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A GUIDE TO THE GREATER FORT MYERS BUSINESS INDUSTRY

# Market booming for Cornerstone

## Fort Myers firm building new plant



TONY LEEBER SR

Cornerstone Kitchen's attention to detail and creative designs has made it an industry leader in Southwest Florida. The company employs 20 designers along with subcontractors such as electricians and plumbers to make it a one-stop shop for customers.

**BY PETE SKIBA**

Florida Weekly Correspondent

Slow home sales and a reported 16,000 homes in inventory throughout Lee County left many homeowners deciding to remodel rather than sell. That blessed at least one home remodeling business.

The increased demand for remodeling in the area left Cornerstone Kitchens needing more manufacturing room and employees. With about \$15-million in business coming its way, the company plans to hire more workers and build a new manufacturing plant.

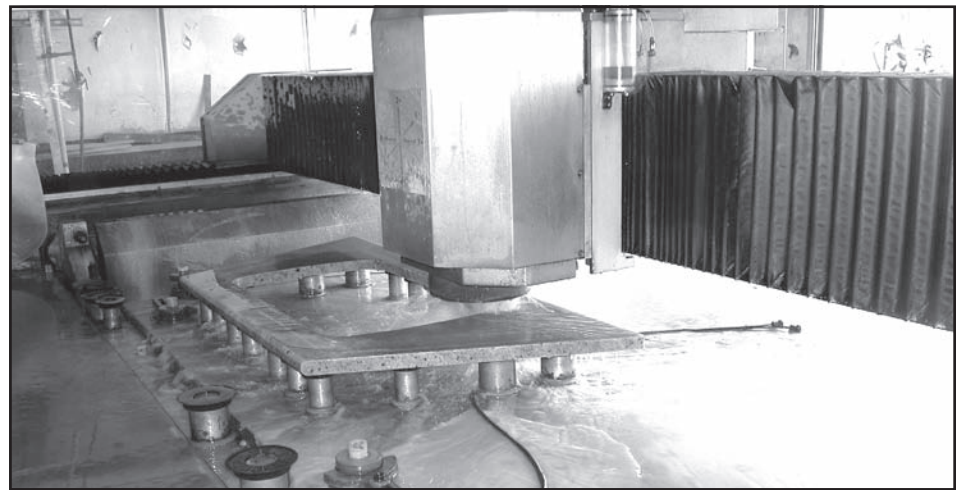
"In this market it isn't easy to sell a home. People still have equity in their homes, so they are deciding to remodel rather than sell and move," said Ricky Dorman, sales and marketing manager at Cornerstone. "Our company and employees grew by 10 to 15 percent."

The median price for a single-family home dropped \$13,300 from 2006 according to the Lee County Economic Development Office.

Since the housing market no longer supports large profits that homeowners relied on to purchase new homes, many have decided to remodel or put additions on their homes. That fits Cornerstone's motto: "Don't move ..... Improve!"

The majority of Cornerstone's business has always been remodeling kitchens, bathrooms and adding additions to homes. New home kitchen and bath construction took up about 2 to 3 percent of its business, said Tony Leeber Sr., Cornerstone founder and chief executive officer.

To add to its manufacturing capability Cornerstone plans a 55,000-square-foot, two-story plant complete with employee cafeteria at a site off Veronica Shoemaker



COURTESY PHOTOS

Cornerstone Kitchens uses some of the industry's most sophisticated, computer controlled manufacturing equipment in the industry. The Fort Myers firm is getting ready to build a new 55,000 square foot plant to handle the demand for its cabinets.

Boulevard next to its current granite shop.

Plans call for construction to start in a couple months. It could take a year to complete, Dorman said.

Dorman couldn't project how many new employees would be hired.

"We've never run an ad for employees," Dorman said. "We pray for them and God takes care of us."

In an economy where the unemployment rate rose to 4.9 percent in August from last year's 3.2 percent, according to the Lee County economic Development Office, all jobs are welcome.

Cornerstone's employees manufacture cabinets, wooden doors and countertops, which are sent out on 50 trucks to jobs in the area. The company, founded in 1988, usually runs 10 to 15 construction sites a day.

Offering modest existing cabinet resurfacing and countertops to gutting and rebuilding remodeling jobs — Cornerstone takes pride that it does everything itself.

The company employs 20 designers, who are happy to show up at a home

with their laptop computers and meet the client's need.

"I used to be in real estate, but I found I really liked going to design centers and designing," said Stefanie Pleasant, an employee of three weeks at Cornerstone. "We can go to the home and find out what the customer wants, and offer solutions right there."

From design to cabinet makers, installers, plumbers and electricians, all are employed by Cornerstone. About two years ago Leeber brought Ash Plumbing and DMK Electric into Cornerstone as part of his team and responsibility.

"I wanted control of everything so that I could deliver the work when promised," Leeber said. "I had problems with suppliers before so that is why I started manufacturing myself. Now we deliver."

The company bond goes deeper.

Many of the employees such as Dorman and Dave Cooke, in sales, are family. Dorman and Cooke married two of Leeber's daughters.

"There are three brothers-in-law work-

ing for Dad (Leeber)," Dorman said. "Then we have employees who are cousins and others who are related to each other. We try to make our employees feel part of a family here."

Taking good care of employees and customers remains a strong part of the company's philosophy. They offer a five-year warranty, but have taken care of problems that arose eight years after the sale.

"What good is a lifetime guarantee if the business giving it goes out of business?" Dorman said. "We have been here since 1988 and we will take care of our customers."

The company also supports what dad, Leeber, considers his true passion — an independent Christian mission group, Faith Missions International Inc.

The group supports three orphanages among other projects in poverty-stricken parts of South America.

Not bad for a U.S. Navy veteran and former union carpenter from Long Island.

"We've been blessed," Leeber said. ■