

# Builder/Architect



## Transition Planning

Committing the Time and Energy  
to Determine Long-Term Vision

Feature

The Beauty Within

Using Stock Home Plans  
to Meet Clients' Needs

# Firstcall Construction

Welcome to the Family

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## Welcome to the Family

By Margaret Ludington

When Scott Cierzan, owner of Firstcall Construction, talks about his family business, he's not talking about just his wife Carol and their kids. Cierzan defines "family" to include his employees and the clients whose homes they remodel and restore.

"We're a service-oriented business. We need to take care of our employees and our clients," Cierzan said.

In 2004, this approach to business earned the company the Better Business Bureau's Greater Iowa Region Integrity Award, based on a nomination from a client they restored after a fire. The client who nominated Firstcall said in her letter to the BBB that the company "exemplifies integrity." She cited their care and patience in walking her through every step during

the process of home restoration and choosing subcontractors who were committed to the same level of quality workmanship. The BBB Integrity Award earned Firstcall the attention of *Remodeling* magazine and their Big 50 Teamwork Award in 2005.

### HIRING FOR A CAREER, NOT A SEASON

Cierzan said taking care of clients starts with hiring the right people for the job. Firstcall primarily does home remodeling and home restoration. That means that when workers report to the job site, they're in someone's home. It means daily contact with family members. Cierzan said the goal is to leave customers feeling good about inviting Firstcall into their home.



FIRSTCALL CONSTRUCTION STOCK PHOTO



"The best way to avoid problems is not to hire one," Cierzan said. "They may be a good carpenter, but if they don't fit in, they won't last."

Cierzan said many of the employees are friends on and off the job site. They enjoy each other's company. A regular church-goer himself, Cierzan has found many of his employees through church connections. Current employees are encouraged to recommend people they know. And Cierzan is always looking for people, even when the company isn't hiring.

Fitting in isn't just about getting along with the other guys on the team. It's also about living up to company expectations at the job site. Firstcall has a set of job-site behavior rules that include, among others, no smoking, no drinking and no cursing at the job site. There are also rules about job-site cleanliness. Employees wear a company shirt to work. While the high expectations of personal behavior don't fit everyone who applies for work, Cierzan said the people they do hire usually stay with the company for years.

Firstcall doesn't leave out skill when it comes to hiring. Interviews include trade evaluations to determine the level of a potential employee's skill. Employees are hired for specific positions based on their skill and knowledge of home building. Each job has a specific job description and employees receive annual evaluations based on how well they carry out their positions.

"We're career oriented, not job oriented. We don't just hire for a season," Cierzan said. "We don't hire for our current workload. We try to hire for a complete career."

Because they are serious about hiring the right person for the job and keeping them, Firstcall offers a retirement plan and health insurance. They also have a company profit-

sharing plan. At the end of every quarter, each employee receives a share of company profits based on longevity, their position and their annual job evaluation score.

Employees have earned numerous certifications related to construction and restoration. An important part of that training is "Healing the Loss," a seminar for understanding clients who have just experienced damage or destruction of their home.

## GOOD EMPLOYEES EQUAL SATISFIED CLIENTS

Jeff Ellis, Firstcall's Project Director, said creating a family culture is reflected in how workers relate to the company's clients. "We care about producing a good product, but we also care about the clients as people," Ellis said. Clients often build a relationship with the people working at their home. Ellis said in one instance, even the client's neighbors said they were sorry to see the workers go when the job was completed.

The company has two types of clients, those who want to improve their homes with remodeling and those who have experienced catastrophic loss from fires, storms or other tragedies. They do about 100 jobs per year, split almost evenly between the two types of work. They are among four or five contractors doing restoration in the Des Moines metro area.

Cierzan said remodeling clients contact them with a sense of excitement about making changes to their homes. They have often dreamed of upgrading their home and welcome the workers as partners to fulfilling that dream.

Restoration work is different story. Those customers have suffered a loss, often of more than just living space. Referrals for restoration



often come through the insurance company. Firstcall is a preferred contractor for State Farm Insurance and also receives recommendations from other companies. When rebuilding after a loss, customers and insurers want the job done quickly and for the amount the insurer will allow. Clients look to the builder to restore normalcy to their lives.

Customer satisfaction starts from the moment a client calls. All the information about a client is kept in a database so that all inquiries are answered promptly. The company has a three-part customer care program. In phase one, the client receives a contract with an extensive scope of work information. Each job has a project manager who is on site every day. "It's like having a small contractor that's just on that job." Phase two of customer care occurs during the project. The client receives periodic calls with questions from a customer satisfaction survey. "Clients won't always tell the project manager if something is wrong. But if they are asked, they will talk about a problem." Contact throughout the project allows client concerns to be addressed as they come up and problems to be resolved. Finally, in phase three, customers receive a thank you letter and helpful information. "We want a client for life," Cierzan said. "We want the process to be as pleasing as the product."



He said the company does a lot of repeat and referral business. Customers who have hired them for restoration often call back later for home improvements.

Like many builders, Scott Cierzan knew he wanted a construction career from an early age. He received a degree from UNI that had an emphasis in construction. He worked construction during high school and built homes in Austin, TX, and Des Moines. He began phasing out of new construction and into remodeling in 1994. He decided that restoration would be a good thing to include in his business. Many builders don't like doing restoration because it requires additional technical skill to deal with fire odors, fire, smoke and water damage and other aspects of restoration. It also means having workers available as needed to do restoration work.

As a family business, Firstcall does employ some members of Cierzan's family. His wife, Carol Cierzan, serves as company Vice President. She works part time while she home schools their two youngest children. Daughter Angie handles the office. The Cierzans have a son in college. Scott says he's a gifted musician more likely destined for the ministry than for building houses. That's okay with Dad. Cierzan said he hopes to pass on the family business, but if the "family" member who takes over one day is an employee that will be fine with him.

Among the pictures and figures of eagles and the books that decorate Cierzan's office, there's a copy of "The Purpose Driven Life." Cierzan sees his life's purpose to be a leader in his home and in his company. He likes helping clients restore their homes and their lives after a disaster. He likes helping people turn their house into a dream home whether it's the kitchen they've always wanted or a complete home makeover. Cierzan likes it when an employee seeks him out for guidance, and he gets to watch them grow in their career and their personal lives.

Being a part of a company that is growing by putting people, employees and clients ahead of the bottom line was what made Jeff Ellis jump at the chance to work at Firstcall.

"Scott's philosophy is to do the right thing," Ellis said, "no matter what." ■

