



Refacing Reality TV

Remodelers put a good face on the home-improvement television boom

In the last two years, the national obsession with home improvement and reality TV have resulted in numerous remodeling programs breaking into primetime. The most common detraction heard from viewers and

The television time crunch can create a downright chaotic work site. Knowing how to share space with camera operators and designers requires detailed pre-job planning.

professionals alike about the home improvement shows currently on the air is that they do not (or cannot) portray the home improvement process accurately—homes aren't completed in 26 minutes (with commercial breaks), and clients don't magically go away only to reappear when all is all shiny and new.

"There's always an element of suspended disbelief," says Eric Stromer, owner of Big House Construction and carpenter on TLC's "Clean Sweep," "and we addressed that by saying upfront that we have a 30-person crew doing the work; it's not magic."

Still, some contractors worry that news reports criticizing such shows—like a May 17 *Newsweek* article—could worsen contractors' reputation with the public.

The behind-the-scenes reality is that the altruistic, educational and recreational aspects of these shows were what overwhelmingly drew remodelers to participate, in spite of 20-hour shoots. After all, a chance to be on television is a once in a lifetime opportunity. Based on the experiences of remodeling companies that have delved into this medium, here are three crucial "Ps":

Planning—not just for the assigned project but also to ensure that your business will not suffer from the sizable time commitment and brainpower required—is central.

With respect to **profit**, don't expect to make one. Remodeling contractors say that despite having product donated or paid for by the show, they still took a hit

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because of intensive labor requirements and time commitment. So, your company must be able to absorb the loss and compensate workers adequately.

Last, multiple cameramen and scrutinizing producers will crowd your workspace, so *patience* is key.

"As a remodeler, you manage your clients' expectations; these are just television shows," says Sal Ferro, president of Alure Home Improvement on Long Island. "If you allow your client to set their expectations based on perceptions from a television show, you've done a poor job.

When done right, these shows promote the industry and show contractors in a positive light, and they separate professionals from the 'truck slammers.'" PR

See www.HousingZone.com/pr/realitytv to read "Tips on getting 'discovered.'"

DOUG CORNWELL AND SAL FERRO (RIGHT), CR, CKD, PRESIDENT OF ALURE HOME IMPROVEMENT (EAST MEADOW, N.Y.)

SHOW: ABC's "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" (Alure's episode aired May 6)
"REEL" AMBITION: "Extreme Makeover" is a crunch against time: renovating an entire home, including the exterior and landscaping, in seven days for a deserving family. The show wanted a contractor that could do a project in New York City; another remodeler who already had wrapped two episodes of the series recommended Alure. Ferro liked the sheer challenge of the project — a complete renovation of an 800-square-foot apartment belonging to two firemen who were involved in the Sept. 11 rescue mission — as well as the possibility for Alure to receive exposure nationwide.

LIGHTS, CAMERAS, ACTION: Having just two weeks to scout the location and work out all the logistics of the planned 12-hour shoot,



Ferro and Cornwell, Alure's director of operations, faced yet another big challenge: Their episode was to be the first live edition of "Extreme Makeover," so the crew would have to come back two hours before the broadcast for a real-time finish. To psychologically prepare their 40 workers for the lengthy, grueling experiment (which called for removing walls, building a whole new bathroom, completely redoing the kitchen and providing new flooring), Ferro and Cornwell created a presentation outlining the action plan and gathered the crew three days prior to the shoot to discuss the project. A visit from a heckling

Regis Philbin mere hours before the project was to be unveiled rallied the crew to finish, even as they worked with no more than three hours of sleep and were still tearing down walls past the allotted time frame.

REAL TALK: "The part that's not heralded as much is the people aspect. The amount of stress we worked under is unlike any other job. Where we succeeded the most was in team building — we walked away with pride and tears in our eyes because of what we'd done for the family, but also because of how we were able to unite our team."

STEPHEN HANN, CGR, GMB, PRESIDENT OF HANN BUILDERS (STAFFORD, TEXAS)

SHOW: "House Rules" on TBS (series premiered October 10, 2003; ran for 13 weeks)
"REEL" AMBITION: Hann's name came up via interior decorators he'd worked with and through his association with the Remodelers Council in Houston. He was chosen after doing a series of interviews, including an on-camera one.

LIGHTS, CAMERAS, ACTION: The show pit three teams against each other, each with the task of renovating a whole house. Each episode focused on a different room, and the judges rated each team's work. The show started taping in May 2003 and filmed every Sunday



for almost 16 weeks, with a minimum 12-hour shoot. Serving as "The Builder" judge, Hann was responsible for

inspecting the quality and level of completion of each of the contestants' projects — given that the contestants were amateurs, Hann focused on how well they planned and executed their work.

REAL TALK: "Doing this made me more aware of the power of perception. I was reminded of the challenges for the homeowner. These

couples had to balance the drama of remodeling while balancing the emotion involved in their relationship ups and downs, and everything was amplified and magnified. It put the value of professionals in context and highlighted the difficulty of the process. It exemplified where you need professionals to guide the people and the process."

IT'S A WRAP: With Lowe's as the chief sponsor of "House Rules," Hann — who does not see their installed services as a threat — learned from the company's business model by observing how marketing, promotion and branding dollars work on a large scale. With all this insight, Hann has tweaked his direct marketing techniques and marketing materials.