

# A From-Scratch Contracting Business

The story of **Remodeling Consultants** begins more than three decades before the company was even founded. Just as the Great Depression was baring its teeth, Jerome Zaccaria Sr. was born into an Italian family in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of Manhattan. Descended from a long line of contractors on his mother's side, he went on to start Remodeling Consultants, which employs a battalion of designers, architects, carpenters, plumbers, masons, and electricians to handle custom home improvements. The firm is now based in Mamaroneck, New York, tackling everything from additions to full-home remodeling. These days, Jerome's sons, Gregory, Jerry, and Richard, are three equal partners at the helm, steering the company toward success amid choppy economic waters. To trace the company's journey since its founding, *American Builders Quarterly* caught up with Richard, the company's current president.

*By Seth Putnam*

## **1930: BORN INTO POVERTY**

During the United States' worst economic crisis, Jerome grows up with three brothers in a two-room apartment with no hot water and an outhouse in the back. He quits school after the seventh grade and hauls blocks of ice up and down the stairs of apartment buildings to earn a few extra cents. "He greatly hated living that way in abject poverty in Hell's Kitchen," Richard says. "He determined to get himself out of there." With a great love for design and construction and a keen mind for management, he soon would.

## 1964: REMODELING CONSULTANTS OPENS ITS DOORS

Driven by the need to provide for a wife and six children, Jerome turns to the world of custom home improvements. “He had it in his blood,” Richard says, referring to his father’s upbringing in a family of skilled builders. Jerome starts by renting a 10’ x 12’ room behind a barbershop. By day, he picks up the construction materials and gets work done on-site; by night, he meets with clients and takes care of the bookkeeping.



## 1970S: JEROME MAKES HIS FIRST MILLION

“[My father’s] childhood really shaped his character and taught him that poverty is a state of mind,” Richard says. “You may be broke, but you’re only poor if you’re poor in spirit.” In the 1970s, Jerome instills his work ethic in his sons and employees, emphasizing the importance of working hard, being dependable and honest, and doing the best job possible. “He always believed money was a by-product of your success,” Richard says.

The firm enjoys rapid growth through the 1970s and early 1980s and expands to include dedicated departments for design, estimating, and construction. It even gains a lumberyard—a big leap from the cramped space behind the barbershop. Jerome’s sons join the company, too, but they start from the ground up. “He didn’t believe in any free rides or frills, even for his own children,” Richard says.

## 1987: IT ISN’T ALL ROSY

The market undergoes a correction, which has dramatic effects on Wall Street and the housing market—two hard punches to Remodeling Consultants’ gut. The new economic climate forces the company to downsize and redevelop the way it does business by becoming a leaner, more efficient design-build firm. Business will later reflower in the 1990s, allowing Remodeling Consultants to expand its operations to accommodate the growing needs of homeowners in Westchester and Fairfield counties.

## **2000–2007: A LARGER STORM IS BREWING**

Zero-down loans seduce would-be buyers across the nation, and the housing market begins to bubble, threatening to burst. Jerome retires in 2006, and his sons become equal partners. Greg oversees the firm's finances; Jerry manages the field personnel and production; and Richard is responsible for design, marketing, and general administration.

## **2008: TAKING THE HELM IN TIME FOR THE RECESSION**

The brothers brace for economic collapse. "These were unprecedented times," Richard says. "We didn't know how we were going to get through it." Thanks to their experience in the 1980s, though, they're ready. They batten down the hatches and scale back from 16 crews and \$12 million in annual revenue to four crews and \$4.5 million annually. Employees agree to a 20 percent pay cut and the suspension of bonuses and paid vacation in order to keep the company competitive. The three brothers don't draw a paycheck for two years. They triple their advertising because "you're dead in the water if you don't keep your name out there."

These are difficult, emotional decisions, but they keep the company alive. "If we didn't do that, this company wouldn't be here," Richard says. "There were some challenging weeks, but we didn't miss a single payroll for our employees or disrupt the production schedules for our clients."



## **2010–PRESENT: SLOWLY REBUILDING**

The firm is now securely under the captaincy of Greg, Jerry, and Richard. They close \$6 million in business and are able to increase their force to eight crews, forecasting more by the end of the year.

**BUSINESS STRATEGY**

**FAMILY BUSINESS**

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