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SMALL BUSINESS MONEY MATTERS

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Left to right, Zack Simmons, Craig Malkani and Lisa Principe expect 2007 to be a banner year for their Durham-based company.

CKS DESIGN: Next step likely to be showroom

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Roanoke Rapids and the richly elaborate paneled staircase in The Exchange West building in Meadowmont in Chapel Hill.

At present, the company houses all of its operations – administration, showroom and workshop – in three buildings off Guess Road in West Durham.

Expansion plans call for the opening of a showroom, perhaps in Raleigh, where CKS is beginning to find both residential work, including in some historic homes, and commercial jobs as well.

"A showroom is a logical step, and maybe more than one location," says Simmons, who is shooting for 2008 for an opening.

Lisa Principe, who joined the company in 2003 and who is a minority stakeholder, is both a CKS designer and sales executive.

Customers interested in remodeling are shown what's possible, both in design and materials. Jobs then are sketched for real by computer in both flat and, if need be, 3-D renderings.

That phase usually takes a week or so, with installation completed in six to eight weeks. A fourth CKS stakeholder, Bill Stewart, works as a liaison between the company and job sites in the field.

The firm advertises in some high-end magazines, but its reputation has spread for the most part by word of mouth.

One of CKS' recent kitchen remodeling jobs in a home in Carrboro will be featured at the end of May in a *Better Homes & Gardens* quarterly publication.

For Malkani, one of the important lessons over the years, he says, has been to accept the fact that he's had to delegate authority as the company grew.

And putting together the right staff hasn't happened overnight, he adds.

"We work hard at trying to achieve the look we want," he says. "I like having people around and the ideas they generate. We're working toward a heightened image and a larger company, and I can't do that on my own."

LIVING THE RENOVATED LIFE

Durham interior remodeler thriving on jobs with an average price tag of \$50,000

By Lee Weinberger

DURHAM – The first thing Craig Malkani knew for sure back in 1988 was that he wanted to be his own boss. The second was that he was interested in tools, working with his hands, shelves, cabinets, that sort of thing.

So Malkani, the son of a longtime IBM employee, and a partner opened a storefront business in Oxford called Cabinet Kraftsmen Specialties, or CKS.

At first, nearly any job – whether low end or high – was welcome. Nearly two decades later, though, the company, now known as CKS Design Studio, has a clientele that is strictly upscale. The price tag on the average job? About \$50,000 these days, but that's hardly the only thing that brings a smile

to Malkani's face.

"We made a business out of what a lot of men do as a hobby," he says.

Despite the slowdown in recent months in some segments of the Triangle housing market, CKS, the high-end niche player, hasn't noticing it.

On the contrary, 2007 is shaping up "to be a banner year," says Malkani and partner/co-owner Zack Simmons, who declined to share exact revenue information.

At any given time, however, the duo says that the firm is at work on 20 to 25 jobs. Even at the mid-level range (prier jobs exceed \$100,000), the company is looking at average recognition of between \$1 million and \$1.2 million at any particular time.

About two-thirds of the work involves kitchen and bathroom jobs in new and existing homes. Over the past few years, though, the number of commercial jobs the company has been receiving has increased, and that end of the business now constitutes about a third of revenue.

CKS, for example, did the millwork in the new Parson Theater in

to Malkani's face.

In his 30s now, with a staff of 25 and growing, he also has the satisfac-

CKS DESIGN

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