

Icon Building Group Thrives By Focusing on What Customers Want

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By Mark Lawton

Icon Building Group aims to develop trust with its clients. “Customers normally have no idea what goes into building or remodeling a home,” Owner Charlie Murphy says. “As such, they need to be able to trust we are doing the best we can to look after their well-being. For this to happen, service and the customer experience have to be more important than profit.”

Murphy founded Icon in 2008 after selling a business he started and grew with three college buddies. The company cleaned restaurant exhaust systems nationwide and sold a product invented to keep grease off restaurant rooftops.

Icon builds custom homes in the Chicagoland and southeast Wisconsin communities where it owns real estate – nine currently – and homes on lots owned by their customers. The homes can range from \$300,000 to several million dollars. Icon also has a good-size remodeling division that handles kitchens, baths, basements and exteriors.

Icon manages all aspects of the building process, including assisting clients with finding a lot, overseeing the due diligence on the prospective lot, financing, engineering, architecture, smart-home technology, interior design and building the home. “From soup to nuts, it’s a one-stop shop,” Murphy says.

After a client signs a contract, Icon begins the process of obtaining a permit. Obtaining permits can take time. “Depending on the municipality, it might take 45 to 75 days, from submitting the permit, to get the home out of the ground,” Murphy says. During this time, clients begin to make selections on their finishes.

Icon follows the customer's lead. "The firm is hyper-focused on helping clients create what they want to create, while doing so as cost effectively as possible," Murphy says. "Change-orders are no problem for us. However, we take the time to talk through the change with the customer so they understand how it might affect spend, functionality and re-sale."

When asked for an example, Murphy says, "We have done heated driveways. Each time we are asked to do one, we suggest there are more inexpensive ways to keep a driveway clear of snow and almost certainly whatever money is spent to create one will not come back when the home is re-sold."

Icon understands the importance of communication with its clients. Employees are instructed to respond to client inquiries within 24 hours. There are regularly scheduled client meetings on- and off-site and the customer is encouraged to stop by their home site whenever the mood strikes.

As part of its effort to make communication efficient, the company has invested in cloud-based technology that lets it post contracts, photos, selections, plans, pricing requests and change-orders the customer may access 24/7. Project managers carry tablet computers or laptops to post updates and changes. Photos are taken and shared with the customer prior to drywall in order to help with any post-close updates they might want to make.

Often the relationships developed between Icon and its clients turn into friendships. Icon recently completed a \$2.5 million home in the Chicago suburb of Lincolnshire. "My entire family was at their wedding, which was eight months after we met and five months after their home started," Murphy says. "Every day brings an opportunity to engage with another family. It is one of the best parts of what I do."

The company is currently conducting due diligence on a property where Icon will build a Buddhist temple. "It is an exciting opportunity and one near and dear to my heart," Murphy says.

Technology and Remodeling

Besides trustworthiness and its focus on customer service, a major factor in Icon's success is its approach to where it owns real estate. "We only buy real estate where there are phenomenal schools, easy access to transportation, plenty of corporate jobs and convenient access to shopping, dining and entertainment," Murphy says.

In terms of building trends, Murphy has seen an increase in open floor plans – "which I think are here to stay" – along with the introduction of smart home technology and large, casual dining areas located in the rear of the home. There has also been a reduction in living rooms, formal dining areas, tubs in master bathrooms, fireplaces and two-story family rooms. "The idea is to build the space a family needs on a day-to-day basis while having the ability to re-purpose space as the family evolves," Murphy says.

Every other year, Icon helps build a home for charity. The two most recent efforts were to benefit St. Jude Children's Research Hospital and Wounded Warrior. The net proceeds of both home sales were donated to the respective charity. "Not only do our charitable efforts benefit great causes, they also bring us closer together internally and with our trades and suppliers," Murphy says.

Icon has three goals for the future. First, the company wants to stay on the forefront of technology. As part of that, Icon is exploring the use of 3-D and virtual and augmented reality software. The company also wants to expand its remodeling division, which Murphy says will generate 10 times current revenue by 2024. Finally, Icon plans to stick to its strategy of only developing and owning real estate that meets its schools, jobs, transportation, shopping and dining criteria. "We will stay in our lane," Murphy says.