

Builder/Architect



Sommers Construction

A Recipe for Satisfying Customers
Before, During and After the Sale

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By TJ Neale



The kitchen is the heart of every home. In this Parade home, it opens to the great room and a sunny dining area on the right.

Alan Sommers, president of Porter County-based Sommers Construction, believes that the kitchen is the heart of a home — both his own and those he builds for his clients. Sommers, a gourmet cook himself, prepares most of the meals for his own family. He works as hard to integrate the kitchen into the house as he does when grilling steaks or braising a lamb shank.



A case in point is the 2005 Porter County Parade of Homes house, The Wilshire at Windsor Park in Valparaiso, IN, that Sommers built. A 30-inch-high countertop, situated in front of a window with a view of the backyard, makes working there a joy for the resident bread or pastry-maker. The kitchen welcomes a gathering of family and friends who can interact with the cook without getting in the way.

Sommers says that whether his clients are serious cooks or don't know a Viking range from a hotplate, they still want an inviting place to gather. "Because I use my kitchen so often, I have a good feel for what someone else will find convenient and useful," Sommers said.

Like his meals, Sommers' homes are never exactly the same twice. "Even if we're using the same plans, we'll use what we learned on the first home to improve the second. Each client brings differences in ideas, lifestyle and taste." Melding those unique elements into the home plans to satisfy the client is a daily challenge that Sommers embraces.

The "we" that he refers to are a group of trusted subcontractors who work well together and share his standards of quality and pride in their work. Sommers prefers this arrangement over maintaining his own crew. "Because I'm not spending my days with employee problems, insurance and payroll issues, I can concentrate on my customers." He does employ one person whose sole job is to make sure that the sites are kept clean, and his father, Owen, a retired builder who makes himself available for odd jobs and to deliver small items to job sites.

Alan Sommers knows a thing or two about managing employees — before becoming a builder full-time, as many as 100 people reported to him at his job as director of Diagnostic Services at St. Catherine Hospital in East Chicago. His education includes degrees in chemistry and biology, becoming a medical technologist specializing in immunohematology/transfusion medicine. After several promotions, he went back to the classroom to earn an MBA from IU Northwest.

Although this son and grandson of builders chose a profession far-removed from construction, he found himself building one or two homes as a side business before deciding to return to his roots and pursue the trade full-time in 1995.

"People who gravitate to the medical/scientific field I was in tend to be good at multi-tasking and are usually very detail oriented," Sommers explained. These traits serve him well as he prioritizes tasks while juggling the eight to 10 homes he now builds in a typical year.

Those homes, mostly in the \$300,000 to \$400,000 range and up, require a timeframe of at least eight months. Ideally, the starts are staggered about 30 days apart, giving the subcontractors time to complete one phase of the house before moving to



Sommers Construction home built at the Links of Aberdeen.

The Wilshire, located at Windsor Park, Valparaiso, IN, was featured in the Porter County Builder Association's Parade of Homes in 2005.



the next. Instead of limiting himself to a certain subdivision, he builds on lots his clients choose.

Those locations include Duneland Cove, Sand Creek, Villages of Sand Creek, Tamarack and Aberdeen, subdivisions with great variation in the type of families they attract. Aberdeen, for example, is built around a golf course and appeals to those who enjoy the country club lifestyle. Sunnybrooke, where Sommers' own home is located, offers a common barn and pasture area for those whose passions include horses. Aberdeen is family oriented, with several playgrounds and open land incorporated into the infrastructure.

Sommers knows that personal attention and good communication with his clients is key to his goal of customer satisfaction. He uses the Internet, maintaining a tasteful website where prospective clients are able to take a virtual tour of a recently completed home, find out more about Alan and the company, get warranty information about his work, and more.

Instead of relying on memory or notes jotted down on whatever is handy, he stays in contact with his clients through e-mail. A client might send him a photo of a feature they saw in a magazine or model home that they want to incorporate into

their own house. Sommers might send a reminder that it's time to make a decision on the bathroom fixtures.

"I keep a folder for each job and store the correspondence. I also have an online form for change orders. This all but eliminates the misunderstandings that can occur when promises are made or directions given verbally," he noted. Sommers estimates that about 90 percent of his clients communicate with him this way. He makes it a priority to check e-mail three times daily.

But nothing replaces the face-to-face interaction with clients, especially in the early stages of a project. Clients are always welcome to visit the job site. When a job begins, Sommers prepares a timeline of when he expects certain stages to be completed and gives his clients a copy of the calendar that includes deadlines for decisions they must make. "This makes the process less intimidating — clients don't have to decide on everything at once."

A hands-on builder, he tries to visit each job site at least once every day, maintaining close contact with his subcontractors. Most of those subs have worked with Sommers for years and are recognized as being some of the best in their specialties. He feels that the consistency of staying with the same trusted crews is best for both the initial build and for any service work

This beautiful living room flows to an all-seasons room that overlooks the in-ground pool and pasture in Sunnybrooke, located in Chesterton, IN.





PHOTO BY DENNIS CRANE PHOTOGRAPHERS

The gourmet kitchen in Sommers' spec home features everything an inspiring chef needs, including many cabinets, working surfaces and extra touches such as the built-in bookcases for cookbooks.

needed after the job is completed. "I trust my subcontractors to respond to my call in a timely matter to correct or resolve any problem that might arise."

And how long might a homeowner expect Sommers to respond to a problem? Even though each home comes with a warranty, sometimes he's there long after the warranty has expired. A case in point is a home that Sommers built years before that he passed on his way to and from his own home. One day he noticed that the roof didn't look "quite right." He stopped, knocked on the door, and asked if they were having any roof problems. The owners hadn't yet noticed, but there was a leak and crack in the dining room ceiling.

Sommers got a crew to take down a portion of the ceiling and discovered a cracked framing member. The member was replaced and the drywall repaired — at no charge to the homeowner. "My philosophy is to do the right thing. Some people appreciate it and some don't, but in the long run I feel it pays off," he noted.

A member of the Porter County Builders Association since

1997, he was a board member and vice president before serving as president of the association in 2002. Sommers Construction Company has also participated in most Porter County parades of homes since 1997.

Sommers has also been a member of the LaPorte County Builders Association since 2003. He uses the Quality Builders Standards program, which was begun by the state builders association and adopted by the LaPorte County Builders Association. ■

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