

# SELLING THE OUTDOOR ROOM



*CG & S Design-Build, South Central regional CotY winner, Residential Exterior Under \$100,000*

## By Deidra Darsa, Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Association

With the right sales tools and techniques, selling the outdoor room is an open road to remodeling work, even in a tough economy. Educated consumers understand the value of adding an outdoor living area to their home. Not only is money spent on outdoor spaces, including a complete kitchen, a wise investment, it will also provide for a substantial return on investment when the house is sold. In the meantime, an outdoor room, or backyard oasis, will provide hours of enjoyment for family and friends.

"I think selling an outdoor room addition is going to be a real opportunity for remodeling contractors to market themselves," said Ross Johnson, vice president of sales at The Outdoor GreatRoom Co., a manufacturer of pergolas, casual furniture and fire pits. "The outdoor room is a way to market additional living space to homeowners, whether former, existing or prospective clients, at typically one-fifth the cost of indoor construction. If former clients don't have an outdoor room, I suggest the remodeler go back to them because they are more likely to spend money with someone they know rather than someone they don't know. And, if you're doing an indoor kitchen remodel, that's the time to suggest an outdoor kitchen, too."

## More Than a Patio Space

These days, an outdoor room is more than a patio, a few chairs and portable grill. It's a well-thought out living space that, when complete, includes a sitting area, a place to cook, a heat source and lighting. For some, an outdoor area includes a water element that may be a spa, swimming pool, waterfall, or combination.

"One of the things we've found is that a shade structure or pergola, dramatically changes the feel and look of an outdoor

room," said Johnson. "People feel a little more protected and it defines the room." For those who don't have the yard space for a stand-alone pergola, there are some that attach to the house over a deck or patio.

According to Russ Faulk, vice president marketing & product development of Kalamazoo Outdoor Gourmet, roof structures for outdoor rooms and kitchens are growing in popularity. "Homeowners want to make the outdoor kitchen more functional and livable," he said. "I think of it as a natural progression to being used all the time, and having a roof means you can use the kitchen in a wider range of weather. We saw the most upscale market put roofs on first and now the concept is working its way down."

At Lynx Professional Grills, Brian Eskew says that a pergola, lanai or screened-in porch is a great way to build an outdoor kitchen or living room that's usable year-round.

"In places where it's wet, cold and windy, consumers are contracting to build semi-enclosed outdoor rooms," he says.

## A team effort

Creating a functional and elegant outdoor living space may not take a village, but it certainly requires the skill of a knowledgeable remodeler, working closely with product dealers, landscapers and architects. And building partnerships with those folks will often send clients your way.

An architect or landscape architect can help you better understand the lay of the land and how it will change once an outdoor room is built. Conveying that to clients builds confidence in the potential client's decision to select a contractor.

For instance, if a client wants to create an outdoor room in what they consider the best spot in the yard, suggest otherwise, according to John Blackburn, president of Blackburn Architects. "I say wait a minute: If this is your best spot, you don't want to build there. Build your outdoor room in the worst

spot, so you can look at the best spot."

He also suggests building decks with a step down off the back of the house so the view from inside the house isn't obscured by the deck railing. For remodelers that aren't experienced in landscape design, Blackburn suggests bringing in someone who can assist in the layout.

"Hire a designer who can see the layout differently than the person who's living there," he says. "It's important to have that person who can see the land clearly and is able to disguise any blemish in the landscape. The designer brings in the creative part, and the builder brings in the skills needed."

Faulk agrees: "From what we've seen, the type of professional the homeowner most often turns to is a landscape professional, either an architect or designer. So in some markets, the best leg up is to partner with a handful of landscape professionals. And, the remodeler is probably going to be more able to contribute on the job in terms of any structure that goes into any project."

A remodeler can look to manufacturers for sales tools that help close the deal.

"We do drawings of outdoor kitchens that use our equipment, and professionals use these drawings as well," Faulk said. "We have done hundreds of drawings and have worked with those who are experienced in outdoor kitchen work and those who are just starting out. We give them as much advice as they need."

Kalamazoo also provides training for professionals on its Web site. "We help with training resources on our web site, including check lists, usability principals for outdoor

kitchens, dos and don'ts," Faulk said. "Building expertise is very helpful."

## Making the sale

Once a homeowner appears interested in the outdoor living lifestyle, the next step is to put them in the setting to close the deal. "There has to be a place where people can see it, sit in it and feel it," said Scott Schopf, vice president of operations for Harmony Outdoor Living. "Sometimes a picture is nice, but it doesn't really do the lifestyle justice. I encourage remodelers to take their clients to a dealer's showroom that has outdoor living arrangements in place. Not only will it help the contractor, but it also gives the dealer a chance to sell furniture, plants, and more outdoor items."

There's no denying times are tough. But, if prepared to go after it, great possibilities and business exist for remodelers in building the outdoor room. ■

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## TIPS:

- Know what makes an outdoor room
- Understand the products
- Partner with other professionals
- Create a photo portfolio
- Build a list of references with outdoor rooms
- Partner with a local dealer of outdoor room products
- Sell the lifestyle



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