



The Modern Remodeler

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Stonington contractor uses latest business strategies to win state award.

By Lee Howard, Marketplace Editor.

When John DeCiantis got into the home-improvement business some 30 years ago, his uncle predicted that he would eventually own the biggest construction company in the region.

"I told him I didn't want to be the biggest; I wanted to be the best," recalls DeCiantis.

What may have been considered youthful bravado has turned into reality. Deciantis, owner of DeCiantis Construction of Stonington, earlier this year won distinction by being named Connecticut Remodeler of the Year. Along the way, he has earned the plaudits of builders and clients alike.

"When you think of John, you think of that old-fashioned word 'integrity'; he just reeks of it," says Priscilla Vail, who has a home in Stonington Borough. "I wouldn't use anyone else for anything."

Lyndon Haviland, who has a weekend home in Lyme, couldn't agree more. She recounts a time when her mother suffered a stroke and DeCiantis, working on a multimillion dollar house, dropped everything he was doing and arranged, within a week, to have chairlift installed so her mother could return home.

She also remembers when, years after DeCiantis completed a kitchen project for her, she mentioned something about the room that irritated her. "You never told me that," DeCiantis said, and proceeded to fix the problem without a charge.

"John is probably honest to a fault," says Bill Ferrigno, owner of Sunlight construction, a development and homebuilding company in Avon. "He'll tell you that you don't need something if you really don't need it."

DeCiantis always displayed an earnest work ethic, but the money and recognition never came easily. Then, about six years ago, DeCiantis had an epiphany after attending sine trade shows: He needed to run his company in a more businesslike manner.

"I started learning how to make money," he says. "We're a profitable company. We're not the cheapest guy on the block."

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DeCiantis began learning about margins, cash flow, standardized systems, goal setting, employee incentives, sales and marketing, the science of estimating costs and the use of computer systems.

About five years ago, DeCiantis made another leap forward: He joined the Builders Association of Eastern Connecticut, took courses in business management and began to enter homebuilding contests, winning three categories his very first year.

This year, he took over as president of the local homebuilders association, after having rung up many more awards, including designation by Remodeling magazine as one of the top 50 remodelers in the country.

One of the keys to DeCiantis' success has been in understanding what motivates his employees. "Appreciation: Money's not at the top of the list," he says.

DeCiantis who employees anywhere from seven to nice people full time, offers days off for exceptional work and incentives for workplace safety in an effort to retain employees.

"This business has a high turnover,; he says. "We need to overcome that."

DeCiantis also wants to overcome the remodeling industry's reputation as the used car salesmen of the homebuilding field. He has been among the first to propose ethics standards that have since been adopted by the local homebuilders association. Anyone who doesn't abide by the standards can't get into the association- a stipulation some had worried would reduce membership, but the ranks have actually grown in recent months.

DeCiantis' interest in ethics goes along with his philosophy of developing "clients for life." His mostly upscale clientele comes back to him time and again to provide custom solutions to unusual needs.

One customer, says DeCiantis, has asked him to do five major projects in the past seven years-everything from an acoustically correct barn for folk concerts to a pool house and greenhouse. In all, DeCiantis estimated he's doing 30 projects a year. "Anywhere from building a fence - we do custom fences at about \$75 a foot - to million- dollar custom homes.

One of DeCiantis' most complex projects involved building a dance studio in Ledyard with a 3,000-square-foot hexagonal room made out of steel.

"Clients are always the biggest challenge," he says, adding jokingly, "We always say the best client is the one who goes to Europe and leaves his checkbook."

DeCiantis may be joking, but he's dead serious about not having clients bid out a job. "We wash windows, but we don't do free estimates," he says. "Before we give a price, we have been chosen to do the job."

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DeCiantis has told clients that they are ill served by competitive bidding because it takes away the element of trust between the builder and homeowner. Priscilla Vail, for one, is happy to put her trust in DeCiantis.

He starts when he promises he will start; he ends when he promises he will end. And he sticks to budge," she says. "Am I starting to sound like his mother?"

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