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## Tactics for a Tight Economy

Year-old homebuilder East Coast Structures has found work by focusing on high-end improvements and establishing relationships

By Erin Brereton

When the development company that had employed John Sullivan for 15 years closed its doors in 2011, Sullivan figured he had two choices: look for a new job or create one for himself. In an admirable roll of the dice, he went with the latter option, founding his own residential-construction business, East Coast Structures, one year ago despite the still-struggling economy. The company has since flourished, handling four home-addition jobs of \$500,000 or more in the summer of 2011 alone, and much of its business has come from partnering with other companies while paying attention to market demands.

Sullivan attributes his firm's success as a new player to its persistent focus on getting business. "Any project that comes across the table, we take a look at right now," he says. And, because East Coast Structures' overhead is so low—the entire staff comprises just two project managers and an office manager—it can keep project fees low, too, making it even more attractive to potential clients.

As in many regions, home construction in Sullivan's area—home to a number of finance and investment professionals who commute to New York City—isn't as robust as it was several years ago. However, he has found that many homeowners are still investing in renovations that add to their home's value. "A lot of people here still have money but don't have a lot of confidence in the market," Sullivan says. "So instead of buying a new house, they're staying put and putting money into their homes."

And the few who are building brand new homes are also cutting back—but may still splurge on extras. "Six or seven years ago, everyone wanted to move farther away from town and have a big house," Sullivan says. "More and more, people want to be closer to town, with less square footage—but more bells and whistles."

Because of this, East Coast Structures has spent a lot of time tricking homes out with elaborate TV sound systems, vanishing-edge pools, and other amenities. And this has put Sullivan in contact with a new group of architects specializing in contemporary design, including BassamFellows Inc., Daniel Conlon Architects, and PH Architects LLC, a Newtown, Connecticut-based firm that East Coast Structures recently collaborated with on a Darien, Connecticut, home.

PH Architects incorporated a number of unique extras into the 5,000-square-foot new-construction project—including an outdoor fireplace and an eco-friendly (and cost-friendly) hybrid heating system that warms rooms with a heat pump (instead of oil) if the temperature is above 28 degrees. "The drawings are very detailed," Sullivan says. "The company has been very easy to work with."

Establishing a relationship with local architects has become a solid source of business for Sullivan. "When we get the opportunity to work with a new one, we try to shine the best we can," he says. And when working on detailed projects such as the Darien home, Sullivan has found that bringing potential clients to the job site can also be a strong selling point, particularly if the client expresses any reservations about East Coast Structures' only having been in business for a year. "They see the quality of our work and think, 'This guy knows what he's doing—these people trusted him to do this; we can, too,'" Sullivan says. "It's helped us stay busy."

As East Coast Structures enters its second year, Sullivan's central goal is to keep growing his business, but his motives aren't directly tied to profits. "For us, it's not really about the money," he says. "It's about building a reputation—and [having] the staying power to compete with the big boys." **ABQ**

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