

SUPER 19 TAKE ON JOB

How many people does it take to change a bathroom? At least 19 it appears. Good customer service involves the whole team working together and dealing with problems before the client is even aware of them. This case-study shows it working at its best in a bathroom upgrade last year in Wellington.

The client brief to the first in the team – architectural designer Daniel Smith – was simple: a modern family bathroom that matches the late 1920s character of the house, that works – and will work for the next couple of decades – is easy to clean and is more energy and water-efficient.

The old bathroom was a disaster. Last updated in the early 1980s, it had cracked floor tiles, a water-etched and cramped shower cubicle, a single basin, a short bathtub and just did not have the space for the three-person family racing to get ready and out in the morning all at the same time.

Daniel's suggestion was to move a couple of walls just slightly – pinching a little space off the spare room and the hall – to allow the creation of a wet room, including the installation of a full length bathtub, a one metre square shower cubicle, and double sink unit and to gain some more floor space.

Finally all was agreed, building consent gained – after some debate over the waterproofing system – and Certified Builder Mike Wylie Ltd was appointed for construction and project management. The client had prepared a comprehensive and realistic budget for the whole project which included contract works insurance to cover the cost of reconstruction should a disaster befall, and also incorporated a 10 percent contingency fund for unforeseen circumstances.

Homework done

The family had already done their homework regarding the bathroom fittings with the expert early advice and help from the designer, the family's regular plumber Mander Plumbing, a Johnsonville-based Master Plumbers company, and Plumbing World Porirua's manager Kosi Kelemete. Fittings included a 1,800mm Athena Liquid Hydrotherapy Spa – shallower than many so it didn't require as much water to fill it – along with a Methven Spa Bath Spout, a water-efficient Methven Kiri Satinjet Shower System and a TECE in-wall cistern with a square dual flush push-plate from MacDonald Industries, fitted with an Envy II toilet and seat.



In addition, because they were already familiar with the house, the opportunity was taken by Mander Plumbing to renew all of the hot and cold pipework with Dux Secura Gold, replacing some old Dux Quest along the way. Licensed plumber Dave and apprentice Ryan – possibly the fastest drain digger in Wellington – handled all of the plumbing work on site.

“ THE CLIENT HAD PREPARED
A COMPREHENSIVE AND
REALISTIC BUDGET ”

Fittings ordered

All of the fittings and fixtures were ordered from Plumbing World through Mander Plumbing. As general manager Gavin Chambers pointed out, for the customer this means not only ease of invoicing, and a single delivery point, but also if there were any problems with any of the fittings, complaints can be directed back through his company. It also meant that the plumber and supplier could liaise on any delivery or specification issues.

Disappointment reigned when it was discovered that the client-selected taps – Methven Belaire – were not available in a single mixer version ('why not?', asked the client) to fit the selected porcelain St Michel Verde wall-hung vanity and Aquatica's NoveCentro taps were chosen in their place. Selecting an imported Hawthorne Hill wall-mounted towel rail also resulted in a delay to the final finishing, waiting for its delivery by ship.

Work begun

The major demolition work happened while the family was on holiday overseas with regular comprehensive email updates from Mike on what had and hadn't happened. Unexpected rot under the old toilet was swiftly and efficiently dealt with and waste pipes from the upstairs shower running through the old airing cupboard were moved.

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After reconstruction started, the biggest issue was how to gain access to the spa bath motor, as the tiled bath surround didn't lend itself to an access hatch. One option was access sub-floor but the problem was solved when, after discussion with the plumbers, it was realised access could be given through the wall of the adjoining bedroom, and with client agreement, a hatch was created in the newly lined wall.

When the owner walked past the half-finished bathroom one day and saw three men – builders Russell Watt and Mike and plumber Dave – standing round the door frame and scratching heads, she thought she was in for trouble. But, no. They were marvelling at the precision-cut edges on the tiles that had just been laid by tiler Neal Jenkins, a former RAF engineer who had retrained as a tiler and was sub-contracted to BTS Tiling of Wellington. He also installed the under-tile thermostatically and timer-controlled Warmup heating and carried out the waterproofing. His superb work is often admired by visitors to the house too.

“ PROFESSIONALISM, MUTUAL RESPECT, TRUST AND A GOOD TEAM WORKING TOGETHER ”

After waterproofing and tiling, the top-only water inlet and switch between hand-held shower and rainshower heads created a problem as the access hole had been cut at the bottom. This was rectified with a custom-made inlet, but begged the question as to why the system is not available in both versions to cover all eventualities? The top one would be set too high for children to reach and adjust, the client thought.

In the plans, Daniel had stipulated a custom-size Newline Profinish shower-base system, which included a foam sill to be tiled onto. Gavin had had varying results with a similar product before but working with this one has convinced him that Manders will use it elsewhere.

An interesting grey area related to who was going to construct the tailor-made shower cubicle. Was it a plumbing or a building job? In the end, Mike organised it through Harbour City Glass in Wellington and it was the last item added to the bathroom. As accurate measurement is absolutely vital for a tight silicone seal, measurement for the glass was taken right at the end of construction and after the tiling had been completed.

A dimmer switch added to the main bathroom light, fitted with dimmable energy bulbs, means it can be dimmed for relaxing spa baths or used as a nightlight.

Good communication led to good result

Regular calls and updates from Mike, Gavin and Kosi kept the client informed and ensured problems were solved quickly and creatively. Mike's efficient system of lists made sure every detail was attended to and all of the workmen maintained a high standard of clean working.

From the client's point of view, professionalism, mutual respect, trust and a good team working together have resulted in a very happy family and happy end to two months of work. She has been busily passing on contractor details to friends and family.

“We love the finished bathroom, which seems at least double the size and had the interesting – but alas temporary – result of ensuring a very clean nine-year old son,” she says.

Tiler Neal Jenkins putting some finishing touches to his handiwork in the shower area.



The reality, with client selected tiles and fittings.



The 'Super 19' team

Architectural designer: Daniel Smith (1)
 Builder: Certified Builder, Mike Wylie Ltd (3)
 Ducting: Contract Air Services (2)
 Painter: First Choice Decorators (1)
 Plastering: Tony Brown (1)
 Plumber: Master Plumbers Mander Plumbing Ltd (3)
 Plumbing supplies: Plumbing World Porirua (1)
 Electrician: Cannon Security & Electrical Services (2)
 Shower screen: Harbour City Glass (2)
 Tiler and underfloor heating: BTS Tiling Ltd (1)
 Tiles: Tile World (1)
 Joinery: Valley Joinery (1)

Total project cost (including resetting and decorating of hall and guest bedroom, building new wardrobe, and replacing all of the pipework) was \$90,881, including GST.

High quality customer service

In Gavin's opinion, the high quality result of the bathroom upgrade was due to a number of factors.



Gavin Chambers of
Mander Plumbing,
Johnsonville.

Having a 'hands on' designer who can not only draw plans on the paper, but also relate the plans to the site, is essential. The designer should take responsibility for his work and attend the site as and when required to resolve any unforeseen issues and not just leave it to the tradesman to sort out.

In addition, he says, there needs to be a culture of strong communication between all involved in the project team and a pivotal person, like Mike, coordinating.

"Teams work better when they have a coach," Mike believes, adding that team meetings and briefings are essential. In addition, most of the team knew each other well and worked together on various projects on a regular basis.

"I also like to think that clients can underestimate how crucial their role is during a building project. They must be well organised and like the taste of dust!"

"In this case, the team had a realistic and well-organised client who had done her homework, knew what her family wanted and was able to communicate her ideas effectively to the designer and the on-site trades team."

In addition, the client needs to trust the contractors, listen to them and take professional advice from them, Gavin says. The contractor also needs to, tactfully, check the client's budgeting process to ensure that everything has been accounted for at the start of the project.

"Most quality tradesmen will respond to a friendly, reasonable customer – normally one can tell whether a job will have a quality finish by the atmosphere at the time of construction. If it is friendly and happy, the job is normally very successful. At the other end of the scale, if everyone is stressed, mistakes creep in and the resulting finish is often lower quality."

He strongly advises having provision for unforeseen alterations, as in this case for unexpectedly moving the waste pipes or dealing with the rot. "No one can see behind walls or underground."

Finally, all of the work should be done to a standard and not down to a price, Gavin believes. "Accepting the cheapest price promotes shortcuts and substandard issues being covered up and not repaired properly for a little extra cost at the time of redevelopment."

Mander Plumbing has a quote on its office wall: "The bitterness of poor quality remains long after the sweetness of a low price is forgotten."

What makes a successful bathroom upgrade?

- Hands-on designer
- Strong communication between team
- Trust, listen and respect
- All work done to a standard and not down to a price
- Provision for unforeseen alterations
- Friendly, reasonable, and well-organised client. ■

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