



Don Strong



Michael Strong

BUILDER PROFILE

# Striving for Perfection

by Shelli McCaskill

Brothers Strong started small, but immediately looked for business aspects to set it apart from the numerous remodeling companies in the competitive Houston market.

"We immediately started using computer proposals, which back in 1990, was pretty cutting edge," said Michael Strong, CGR co-founder of the business. "Our goal was to make the best use of technology as it became available, so when facsimile machines became available, we bought one. Now, of course, everyone has one.

"From the start, we focused on running our business like a business," Strong stated. "We didn't want people to think we were a fly-by-night type of company, so we emphasized professionalism in everything from the paperwork to arriving punctually at appointments.

Brothers Strong is owned by Michael and his father, Don Strong. Michael's brother, Tommy Strong, CGR, CLC, is the lead carpenter and is now assuming the role of production supervisor.

## Remodeling with a Twist

There are many ways a business can differentiate itself from others. For Brothers Strong it was simply a matter of finding the right mix and incorporating it into its business practices-and the business practices of their trade contractors.

"One thing that stands out about our company is the fact that we have subcontractors, not field staff," said Michael Strong. "I didn't want to look out into the parking lot and see 20 trucks and staff that needed places to be; I simply did not want the kind of pressure. To avoid that, we structured our business more along the lines of a homebuilder. We have subcontractors who handle everything while we provide supervision and daily communication with our customers.

Currently Brothers Strong builds 25-50 kitchens and 15-30 baths in the mid-range price category annually. The use of subcontractors enables us to schedule multiple jobs of the same type on the same day without concern.

"We have developed systems and procedures in great breadth and in great depth," Strong adds. "This enables us to keep an eye on the financial health of the company. Each project has a detailed set of "to-do" lists, selections sheets, salvage lists, communications log, project schedule, purchase and work orders and monitoring that must happen before we every start working on the actual construction.

Don adds, "Before we every start a project, we order everything. If we are working on a kitchen redo, we will have everything either on the jobsite or at our office before we begin. That means not just the big items

like the cabinets, but the drawer pulls, the faucets, and the lighting fixtures. We don't start a project with part of the order in and assume it will show up before the job is through; instead we wait until it is all here. That enables to go into your home, and ultimately from start to finish we will spend less time in the home completing the project. While this might make for a later start, ultimately it makes for a happy homeowner.

"We are also very careful to respect the client's space. When we leave a job at the close for the business day, it is broom clean. That means we can be working in your home on Friday, and you can throw a dinner party Friday night without concerns over the mess, because there isn't one," he said.

Brothers Strong also goes out of its way to make the homeowner feel comfortable about being left in the home with trade contractors. "Usually, the homeowner who is present while we are working is the woman of the house. We are very careful to watch our personal demeanor, never crowding our homeowners nor doing anything to make them nervous.

"By the same token, we ask our homeowners to follow a couple of rules to make our work easier. WE ask the all children and pets be kept out of the work areas-not just for their own safety reasons, but also



because a job can't proceed smoothly if the contractor has to be on the lookout for dangers to a toddler or pet. We don't view the jobsite as such; it is someone's home, and we respect that as much as possible throughout the construction process."

We are the only remodeler in the Houston area that has all major jobs in the county inspected by a code-certified, licensed inspector. While we pay for the inspections, they are not done by employees or staff. These are independent contractors who look for code violations the same way a city inspector would." Don said.

The company uses a combination of technology savvy and old-fashioned customer service to guarantee their abilities as a top-notice-remodeling firm. "We are one of the few remodeling companies, if not the only one, offering a two-year warranty," Michael said. "And," Don adds, "We get very, very few call-backs within that two-year period."

## Focus on the Client

Customer service is a highlight of the Brothers Strong business practice. "We oversee everything," Don states. "Each salesperson must visit their projects daily, and when the job is completed, you may find them on their hands and knees scrubbing the floor. We go over each job thoroughly, leaving it clean and completely inspected. That way we catch most of the small tough-up work ourselves, and we leave the homeowner with a warm and fuzzy feeling because we cared enough to make the sure the space would be usable when the job was finished."

One thing that Michael emphasizes is spending as much time on running the company as he does running remodeling projects. He evaluates cash flows every week and does monthly comparisons of

financial statements. "I believe with regular monitoring you can pinpoint the areas of the business needing more work and the areas that are healthy. Then, you can evaluate what works and why, and apply that knowledge in other areas of the business.

"We don't allow our business to run from funding on one project to support the next project. Operating paycheck to paycheck is not an effective way to grow a business, or to develop a business where the owners can never step back—even for a vacation," he adds. "Yet, we take off eight weeks a year. Careful planning of our systems and procedures allows us to do what we want or need to do."

## Joining the Association

"None of us were raised to be part of a group," Michael stated, "but we saw that the contractors who belonged to the Texas Association of Builders tended to be better business people, and we learned from that. We were already members of the National Association of Remodeling Industry (NARI) and networking through them.

"One of the vendors we were working with at the time suggested we look into the Greater Houston Builders Association. When we did, we were impressed with the Remodeler's Council and the general membership, and we haven't missed a meeting since 1995. One of us always goes to represent the company."

Ultimately the networking provides such a substantial benefit that Michael believes they make and save far more than the membership dues on an annual basis. "This gives us the opportunity to meet the very best produce manufacturers, learn about upcoming legislation impacting our industry and to interact with other industry professionals.

The association also provides a way for contractors to gain continuing education. "Since contractors in Texas are not licensed, continuing education and the accompanying designations show responsibility to the industry and to running a business. We encourage all potential clients to at least insist the contractor they use is a Certified Graduate Remodeler. Since there is no stage licensing, homeowners should at least require their contractor to have earned the industry's leading remodeling credentials and to maintain that designation through adherence to a code of ethics, continuing education and maintenance of general liability insurance."

## Growing the Business

For the first 10 years of operation, Brothers Strong focused on building a solid profit base. "We learned the process of monitoring the business during that phase," Michael states. "Relationships with trades are a critical factor in growing a business, and we spent a great deal of time refining those interactions."

Michael and Don now feel the business is ready to move to the next level—if it is done systematically and carefully. "We are now ready to grow," Michael said. "I think we are at the point where we can triple sales with a minimum increase in our overhead. Our investment in technology, people and infrastructure has put us in a position to turn up sales numbers big time. To do this, we will focus on increasing sales for the first time.

"As part of this process, we have hired a marketing firm to help with promotional materials, logo redesigns, Web site construction and other marketing needs. It is a big step for our company, but we know and understand the cyclical nature of our industry. Also, we have a flexible business structure since we do not have the added stress of managing field employees or worrying about increasing our overhead by having to hire more employees. We have budgeted \$80,000 for this effort—more than most home builders three times our size."

## Giving Back

Brothers Strong continues to give back to the community whenever possible. One primary way is through their association involvement, but they also include community outreach projects such as Habitat for Humanity.

"The offices we recently built are on a couple of beautiful oak-tree-studded acres, and we are looking at ways to bring in neighborhood kids to teach them basic building skills through the construction of birdhouses and planter boxes for Mother's Day," Michael states.

Brothers Strong continues to aspire to new heights with the success of the company. "We will always focus on business management practices first. Even when our volume triples, we will know our costs of doing business and each line percentage of our financial statements. If we lose control of the business fundamentals, we cannot offer our employees a career with a future nor our clients the high level of service they have come to expect" Michael stated.