

A remodeled business

Tibma Design/Build Inc.

Husband-and-wife design-build team draws on plans to enhance business model

BY SEAN MCFADDEN
JOURNAL STAFF

NEEDHAM — The fact they own a relatively small company hasn't kept Dan and Mary Tibma from making major capital investments that have strengthened the foundation of their home remodeling operation.

Partners in marriage for 19 years, the Tibmas have been partners in business for 10. Their award-winning professional collaboration, Needham-based **Tibma Design/Build Inc.**, which specializes in the design and remodeling of high-end kitchens, master baths and master suites, is very much a mutual passion project that was established in true grass-roots fashion and nurtured by the couple's willingness to exceed their original expectations.

"I had always pictured it as being a small business with minimal employees," admits Dan Tibma, 49, who now presides over nine full-time and two part-time staffers, including a recently hired lead designer and production manager. "A year and a half ago, we decided that we needed to bring in people to help spread the load around."

Their transition from being mere doers to managers has allowed them to reach the next level, adds Mary Tibma, 48: "Now we're thinking about things in a different way. The same constraints don't seem to apply now that we're really looking at setting those longer-term objectives."

Since its debut in 1997, the company has completed more than 250 projects — usually on the order of 27 per year, and primarily for an upscale demographic in Needham, Wellesley and Newton. Its average job size has ballooned over the past five years from the mid-\$30,000 range for some bathroom projects to as high as \$350,000 for additions.

As a result, the Tibmas' revenue has grown to \$3 million this year, up from \$2.5 million in 2005.

Though they have complementary strengths — Dan in construction management, Mary in business development — they admit it was sheer "force of will" that kept them going when they launched the business with about \$20,000 in personal savings to purchase a truck and some computer equipment and build an office addition to their home in Needham.

Their early efforts to gain name recognition for the business were the very definition of guerilla marketing: They recall distributing flyers three times over the course of each project and plastering the promotional notices on cars and in grocery stores.

"Getting the business running in a professional fashion



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Mary and Dan Tibma of Tibma Design/Build Inc. have revamped their business model in recent years.

FAST FACTS
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established Tibma
Design/Build Inc. in 1997.

The company specializes in the design and remodeling of high-end kitchens, master baths and mastersuites.

The Tibmas generally complete 27 projects per year, this year, the average cost was \$162,000.

firm, KSG Transform LLC.

Jim Kelley, president of KSG, whose firm began working with the Tibmas two years ago, says they were experiencing "a triple whammy: They were running a business, they were running a business as a relationship, and they were running a business out of their home."

With Kelley's assistance, the Tibmas began to focus on expanding their vision. In July of this year, they finally moved their operations out of their home and into new 1,475-square-foot office space in Needham, a move that cost them about \$21,000.

"It had gotten to a point where it was a neces-

sary move for me," says Mary, who had begun to yearn for a more balanced lifestyle in the face of an increased workload.

Equally important, the Tibmas made two key new hires: a lead designer, Jodi Geran, whose presence has enabled them to bring the design component of their business, which they had previously subcontracted, largely in-house; and a full-time production manager, Richard Cutler, who supervises all their carpenters in the field.

The new hires, says Dan, have allowed the Tibmas to curtail cost "slippages" and to tackle more complex projects. As a result, their business is running about 40 percent repeat clients and 22 percent referrals.

Recent customer Caroline Maynard of Needham says, "At the outset, I wanted a company that could do the work in as short a time frame as possible. ... Tibma is very sophisticated in the project management that they do."

The Tibmas say all of their recent growth initiatives have helped them improve efficiency and profitability — even if their bottom line has suffered a bit.

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SEAN MCFADDEN can be reached at
smcfadden@bizjournals.com.