

Hot Topic 3: Great Kitchens - Continued

Kitchen Remodeling Basics - Part III: Manufacturers Production Styles, From Custom to Stock

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Remodeling Reports

April, 2010

Manufacturers of cabinets have guidelines to their offerings. These specifications relate to the sizes of individual cabinets and their configurations. In addition, accessories, amenities and the ability to support the installation of certain appliances or conveniences may or may not be made available during the production of their products and are pointed out in their catalogs and product brochures. In some cases, desirable utility use can be added with aftermarket accessories, alterations made during the installation phase, or by a woodworking shop before delivery. The flexibility of the manufacturer's production line groups cabinets into stock, semi-custom, and custom categories.

This is regardless of whether the manufacturer is a small cabinet shop or a million and a half square foot state of the art facility. It is important to remember that cabinets of equal quality can be found in all groups as well as cabinets of poor quality. You will find that some books about kitchen design, with breathtaking pictures, will disagree with my previous statement. I'll leave it up to you to decide who is right, the author of a book with their credentials or Coach Jerry, who has built cabinets and furniture. Send us your comments upon the conclusion of your own research. In my opinion, the cost premium you pay between different categories is for the design flexibility that you desire, the use of exotic materials, complexity of details, hand craftsmanship if required, and the complexity of the finish. This cost difference directly relates to the additional time of constructing your cabinets to your specific design requirements and may or may not relate to quality. Even to confuse the issue further, it is not unusual to find a manufacturer with multiple brand labels charging less for cabinets with equal or better quality that have the greater flexibility you need at no additional expense. You should always take in to consideration the cost of upgrading a supposedly lower cost line before eliminating cabinets where the upgrades are standard. When cost is a consideration, a client can also alter the room to conform to the cabinet category rather than build custom cabinets to fit the room. I will talk about this a little later on.

I want to take a little of your time to

explain why, in my opinion, you need an expert to supply impartial advice to help you with your selections. You will need this not only in the selection of cabinetry, but throughout your kitchen decision-making process. I also want to emphasize the importance of you doing your own diligence through research and examining products.

When you are speaking to a salesperson or contractor ask yourself: What is the person's motivation? How expert are they? If you have a friend or relative who is in the building industry and has the cross product knowledge, they may be able to help you with the selection process with only your interests in mind. My years of experience tell me that there are many people who are designers or interior decorators who's input can be vitally important to a project in their specialty. However, the hands on knowledge of cabinet con-



struction as well as the other products that make up your kitchen project (and its relationship to your budget) is lacking by many specialist professionals. Another advantage of using a Coach or a successful retired builder/developer in your family is that he understands the real estate market. His opinion is based on the expertise and experience that his financial success was built on. Knowing what makes sense to add value to a home is a corner stone to this person's past and future success.

This is one of the prime reasons that I recommend to my clients (as well as use for my own projects) an independent kitchen designer. This way you own the design for a small cost. This cost should be offset by a similar reduction in the vendors' bids. You can then use the plans, specifications, and options from the designer to obtain the best

kitchen cabinet prices through the use of competitive bidding. You'll also be able to compare the cost of options being considered by requesting unit break downs. Your fee based designer will have your best interests in mind because their business growth is dependent on your satisfaction thru referrals. Their objective is to meet your needs, not upping the cost of the project to increase their profit. To learn more read the article: "How Builders and Remodelers Buy Right" under Remodeling Reports on the home page of our website (allows easy printing/ downloads) or find it in earlier blogs!

Many professional builders and general contractors do not have the depth and breadth of product knowledge to advise you about your selections, regardless of their good intentions. Most general contractors normally allow you to pick from a limited group of displayed cabinet fronts or build an allowance into their contract and introduce you to their supplier. They are dependent on their designated vendor to educate you. Once having signed the contract, if the cabinets are more than the allowance, you pay the difference or if you're lucky, you can supply them and take all the responsibility. I think you can recognize all the pit falls of the above.

You need someone who can integrate all of the products and services for you. (My short commercial.) To understand the requirement for this adviser or Coach, read past articles on this blog about "The Requirements For A Coach" and visit my website thedycoachusa.com to learn more about planning your project with a person who has your best interests at heart. If you plan to go it alone, I repeat, a few minutes of your time spent on my website's blog will enable you to learn "How Builders and Remodelers Buy Right".

With the above in mind, we'll talk about the least costly of the three production styles, stock cabinets, which fall into two groups. The first group are cabinets that are finished and shipped fully assembled from the factory. The second group are called RTA's or Ready To Assemble cabinets that may be assembled by the final purchaser or by a distributor that sells them to you. I'll start with these first.

These cabinets may be finished or

unfinished and are shipped in a box unassembled from the manufacture. Manufacturers may be companies from overseas, in this country, or Canada. They can be sold through an importer, wholesale distributor, or retailer. Many of these sellers are found on internet websites. Because they are boxed flat (unassembled), many more units can occupy the same space as preassembled cabinets at a big shipping cost savings. This group, when you understand cabinet construction, can provide you an excellent product at a bargain basement price, but you'll need to be able to separate the good from the bad. RTA's offerings are limited compared with stock cabinets that come fully assembled from the factory. RTA's can represent an alternate to particleboard cabinets found in many big box retail home improvement chains; RTA's are often made out of better materials at similar prices. For the budget minded home owner or real estate investor, RTA's can be a great choice.

Some imported kitchen cabinets have a certification label or stamp on the inside of drawers or interiors. There are a few authorities or American manufacturer associations that certify that wood products meet certain minimum standards. (Rather than spend a lot of time on this, you can do your diligence by researching this on the internet.) The first standard that is most important to me is that they are manufactured with products that do not give off toxic fumes, do not leach toxic chemicals, and are safe for your family in an interior closed environment. The second is that they conform to a construction standard. One of the certifications is the Kitchen Cabinet Manufacturers Association or KCMA; there are others. In small custom shops, they may adhere to an association's specifications and may be able to give you a copy of that list. In most cases, the safety of custom cabinet shop's products rests on their reputation and good name, of which without, the longevity of their success would be short lived.

The most general observation you will be able to make about most imported RTA cabinets is that the choice of selection is limited. There are no alternative door styles or finish choices in their selection like there are in other stock cabinets. The particular style of cabinets that you select will have a limited standard list of base, wall, specialty, oven, pantry cabinets, and accessories for you to pick from to design your kitchen. From draw slides (glides) to shelves, everything is standardize. This helps keep the cost of manufacturing and the price you pay affordable.

However, there are many aftermarket accessories that can be added that allows customizing the utility and use of RTA's.

There is an American manufacturer of Ready To Assemble Cabinets that are sold through direct distributors and retail specialty cabinet companies that must be called semi-custom because of the hundreds of styles, thousands of finishes, and the quality of construction. The manufacturer will build many cabinets to sizes not found in stock cabinets. Some individual outlets for the imports and the domestic RTA's offer assembly at an additional reasonable charge, which I recommend that you consider. Stock cabinets that come fully assembled from the manufacturer offer a basic, limited line of wall and base cabinet units to use to assemble your kitchen. However these cabinets offer greater choices in door and drawer design, finishes, and cabinet construction than imported RTA's for the most part. Depending on the manufacturer, there should still be a greater choice of different types of cabinets than RTA's or the inventoried stock cabinets sold by the big box home improvement retailers. Semi-Custom means just that, you have greater choice of everything we mentioned above. There are more styles and shapes in these fully assembled cabinet lines that are the building blocks of your kitchen. The manufacturers allow the cabinets to be built, with more flexible guide lines, that include a catalog of many units not offered among stock cabinets. Depending on the particular manufacturer, they will allow you to alter liner dimensions in three inch increments and some allow alterations as small as a quarter inch. In addition, special organizers may be included as well as custom finishes. These made to measure cabinets are built by large manufactures at a price that may be considerably lower than a small custom shop. The time from the date of ordering to the day of delivery may be eight weeks or more. When the cost fits into their budget, most of my client's kitchen needs can be easily satisfied at this level. Just a reminder: if you have budgetary restraints, explore American made ready to assemble cabinets.

Custom cabinets are made by smaller manufactures or smaller facilities owned by larger manufacturers as well as local cabinet shops. These companies may make all of the components that go into the cabinets or they may outsource some or many of the components that go into their products. Companies may finish their product in house or send them to a finishing specialist. Why they do this and what is best is a

whole another discussion, so for now let's just say the production process is customized to what works best for the kitchen cabinet builder. When I work with a client who has an interest in custom cabinets, I go into detail of this subject during the selection process. At this point, it is enough for you to understand the above.

Custom cabinets have few limitations. They are built to the designer's specifications and the client's wishes by starting with a blank piece of paper. The finished cabinetry should emerge as not just a architectural and design statement of the client's taste, but also should exhibit fine furniture craftsmanship. It should incorporate all of the functionality that the client desires that was refined with the designer's and builder's input. The end result can meet a client's every expectation. Custom cabinets can run in price from moderate to extremely expensive because of all the variations in costs of the differently used components to build them.

We covered a lot up until now. If you are getting a basic feeling for cabinets, you've done well. Furthering your knowledge will enable you to make intelligent decisions throughout the planning process. You are already on the right track. You'll graduate Kitchens Remodeling University with honors, with a Magna Cum Laude in Great Kitchens.

At the conclusion of all of the "Great Kitchen" articles that will contain information of almost every aspect (from floor to ceiling), I will include a list of books that should be helpful in your research and stimulate ideas for your perfect kitchen. Again, I receive nothing from these publishers, but also encourage you to look at other published books and magazines for ideas.

The next article will be about the many styles that are incorporated into kitchen design. The key words will include Colonial, Craftsman, Country, Contemporary, Classic, and Continental. I hope to touch on compact and universal kitchens that provide the utility of use for multi-generational families living in the same residence and discuss the differences between fitted and unfitted kitchen design.

I hope you're having fun and I'm getting your creative juices going as we continue to take this journey together. When we are done, I believe you will understand how the use and interaction of the space centered around your kitchen can improve the life of you, family, and friends.

May the Coach be with you,

Coach Jerry