHB's 2012 Remodeler of the Year

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Robert Criner, GMR, GMB, CAPS, and president of Criner Remodeling in Yorktown, Va., never wanted to run the biggest remodeling firm, only the best. On his way to accomplishing this goal, Criner has been named the National Association of Home Builders' 2012 Remodeler of the Year.

The award, co-sponsored by Qualified Remodeler and Pella Corp., was presented to Criner during a ceremony in Baltimore in October, which he proudly accepted in his typical humble way. In his own words, "I have a body of work over 35 years that is impressive to the [award] judges because I've surrounded myself with talented people. We hire good people and let them do a good job," he says.

“When I first began my business, I thought I was what a contractor should be, so I hired people similar to me. But, I quickly found that the company does better when I hire people who are not like me. This way, you get a nice mix of talents and viewpoints, which is much healthier,” he adds.

The goal for Criner’s remodeling firm has always been one in which employees could grow and have a good life, and the business could profit by providing better services to clients and better benefits to employees, he says.

In The Beginning

Interest in remodeling began for Criner in high school, with a summer job doing improvements on the high school. Criner then went to college during which time he worked with a home improvement company. At 21 he started what was then known as Criner Construction. “I was young and didn’t know how hard it was to start. I got into it and, frankly, was not sure how I made it through first few years. I started out doing home improvements, roofing, siding, small screen porch projects. We cut our teeth on the home improvement side.”

The name of the business changed as part of the firm’s evolution. “In 1977 when I started the business, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to do home building or remodeling. We’ve never built a new home, and have always done residential remodeling, so now the name says exactly what we do.” During the rebranding, Criner went to a local university and hired the brightest marketing student, Joelle McLaughlin, as marketing manager to handle the process. “She fills a lot of holes in the office,” he says.

For the first few years Criner had a job, not a business, he explains. It was not until year seven that he realized he needed to make more money. “It’s important to realize that I did not know how to run a business for the first several years. It was not until my mid- to late-20s I put my nose to the grindstone and started to learn the nuances of an income statement and balance sheet.”

Now that rebranding is complete, it’s time to move the home office from a building on Criner’s property to a building he purchased in town and renovated. “Part of planning for the future is planting a flag some place, and running it off the property you live on doesn’t help carry the company forward. We’ve outgrown the office we’re in right now; there’s not a lot of volume in that building. Long term I’m bullish, which is why we just invested in the new office. We’re in a position to seize on opportunities and buy things cheap, plus the rates are wonderful.”

Becoming a huge remodeling firm isn’t one of Criner’s professional goals, but growth remains important and is possible only with a staff talented enough to handle it. “I took several hats I was wearing and hired people to wear them. Two people that deserve credit are Terry Thomas, our production manager, who has been with me for more than 30 years, and Julie Thibodeau, our office manager, who has been with me for more than 25 years.”

The challenge now is to keep sales up despite dealing with consumers who are nervous living in homes that have devalued, Criner says. “They’re asking themselves, ‘Is it prudent to invest in my home?’ It is difficult for consumers to answer that question. What we’re trying to do is market more to people who can afford us, and have been in their homes a long time and are planning to stay there. We’re not trying to be all things to all people; we’re doing the more complicated projects, not so much the handyman/repairman work. We’re going after the market we’re best suited to serve.”

Be Educated

Criner’s professional path follows that of many successful remodelers, except that, unlike him, those who graduated college began a little higher on the ladder than he did. Criner did not graduate college, but values education. When he was taking classes at Christopher Newport University, he had three or four of his classmates working for him, to a point where his professor noticed. “The day the professor asked me for a job, he was looking at my success and trying to find out how I was doing it. That’s when I thought I might not need the formal degree to become successful.”

Not possessing a college degree doesn’t mean Criner’s not educated. On the contrary. “I’d still be in the stage of having a job rather than a career if it wasn’t for the educational opportunities I’ve taken advantage of. I believe education is important. It’s important to clients whether they know it or not, because I offer more because of education and experience. My experience always is a topic of discussion.”

Typically, where a remodeling contractor comes from is in the field working for someone else, and the boss is making all the money, and thinks, “I can do that,” he says. “And he can be an excellent craftsman, but if he doesn’t know how to run a business, he won’t be successful. That is where most people struggle. They’ve never had a business background, and they don’t know the ins and outs of a balance sheet and income statement.”

A key moment in Criner’s career was meeting Walt Stoppeworth, who taught estimating for remodelers on a national level. This was a turning point when the light went off. He spent time learning how to run a business, taking business and drafting courses. “Anyone running a remodeling company must know how to do both.”

Another meaningful moment in Criner’s career was joining the local Home Builders Association in the mid-1980s. Seven or eight years into his career, members approached him and Criner was intimidated. “They had offices, and signs, and staffs. They would bid against me and they’d win. They were big shots. It took me a few years to join, after they talked me into it. Then, they got me involved, which is more important than joining. Involvement is where you start learning. So I started down the education path where I earned all my designations. The association was a source for me to get remodeler-specific education. Education at a local college is nothing compared to what you can learn when taught through an association by other remodelers.”

NAHB 2012 Remodeler of the Year Robert Criner, GMB, GMR, CAPS, has collected many pearls of wisdom during his career, some of which he shares here.

- You're only as good as your employees. You must be able to hire well, and allow them the time and space to produce the best work they can. If they produce good work they'll be happy in their job. I place a lot of stock in keeping employees happy.

- You must give back to the industry and community in which you make your living, and we walk the walk. I sit on a large list of boards with the NAHB and Remodelers' Council as well as teach the licensure course at the community college. On the community side, I have been active in the Red Cross and Habitat For Humanity. I also am chairman for the apprenticeship program of New Horizons, which is for high school kids coming up in the trades.

- People can be fearful of people smarter than them. I'm not.

- How you spend your marketing dollars makes a big difference. Don't be all things to all people; Know the clients and go after them. Our marketing dollars follow that direction.

- Always share accolades and awards with employees.

- Little things are important for people to learn, like how to handle an insurance audit or manage your time. I went to time management course years ago, and one of the things I learned is the simplest way to manage tasks is to write them down and throw them away when done. I still do this.

- Don't give estimates away for free. I have an appreciation for my opinion because it's valuable. People must appreciate the fact that they might not have an architect's stamp from me, but my field and practical experience shouldn't be given it away for free. On the first appointment, I will walk around, solve problems, and give them a ballpark price. But, when I start drawing and photographing and preparing a formal estimate there will be a fee. It's a prequalifier, because if they're shopping on price I'm not their guy.

- Always survey your clients after project completion. In the beginning, clients were a little hesitant to be forthright with me, but since I switched to a third party surveyor they've more inclined to tell them everything. And because it's a third party, it gets done all the time. They capture the statements and put them on the Internet. I also use those statements for other things, such as during a Christmas party for the staff. I lined up all the carpenters and gathered all the comments clients had made on Guild Quality about them and read them aloud to their spouses. When spouses hear how clients think they're gods, to look at the expressions on their faces is priceless.

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