

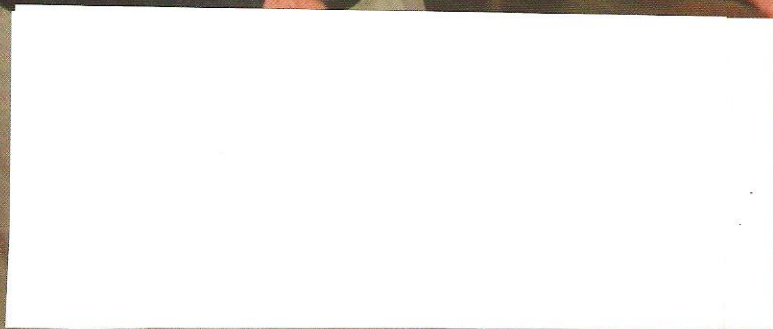
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# PMM

PLUMBING & MECHANICAL

Jeff Kuhn, president of  
S&K Pump and Plumbing,  
Brookfield, Wis.

*Custom*  
**Bath And Kitchen  
Remodeling**



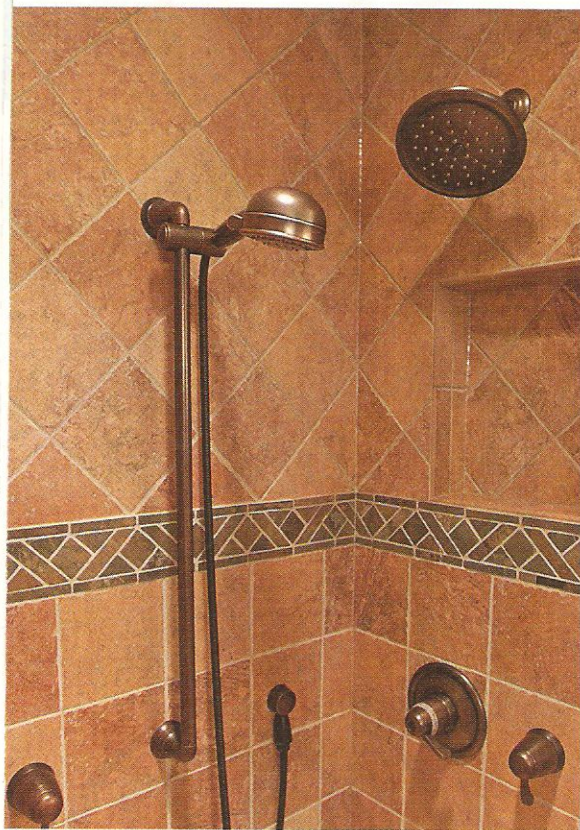
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# CUSTOM MEANS

# Custom

Communication holds the key to bath-and-kitchen remodeling *success.*



S&K installs the plumbing in all the remodeling jobs it designs. It subs out the tile and other work.

Giving customers options is why Jeff Kuhn fills all available space in his 1,890-square-foot S&K Kitchens & Baths showroom with vignettes and products. The Kohler-registered showroom in Brookfield, Wis., also displays items from Delta, Moen, Elkay, American Standard, TOTO and InSinkErator as well as tile, countertops and cabinets.

"I always say that custom means custom," says Kuhn, president of S&K Pump and Plumbing. "Customers should get whatever they want, not whatever they're going to get."

This belief has motivated Kuhn, a plumbing contractor, to hook up running water in his showroom to the toilets, faucets, showerheads, whirlpools and air tubs. The plumber's touch is evident again in the behind-the-wall displays that show piping, valves and anchors for grab bars. Tankless water heaters, steam units and S&K's own brand of Crystal Clear water-conditioning products occupy other areas.

"Our designers let people know all their options so they can make a choice and not find out about something else after the fact," Kuhn says. "We don't want to hear our customers saying later, 'I could have had a V8!'"

**Two-Way Communication:** Successful remodeling projects involve as much listening to customers as telling them what's available. While S&K remodels more bathrooms than kitchens, the height of a kitchen faucet provides an excellent example of the importance of communication.

"The scale of the faucet depends on what customers want to do in their kitchen and how they live," Kuhn says. "Do they want a nice spot on their counter to put their McDonald's bag, or do they get into 'The Iron Chef' and the other cooking shows? If so, they'll want a taller spout, ancillary sink and maybe a pot filler.

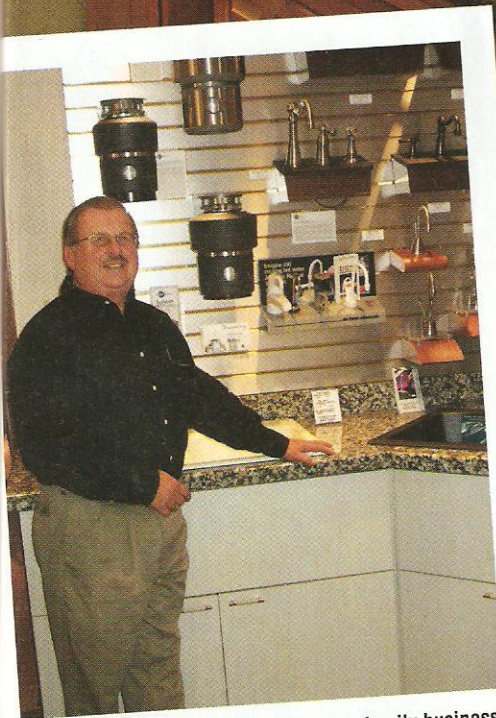
"It goes back to us offering a full breadth of products to serve the different needs of our customers."

Photo credit: Product shots from S&K Kitchens & Baths; all other photos credited to Bob Miodonski/Plumbing & Mechanical.





S&K targets the upper-end remodeling and new construction markets in Milwaukee and its suburbs.



President Jeff Kuhn has worked at the family business founded by his uncle and father since 1974.

S&K caters to the higher-end remodeling and new construction markets in the suburbs of Milwaukee and in the city itself. Customers usually have researched products on the Internet or seen them on home-improvement TV shows by the time they call S&K.

The project then becomes a three-step process, Kuhn says. The first step occurs when customers visit the showroom, which is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays and by appointment at other times. Customers can see what's available and meet with S&K remodeling manager **Janet Callahan**, designer **Peggy Skenandore** or with new construction consultant **Beth Hunn** who assists with remodeling.

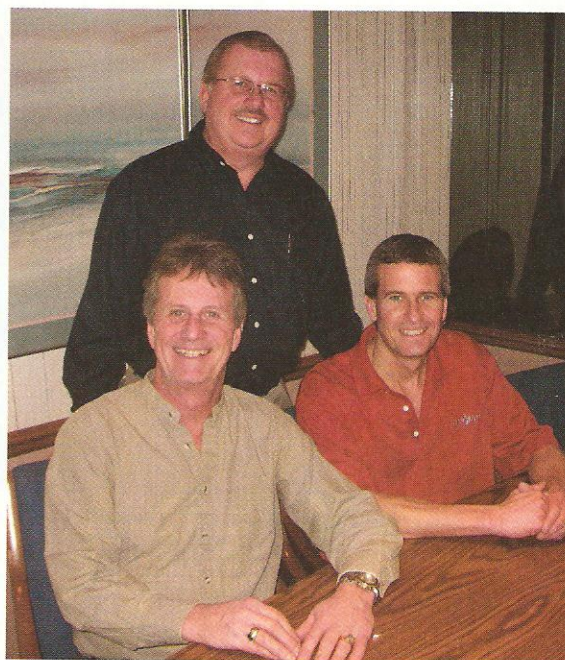
The second step takes place in the customers' home to look at the remodeling space and to review the products to be installed and the price. The third step is a meeting in the showroom to discuss the plans S&K has drawn up for tile, countertop, plumbing fixtures, faucets, finishes, shower door glass and accessories.

"There may be some tweaking in the design as we go along," Kuhn says. "The project may go from a Rolls Royce to a Cadillac."

An essential component of this communication is the calendar of events created by S&K. The schedule will spell out the open days as well as the work days to lay tile, measure countertops and install plumbing.



# CUSTOM MEANS *Custom*



**Left:** New construction consultant Beth Hunn (left) and remodeling manager Janet Callahan stand with Jeff Kuhn in the showroom's entrance. **Right:** The brothers Kuhn: Executive Vice President Gary (left) and CFO/Vice President Brian join Jeff in S&K's conference room.

"We keep the remodeling customer informed because no news is bad news," Kuhn says. "We won't start a job until we know what the schedule is. If we tear up a kitchen or bathroom and then experience delays, we've made an enemy, not a friend."

S&K develops schedules for its new construction jobs, too, so that general contractors know what's going on and when. GCs have told Kuhn they like the calendars, which contribute to his company's reputation for professionalism.

**Getting To Know S&K:** Founded 61 years ago as S&K Pump, the company was started by Jeff Kuhn's uncle and dad, **Edward Stamm** and **Helmut Kuhn**. Jeff's brother, **Gary Kuhn**, is executive vice president and oversees the well pump and water-conditioning businesses. Brother **Brian Kuhn** is chief financial officer and vice president.

S&K Pump branched into plumbing when Jeff Kuhn joined the family business full-time in 1974. The plumbing work initially consisted of repair and service jobs and then new construction.

"I had served as an apprentice in a couple other shops before I came to work at S&K," he says. "I didn't want to just show up here and say, 'Feed me.'"

At its peak a few years ago, S&K

generated \$8 million in revenue from its different operations and employed 50 people. Today, the company does \$5 million a year with 30 employees.

S&K employs union plumbers, while the well pump and water-conditioning operations are open shop. The company joined the Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors – National Association in the early 1990s and became a member of Quality Service Contractors four years ago. S&K also belongs to the National Kitchen & Bath Association.

Even in today's market, S&K's new construction plumbing does about twice as much business as the combined remodeling, well pump and water-conditioning operations. New construction, primarily custom homes and commercial projects, at times has been four times as large as the other businesses, which roughly are equal in size.

Last summer, the company redesigned its Web site ([www.snkpump.com](http://www.snkpump.com)), which devotes specific areas to S&K's different operations. S&K also advertises on a Milwaukee radio station and in the Yellow Pages. It tries to do as much crossover marketing as it can, for example, to let its remodeling customers know about its expertise in well pumps and water conditioning.

**Remodeling Realities:** S&K installs the plumbing on all its remodeling jobs with dedicated plumbers and acts as the GC on most projects. The company hires subcontractors for the countertops, tile, cabinets and other installations needed to complete the project. Kuhn sees a benefit in having a plumbing contractor manage the jobs.

"In the case of a bathroom, everything revolves around the tub, shower and toilet," he says. "Maybe the customer wants to move things around or break down a wall to increase the size of the room. We know the plumbing and the products and what they can and can't do."

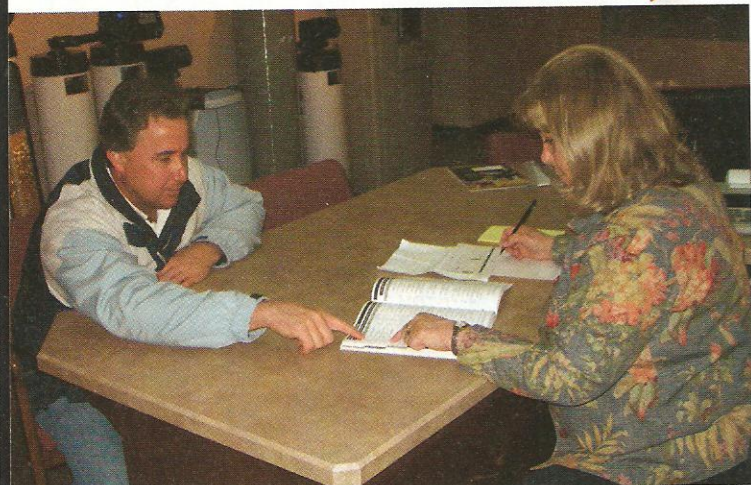
"It works out for us because we designed what goes into the project."

The recession's impact on the housing market has resulted in customers downsizing or delaying their remodeling projects.

"One change we've seen in remodeling is that people do it because they want to do it, not because the remodeling will add value to their home," Kuhn says. "We ask ourselves, 'Why do people fix up their house only when they sell it so someone else can enjoy it?' We tell our customers who may be living in their house for another five or 10 years, 'Fix it up now so you can enjoy it.'"



# CUSTOM MEANS *Custom*



S&K customer William Evanich consults with Janet Callahan.

For customers selling their house in a tough real estate market, remodeling may not increase the price. Updating a bathroom or kitchen, however, could help their property stand out from all the others without costing a tremendous amount of money, Kuhn says.

Popular products in remodeling projects today include: vessel sinks and wall-mounted faucets, primarily in powder

rooms; European-style handheld showers, larger tile and steam units in bathing areas; and comfort-height toilets. Aging baby boomers are replacing tubs with walk-in showers.

"It's much easier to get into a shower than stepping over a tub," Kuhn says. "We'll always give customers options for grab bars by suggesting we can put in the backing now and install the grab bars later. You can be 40 years old and still need to hold onto something in the shower."

"Nobody wants to think they're growing older but grab bars in the shower don't have to look like you're in a hospital. We make them part of the design."

Another phenomenon brought on by the economy is what Kuhn calls extreme price shoppers. These people will ask S&K to bid a job and then shop the Internet for products before hiring someone else to do the work.

"If they find somebody like that, we caution them to make sure he's insured and he'll be around to finish the job," Kuhn says. "Very often we're able to turn people around so they go with us."

A good sign in recent months comes from the customers who asked S&K to bid on jobs a year or so ago and are now starting to call back, Janet Callahan says.

"We sell our remodeling jobs on our design service and customer care," she adds. "We're getting more leads than last year. People seem more willing to make decisions now." **PM**

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