

## Design Center Kitchen Conspiracy

**Builders are finding that a design center that emphasizes the kitchen can be a good investment.**

Something new is cooking in builders' design centers and it's happening in the kitchen. Two notable examples: Richmond American Homes established a new 11,000-square-foot prototype "Home Gallery" in a high-end Denver retail district. It features three working kitchens. Meritage Home's upcoming 12,000-square-foot design center in Scottsdale, Ariz., will include four kitchen vignettes. Patty Snyder, senior vice president with Meritage, says the new design center will be more than double the size of the current facility, which features two kitchen vignettes.



In fact, more builders than ever are building their own design centers. And because the kitchen is such a good place to sell upgrades, it's where these

builders are putting their money.

"More builders are creating their own in-house design centers as another step in branding, and another step toward owning the entire home-buying process," says Snyder. Having your own design center keeps customers in your environment where you have some control over the sales process - which is not the case if you send them to a third-party showroom.

Kitchen vignettes are a valuable tool in that process. "The kitchen is the heartbeat of the home, so much of family life is focused on the kitchen," says Snyder. Because of this

### In Focus

**This month's In Focus question:**

What's the most popular new shower trend you're seeing?

- Unusual Location (outdoors, mudroom)
- His and hers "Double Shower" in the master suite
- Spa Shower
- Steam Shower

In July, we asked about your biggest business challenges. Results are:

1. Finding qualified workers and/or subcontractors (nearly half of you ranked this no. 1)
2. Managing administrative tasks
3. Finding customers
4. Keeping up with trends

Thanks for participating in our online poll.

focus, design-center kitchens are receiving increased attention from builders, partially because that is where a number of big-ticket upgrades can be displayed. Refrigerators, stoves, dishwashers, sinks, faucets, and stone and wood surfaces can all be highly profitable.

Larger design centers may include several almost full-scale kitchen vignettes depicting as much of a real kitchen as possible, sometimes even baking cookies in operational ovens. But what do you do if you can't afford the space for that?

Keith Steier, president of Knockout Renovation, a remodeler specializing in New York City condominium renovations, operates a small (700-square-foot) design center on Manhattan's Upper East Side. He gets the most out of this tight space with a customizable kitchen counter/cabinet mock-up.

The mock-up is simple but effective. Steier built bare frames for two side-by-side, 18-inch base cabinets, then applied industrial-strength Velcro to the front and top of the frames, as well as to custom-made samples of counter tops, cabinet doors and drawers. With more than 150 options to choose from (flooring samples, backsplashes, countertops, doors and hardware) he can show a dizzying combination of colors and finishes for critical kitchen options. "The biggest problem I have seen in other kitchen showrooms is the inability to visualize the specific combination of options the customer wants," says Steier.

A good design center takes into account how the buyer will use it. "People spend the longest amount of time making selections in the



kitchen," says Mark Martin, director of Design Services for the Drees/Zaring Design Center in Cincinnati. The Drees/Zaring design center includes several kitchen displays, and is being refit in the fall of 2005 with more stainless steel appliances to increase high-end option selections. Four different islands in the area give customers a place to set materials and papers.

Large or small, a design center can help you sell. Your customers will feel comfortable and engaged, and as a result, they'll spend a little more time - and often a little more money - on their selections.