

# Adapting in the Face of the COVID-19 Crisis

BY JAMIE GOLD, CKD, CAPS, MCCWC

Designers, dealers and other industry pros share their strategies for safely doing business during the pandemic and their insights on how this will affect the industry.

No one knows what the world, or our industry, will look like in the immediate future. As of publication, almost two million Americans have been infected by the novel coronavirus (more than six million worldwide), and more than 100,000 Americans (370,000-plus worldwide) have lost their lives. It's shocking to realize how quickly life can change for so many.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on economies around the world has also been serious, as has its impact on the kitchen and bath industry (see related **Barometers, Pages 8 & 9**). Thousands of large and small American businesses have applied for financial relief, and millions of newly unemployed workers have filed unemployment claims. Those numbers are expected to increase across the foreseeable future, with a pandemic-generated global recession likely. And while the pandemic might have eased by autumn, it's possible that there will be a second or third wave this winter and into 2021, and other viruses lurking in the future.

What follows are the perspectives of eight kitchen and bath industry professionals and how they're adapting to this public-health crisis.

- Bill Darcy, CEO of the National Kitchen & Bath Association;
- Nar Bustamante of Sacramento-based Nar Design Group;
- Gail Drury of Drury Design, in Glen Ellyn, IL;
- Todd Jackson of Jackson Design Group, in San Diego;
- Gerald Olesker, CEO of Los Angeles area-based architectural lighting manufacturer ADG Lighting;
- Peter Salerno of Wyckoff, NJ-based Peter Salerno, Inc.;
- Debbie Schaeffer, third-generation owner of Mrs. G Appliances in Lawrence Township, NJ;
- Scott Waldhauser, co-owner of the four-showroom, family-owned Kenwood Kitchens in Maryland.

These eight pros represent a cross-section of the industry – from manufacturing to retailing to designing to organizing and educating, building and remodeling – as well as geographic diversity, from coast to coast. The perspectives they offer, as well as the lessons they've learned, can potentially serve everyone going forward.

## DESIGNER CRISIS RESPONSE

Few people are better positioned to provide the kitchen and bath industry's big picture than the NKBA's Darcy. How are member design firms

responding? Day by day, Darcy replies, with each one being very different than the others.

"All of them are adapting," Darcy observes. "They're being proactive and embracing the digital tools available to them, to continue to virtually connect with their team members, clients, vendors and each other."

This has some practical applications, he notes. "Some of our dealer members are shipping samples directly to a client's home or offering curbside pickup solutions to keep the design process moving forward, while others are enhancing e-commerce offerings."

Some owners are also using this time to improve their business operations, Darcy notes. This includes everything from learning new software programs, studying for certification tests and participating in webinars.

Bustamante and Jackson are both based in California, which imposed stay-at-home mandates earlier than other states. While that is helping to flatten the curve in the nation's most populous state, it is having profound impacts on designers and others located there.

"The day California's governor declared a mandatory stay-at-home order for 14 days (March 19), I had no choice but to understand we were going to be in this situation for much longer than anyone cares for," Bustamante recalls. "With incoming projects going on immediate pause, (our) supply chain firing warning shots about production and the stock market tumbling, this is a global awakening to how closely we are interdependent as a business community."

He adds: "I had to lay off three employees indefinitely and keep only the employees who were absolutely critical to maintain day-to-day operations. I hope to regain my staff if the fall-out does not last too long or with some federal help. We are set up to be able to also work at home if need be."

Bustamante notes that he's also had to change how deliveries are handled, quarantining product before it's handled for three days and allowing only one trade on a jobsite at a time."

Jackson reflects back on that time, too: "Anticipating significant changes to our workflow, we had already established an internal communication system to assure we could all stay in consistent communication," he explains. "Not everyone was ready to go on a work-at-home basis, so we dedicated time to assisting everyone who needed help."

This communication includes essential updates about local, state and federal policies, information about Jackson Design Group's ongoing response, "and also more personal communication about how to keep our bodies and minds healthy during this ongoing crisis," Jackson says.

Salerno is in the hard-hit Greater New York City metro area, and his staff is also working from home, he says.

"Cabinet orders have become a major issue," he observes. "We cannot get completed kitchens out of the factories, and whatever is in progress has stopped. I still have access to appliances, countertops and my tradespeople, but with no cabinetry, my business will be at a standstill in four weeks. I'm sure that cabinet parts such as drawer slides, door hinges, hardware and accessories will hold up the completion of kitchen and baths, since many are imported."

Wood-Mode dealer Waldhauser has had an extra challenge beyond the Maryland-area



↑ Food handling and storage designs could change because of contagion concerns.

Photo: Courtesy of Nar Bustamante, Nar Design Group/Photo: Photographerlink



Photo: Courtesy of Jackson Design and Remodeling

Wellness spaces are likely to trend post-pandemic.

COVID-19 impact, since the Pennsylvania-based cabinet manufacturer was forced to temporarily suspend operations, along with other businesses deemed “non-life-sustaining” in the Keystone State. At press time, the company is manufacturing again.

“Under new ownership, (Wood-Mode) seemed to just get their feet back under them when the pandemic happened. We’re confident that they will get through this situation, as well,” Waldhauser says.

The multi-branch dealership supplemented its existing cabinetry brands with three new lines to help the company address the initial uncertainty, the co-owner says.

As far as managing jobs, Waldhauser says, “Some installations we already had in progress are continuing with customers’ approval and keeping within the recommended safety precautions. Most of our installers work alone and have our detailed drawings to get the job done with less personal interaction. Staggering other trades like plumbers and electricians also minimizes how many people are on the job at a time.” Cell phones are helping to coordinate jobs remotely, he adds.

“Vendors are the trickiest issue,” Bustamante says. “If you purchase material, one has no guarantee it will be delivered on time. Local delivery companies are having to rely on their local ordinances that can affect if a delivery is even able to be received or delivered.”

Jackson says, “Clients have questions about supply chains, and we’ve been continuously researching as the situation changes. Basic materials, such as lumber, electric, drywall, etc., all have no issues so far. Moving forward, we’ll be keeping an eye on materials including electrical fixtures, hardware and other finishes to see how their availability is impacted. Clients may choose to use one material that’s definitely available now, with plans to replace it with a more custom European solution when the market returns to normal.”

Like her coastal colleagues, Drury is adjusting project processes for her suburban Chicago design studio and dealing with vendor issues.

“We are working with customer photos and generating drawings of the existing space with the understanding that we will measure on-site before ordering any materials,” she says. For jobs in progress, Drury has established a strict protocol for handling site issues, she relates. “The rooms are completely sealed off with no access for the

customer into the job site area. We are limiting the number of employees that can be in a job site at one given time and are practicing social distancing. As of now, we’re not starting any new project installations until stay-in-place guidelines are over.”

By April, New Jersey had the second highest rate of infection in the country, and Salerno has had to address that.

“Site meetings are all about safety – gloves, masks and social distance,” he says. “Kitchen installations have been treated like operating rooms for the safety of the homeowner as well as the installation team.” In addition to sealing them off, “we have also added hospital-quality air filters in the kitchen for air purification. Both the clients and installers are put at ease with these added precautions.”

#### MANUFACTURING AND RETAIL COPING

Debbie Schaeffer’s family has been selling appliances for more than 80 years in New Jersey, a short drive from Princeton University.

“Any staff member who can work at home is doing so,” observes the current owner and founder’s granddaughter. “This was not easy. We needed an IT professional to mirror the in-store computer and POS system.”

Schaeffer has readjusted schedules to ensure social distancing in the store and is using technology as much as possible with staff and customers. She is seeing numerous sales close via the TAWK.to messaging service for company websites and mobile apps, but reports that most recent sales have been by phone. As this issue goes to press and more businesses are able to open back up, at least right now, Schaeffer has been able to bring more staff back into the store.

Beyond qualifying that no one is sick in a client’s home, Mrs. G hasn’t changed its delivery and installation program. “Everyone brings sanitizers and cleaning wipes,” Schaeffer notes.

Her biggest vendor issue: It’s “impossible to get freezers,” she says. “Our buying group is well-stocked, but I worry what will be in the coming weeks. We are getting notices that manufacturers are halting production.” Hopefully, this shortage will also have eased by the time you read this.

Olesker is still able to keep his Los Angeles area staff working, he says. “ADG produces all of our products,” he explains. “We have a small team of skilled craftsmen that work across two factories and are able to keep distance.”



Photo: Courtesy of Whippool

Freezers hit peak demand with food shortages.

Since California has designated construction an essential industry, he does not have to close them down. He is adjusting processes, though, including scheduling and asking staff not to leave for lunch to reduce contacts.

#### POST-PANDEMIC LESSONS

All eight industry pros see many more electronic business processes and meetings being used for non-sensitive items, and more employees working from home even after the crisis eases or ends.

They also anticipate new design ideas emerging (see related Editorial, Page 5). Bustamante sees a need for decontamination stations at home and thinks using workstation sinks and separate pantry-like areas for safely handling food storage will appear. Jackson and Salerno predict that private home offices will make a comeback. Jackson also sees wellness rooms, in-law suites and year-round-friendly outdoor spaces gaining fans.

Waldhauser says he would like to be able to make wellness features available to more clients. “Hopefully, some of the ideas that stem from this current virus will be affordable to everyone,” he says.

#### FINAL WORDS

“We are all in this together, so let’s continue giving each other support and trust that we will all be stronger when this is past,” Bustamante suggests.

Jackson agrees: “There’s no avoiding that this is a tough time for our industry. We’re focusing on how we can be resilient and adaptable as a design build firm, and as citizens of our community.”

Waldhauser is hopeful that firms like his will come through. “I think companies that know how to weather the storm will become stronger.”

NKBA’s Darcy advises: “Being there for clients and trades to let them know they are thinking of them and want them to be safe is so important right now.” ■



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