

## Ep #68: Establishing Builder Relationships with Mark Williams



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**Desi Creswell**

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Hey designer, you're listening to episode 68. In this one I'm talking to Mark Williams, he's the owner of the sought-after, high-end boutique design firm Mark D. Williams Custom Homes here located here in the Twin Cities. We talk all about how you as a designer can get in with the builders you want to work with, how to navigate those tricky conversations when things go wrong, how to bring your process into the fold and so much more. Keep listening for a dose of real insider industry talk.

Welcome to *The Interior Design Business CEO*, the only show for designers who are ready to confidently run and grow their businesses without the stress and anxiety. If you're ready to develop a bigger vision for your interior design business, free up your time, and streamline your days for productivity and profit, you're in the right place. I'm Desi Creswell, an award-winning interior designer and certified life and business coach. I help interior designers just like you stop feeling overwhelmed so they can build profitable businesses they love to run. Are you ready to confidently lead your business, clients, and projects? Let's go.

Desi: Hello, designer. Welcome back to the podcast. We've got a special guest here today that I'm really excited to introduce you to. We have Mark Williams from Mark Williams Custom Homes. And he's also the host of *The Curious Builder* podcast. And he's having some incredible conversations with leaders in the industry, both the builder side and the home industry in general.

And so I'm so excited to have Mark here to share his expertise and insights. Welcome, Mark. So glad to have you. Why don't you tell us a little bit more about yourself, what you do and why you do it?

Mark: Sure. Thanks for having me on, Desi. It's a nice time to switch spots. You were on our podcast a few months ago, and now it's fun to kind of come on yours and speak to your audience.

Yeah, so I've been building for, coming up actually this spring will be 20 years, which is kind of crazy. In some ways it feels like it's been one year and in another sense it feels like it's been a hundred years. And yeah, we basically navigate what we are now as a high-end kind of boutique custom builder. We

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maybe build anywhere from three to five higher end homes, kind of in that million and a half to 5, 6 million range. And then we'll do a handful of larger remodels that kind of fit in between wherever our projects are at.

And the way our company is structured, we don't really do anything in-house. So we have our, obviously, project management staff and our internal team. But my normal process is I'll interview a client or they'll interview me. It actually ends up being, because I'm very relationship-based, we really just are trying to see if we are a good fit to spend the next year and a half, two years together, depending on how long the design process is.

So after they essentially sign the design retainer with us saying they want to move forward, we'll usually – It's a lot up to me based on their personality, based on their goals, based on their budget that I'll bring in the right team members for them.

And sometimes it's a judgment call. Like I know this person is going to click really well with this designer or that designer. Or I don't know, and you I'll bring two designers that I work with and I'll have them interview both firms and let the client decide on who they seem to mesh best with. And I'll do the same approach with our architecture partner.

Once we essentially assemble the team, from that point on I'm essentially the conductor or the cruise boat director kind of guiding the ship where it needs to go and kind of the armchair consultant. And we let the designers do what they're best at. And we let the architectural design, we let them do what they're best at. And we'll kind of walk through that process until we get to all the interior selections are made, hopefully, as well as architecture is obviously done.

And at that point is when we will price it out. Shocker alert, if we price out what you've actually selected, we can actually tell you what the house is going to be. So often in the past people wanted to go, and I also wanted to go, and so it's like building an airplane while you're flying. Not a great time to build an airplane when you're in the air. So I don't know why builders, and even today, why we think it's a good idea to start a project before we really have everything selected.

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So right now in the last couple of years and going forward, obviously, it's really about setting expectations with the client from the very first meeting, what is going to have to happen. And they don't usually know any better. So when you explain it to them, it makes total sense. And so I think when you tell them on the front end how it's going to go, that's kind of how it goes. So anyway, that's a little bit how we built the company and what we're doing now.

And then for *The Curious Builder* point of view, that's been about a year and a half. And we are weekly and we basically are interviewing builders from across the country, but we started off mostly from Minnesota. Now we have interior designers, architects, landscapers, wood floor companies, anyone that is associated with building a home and we want to hear about their business story.

And so we're now kind of launching out into some educational networking groups as well that we'll be kind of unveiling in Q2 of this year, as well as doing some of our live events where we'll host a podcast and have anywhere from 70 to 100 people show up and kind of participate in kind of a fun atmosphere.

So that's probably a little more than you wanted, but that's me in a nutshell.

Desi: All right. Or a large shell, one of the two. No, I think that gives a really great landscape from which you're bringing your expertise. And for anyone who hasn't become familiar with the podcast, definitely check it out. I love the name. I think that was initially –

Well, we got connected through Kim Senn. And I think I saw her post about the podcast and I thought, gosh, someone who has curious in the name of their podcast, I need to talk to them. Because anyone who knows me knows I love to get curious, so that's really fun.

Mark: Well, and it was really interesting at the time – So I met Kim because she was going to help us rebrand our company. The name of my company is and was Mark D. Williams Custom Homes. But about two years ago we considered rebranding it. And the idea was that someday you hope to sell your company

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and it's hard to sell your name. And so we went through this whole exploratory process.

Well, during that time I got invited to be on a podcast. At the time it was called *The AFT Construction Podcast*, it's now called the *Brad Leavitt Podcast*. He's out of Arizona, a big podcast in the construction world. And I had such a blast doing it. I'm like, this is amazing. I should start a podcast. So 30 days later, I launched *The Curious Builder*.

And the reason it's called *The Curious Builder* is during kind of the naming exercise that Kim and I were going through, and she's a brand strategist, curiosity was one of my chief attributes to my own personality. And so I think I just got really lucky that I was working with a professional brand strategist at the time I was launching a business. So both Mark Williams Custom Homes and *The Curious Builder* ended up being really integrated in terms of the color and logo. They compliment each other very well.

And so I got really lucky. In fact, so lucky that I think a lot of times this just happens by, obviously, accident. We've only been out for a year and a half, but I actually just typed in construction podcast or builder podcast and we ended up being either number two or number four in the country in terms of ranking. And I'm like, how could that possibly be?

And I think it's the fact that I have builder in my title. Most construction podcasts don't have builder or even construction. There's some very successful ones like *The Modern Craftsman*, AFT Construction. So it's just interesting, total luck that happened. Now, we do a ton of SEO by publishing the blogs and the videos and everything lives on our website, so I imagine that's a big part of it too. But I just actually looked yesterday and I was like, wow, I had no idea. I was thinking that we'd be on like page 100.

Desi: Yeah, congratulations.

Mark: But it was just luck because it turns out when you're getting into branding and you're getting into marketing, you can either get lucky like I did, or you can

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be intentional about it, but think a little bit about what would be some keyword searches that people will even enter in. And if it aligns with your brand and with your company naming strategy, you might give it a second look.

Desi: Yeah, I had some other names in mind for my podcast and my team who helped me get everything set up were like, no, you can't search that name so we can't go with it.

But I don't know if you know this, but I worked out of Kim's office this summer.

Mark: No, I didn't know that.

Desi: Yes. And so I was in her conference room and your website project was up on the pin board the entire summer. So I'm very intimate with your website and the different pages and it is really beautiful and Kim did an amazing job.

Mark: That's so funny. That's why it's number one, it's because you constantly were refreshing your page. Thank you for doing that, Desi. You're too kind.

Desi: No problem. All right. Well, I want to dive into what we want to talk about today. So a lot of designers I've been talking to have really been realizing they need to shift back into marketing mode and make marketing a consistent part of their business development and business growth. And a big part of this could be establishing relationships with potential referral partners and trade partners in your area.

And I thought that Mark being one of the top builders in our area, and I know one that so many designers want to work with, would be a great person to talk to about how do you actually get in with a design firm or a build firm and kind of start to develop that relationship and really become one of the go-to's for them? Because that's a great way to step into a new realm of clients, start to expand your reach in terms of geography you're working within, budget, scope, all of that.

So I'm really excited to talk about that. And also about how to make those relationships successful, because that is, of course, how you're going to keep



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working with these people. So why don't we just get into the nitty gritty of it and say, how do you get in with a design build firm?

Mark: I mean, it's a great question and maybe I'll share the evolution of even our design background. And I can speak a little bit, I haven't thought about it, actually, until you just asked the question, about the two or three main designers that I work with. And maybe I'll just share how I started working with the three of them because I do get a lot of requests on social media platforms, we love your work. We'd love to work with you. Can we sit down and have coffee with you? Can we learn more about your business? Which those are all great and they need to happen.

I think the hardest part in dealing with those questions is because there are so many talented designers and I'm sure I would enjoy working with them. But it's a little bit like the Kentucky Derby. I think it's like 20 horses get to race and each owner can only have a maximum of two horses. And I use that analogy as I'm a small firm.

I'm only building, as I mentioned, three to five homes and I have existing relationships already. How am I going to get rid of one of the horses in this analogy for the Kentucky Derby to race, just to have a different horse? And I use that because everyone has kind of their go-to people that they really like. And plus, there's just a skill aspect to it. Someone is maybe more skilled. There's another part where it's personality based. Like I really enjoy working with them. That's huge, frankly.

I almost, and this is just my opinion, it doesn't make it true. But for me, an interior designer is really a partner in our build. And I wouldn't work with somebody that I also wouldn't be willing to like if they – I consider them like my inner team, like my right hand.

And they need to, like any employee, if my life is easier because of them, obviously that's – I think the secret sauce here is how can you help make a messy process, which is construction or remodeling, how can you make it easier

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for the client experience, which is probably number one. Because if you can make my client happy, you can help me with a difficult part of building a house.

And two, can you help facilitate information very cleanly, help me in tracking? And a lot of builders, most builders are a hot mess because there's just so much going on. But even those that aren't, it's still a lot to go on. It's like wedding planning. It's like not until you actually get married that you're like, yes, I'm sure the wedding planner can sit down and be like, we did it. It's just a lot.

And so I feel like the interior designer, more so than the architect and almost more so than the builder, is kind of in charge of like temperature control. And what I mean by that is I feel like they are very tied into the homeowner's emotions. And I like it when a designer will call me and they'll say, I feel like the homeowner is a little stressed right now. They could use a little bit more attention from you, or I feel like they could use a little break.

And I feel like they kind of give you an inside family member track to what's going on behind the scenes. And not that the builder's not there and not that the architect's not there. I just feel like the interior designer really gets a sense of how the client is feeling. And so I've always found that to be extremely helpful. And that's why the ones that are really empathetic and the ones that you can really see care about their craft and the people around them, that is one thing that really attracts me to a good interior design partner.

Desi: Yeah, I think that's really spot on. It is a different relationship. All relationships in the building process are important. And I think that the designer is the one who has the most intimate relationship, typically, with the homeowner.

And so I think that's great to call out, right? Because I think a lot of times when we think about approaching somebody we would like to work with, we're really focused on how can I make this impression of I'm really established and I have all these skills and like looking really impressive?

But we forget about, what about the person? Who am I showing up in the relationship as and really how important those "soft" skills are and how that



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could help you stand out to somebody that you potentially want to work with. I think that's really brilliant that you brought that up.

Mark: Well, I was just going to reflect on a couple of the designers that I work with now. And maybe I'll refrain from their names in particular unless that's what you want. I'm thinking the one that I've worked with the longest is now going on probably 12, 13 years. And they're a team of, I think they're a team of about 10 or 11. So you have the owner of the company and she has nine other interior designers on her team.

So the benefit there is if I have a client who maybe has a certain personality, her firm has enough different people in it that I know that I'm like, oh, so and so might be the best fit or so and so might be the best fit. So there is some attraction there. They also, in this particular case, happen to be literally 200 yards from my office. So being close proximity is a big selling point to my clients as well. Especially for building in town, I tend to like to kind of reinforce local.

So at the time we moved to Excelsior, we've been here for about 10 years, I guess, a little more. If I'm building in town, well, I like to give work to the people that are here as well, because I just feel like a lot of the people that are picking me as the builder who also lives in town, I feel like it reinforced what maybe their value statement was. So partnering with someone else that was in town just made a lot of sense. And so, obviously, you develop a relationship that went great and so you continue it.

And then maybe this other one, they came on my scene from a referral. So I had built a house for a client who did blinds, Grace Inspired Interiors. And so she does blinds and other treatments for windows. And she said, I have a friend who moved up here from Texas, she's amazing. Just her personality, she's so organized. And I think the word organized really clicked with me. And it's obviously a direct referral from someone I just spent two years with.

So I interviewed her and we met. And interviews are great but, honestly, the only way you can really know if you're going to be a good match is if you just do a project together. And usually, whether it's a painter or a trimmer, you start off

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with a smaller remodel and then you would maybe graduate to a bigger home. Well, as it turned out, her office was in Deephaven and we were able to attract a very big client in Deephaven like a block from where she lived. So, again, proximity played a huge factor.

And I said, man, this homeowner is busy. She's got three kids. I think, I have to go back and think, I think I did have her interview both design firms and she chose the designer that was closer to her. I think they were pretty equal, but I think, well, man, if I only have to drive 200 yards or 300 yards, that's kind of a no brainer. She could walk there, close to her kids.

And it turns out it was one of the best builds we had. A big part of it was just the client was amazing. And both designers would have been a great fit. I wouldn't pitch somebody that wasn't going to be a great fit, but she really nailed it. And so because she did such a great job, we built a great rapport over a couple of years. And now we've probably worked on four or five projects together and will continue to do so.

And then the last one we did just recently was down in Minneapolis, I live close by. And different areas have different vibes. And like some builders can build anything, that's kind of like our style. We can build you modern homes, contemporary, we can do cottage, log homes.

Sometimes builders only build one type and that's their niche. They own it and they say that's all we do. Or architects, I'm thinking of like Charles Stinson, he's very famous for his style of homes. And if you go up to him to build a cottage home, my guess is he'll tell you no, but who knows? He could probably design anything, but that's just not what he does or what he's known for.

And this particular designer had just a really, her style was the same across the board. And I think she's very deliberate about her style. So people went to her because her style fit with theirs. And it's okay, she's like, if I'm not your style, then don't pick me, that's okay. She really owned her message. That really spoke a lot to me and it happened to align with my personal style.

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I actually pitched her and one other, basically a startup designer who was a friend of the homeowners. And one designer was extremely expensive and one was basically just starting her career. And so the client was kind of torn. Like they knew they wanted the higher one, but they didn't know if they were willing to pay for it.

And the other one was like, well, it's a friend of a friend. I'm sure she'll be fine. They knew we would probably pick her, but she'd be the least expensive. And they were balancing what to do. And as it turned out, they went with the one that was the most expensive. The style was off the charts great.

Anyway, that's the three most recent interior designers that I've worked with. That's kind of how I started working with them.

Desi: Yeah, and I think you highlight a good point about thinking about what gaps can you fill for somebody? If you are interested in developing those new relationships, what is the unique thing you're bringing? So that way it helps, really, it's another way that it's making your life easier, is that there's a very specific reason that the builder would send that client to you specifically.

Now, we know that you're not looking to replace any horses, but –

Mark: Probably a bad analogy, I'll pick a different one. But this is the one that came to mind while I was thinking about racing because there's only so many. If I did 20 homes –

Desi: No, I think it's a great analogy. But if you were looking to add another designer to your roster, what do you think would be a good way to approach somebody that you'd want to work with?

Like let's say someone is wanting to work with a builder in their area or maybe even you. Maybe I've got some Minneapolis people listening and they're like, I want to get in with Mark. How would you want to be approached or what types of things would you want to be introduced to when they initially reach out?

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Mark: I mean, I can just speak for myself, and I have a much different personality and probably a different platform than a lot of other builders, considering we essentially have a marketing division in the *The Curious Builder* podcast.

So for me specifically, it would be showing up at our events, supporting what that builder is doing. In my case I do have designers that I see. They come to *The Curious Builder* podcast live events knowing that I don't really have a spot for them right now. But it's like consistency and also being genuine and real. They're not just going there just so that I see them and then leaving when they're bored of it. They're there because they're honestly interested and they want to interact and I enjoy them.

I mean that's the thing, I really enjoy people. And I'll be honest with you, but sometimes I think just being at the right place at the right time, it's an old adage, but it's really accurate because someone once told me I know I'm not your first call, but can I be your second call? I always really liked that. I know I'm not option A, but can I be option B? So that someday when option A slips, leaves, moves, is no longer in business, the timing doesn't work, there's a health or sickness, like who are you going to think of? Option B.

And so staying consistent, it's a hard thing to tell people because it could take years. And I also, they come to mind right now, there's about three or four interior designers that every single post, and it's not unnoticed, every single time I post something on Instagram or LinkedIn, they comment, they like, they're very interactive. You can't fake that for a couple of years. If you do fake it for a couple of years, well, kudos to you, you're an amazing actor.

But I guess my point is they're involved for your success and your cheerleader, regardless if they're working with you or not. That is huge. You realize then it's not an ulterior motive. Now, if a time comes that I have an opportunity to work with that person or one of my "horses" goes down with a limp before the Kentucky Derby, I'm probably going to go and ask one of those people that has been so consistent, at least give them a shot to look at it, right?

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I mean, I think they have shown loyalty to the brand. I also think with like the artisan home tours and the parade home events, that's for me personally, I have those on tour. I see them, they come through, they're engaging, and that's one way.

Obviously, the other way is to bring us a client. And in some ways while I'm listening to myself explain this, I think it's the same way that builders "get in" with architects. It's a relationship game. Architects, at least high-end architecture, I mean, they have kind of their roster of their horses. And so if I want to be noticed by an architect, I have to be consistent and I have to be present.

You also have to have the skill set and personality to mesh. You shouldn't just chase everyone. I would say, get your hit list. Find 10 builders you really want to work with. Follow all their Instagrams, look at other websites, find which brand really appeals to you. And I would say, don't always pick the biggest one. I would pick like the up-and-comers, they're more likely to have more room, right?

And I'm not saying don't go for the big ones, but I think a little bit about architects, I kind of knock on the doors of the top architects. But there's a lot of up-and-coming architects that they're developing their friend network. They're developing their professional network. They're much more likely to be more flexible and say, oh, I'd work with you.

And then the last one, of course, just like the architect, if I bring an architect to a client, obviously you would hope that they would realize I just brought them business, you feel some sense of loyalty to bring business back the other way. I will tell you this though, in 20 years, I've never had a designer ever bring me a single project.

And that could speak a little bit to our market in Minnesota. It's a very builder-centric, builder-driven market. I talk to designers in places like Houston, Texas or Austin, Texas, and a lot of clients go to the designer first and then the designer brings it to the builder. In other places, maybe New York or California, maybe you go to the architect first.

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So it might be a little location-based on that deal. But if you have an opportunity to bring somebody business, obviously no builder is going to say no to that.

Desi: No, definitely not. And I really want to circle back to that consistency piece and the importance of it and building that relationship. Because I think that often, I think this is true in anything we try and do new in our business, is that we want to have the result we want yesterday or after one go. And that usually isn't how it works.

And I think it's important that we just recognize that it is a long game that you're playing in your business with the relationships with the builders that you talk to, with the clients you interface with. It's all a long game and a level of patience and dedication to building those relationships is really important.

Mark: Yeah, I 100% agree. I also think that having success with the trade partners is valuable, too. I think an interior designer that's willing to take some initiative and reach out to people to get them, again, going back to can you make each other's jobs easier? In this particular scenario I guess it is all about the builder. But in the sense that if you can make someone's job smoother, easier, and the client is happier, man, you're solving so many problems for me personally, that's amazing.

And I personally really appreciate really high levels of organization. I appreciate it maybe because it's one of my weaker points. And so I really like it when an interior designer can bring a lot of organization to it. And that's just a personal thing for me. Some people would view it maybe differently. Maybe they want something else.

The other thing is ask. Shocker, if you ask the builder, what is it that I could do for you to earn your business? What is it that I could do for you that would make your life easier? With your current designers, what are your top three things that you enjoy about your current people that you work with? What are two or three things that you don't enjoy about your current relationships? And how could they improve it to make themselves even better?



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I think when you start framing questions like that, it also opens up the door for you as the designer, the builder without knowing it is now sort of leaving the door open for you to maybe be that hero to swoop in, if you will. Right time, right place.

Desi: Yeah. And I have to then highlight that was curiosity in action, Mark.

Mark: All right. Well, there we go.

Desi: You took a pause with thinking about how could I bring value to this person I want to be in relationship with and what matters to them and getting that curiosity flowing. And I highly recommend everyone who's listening to pause if there's someone you want to engage with or reach out to, to really start to think about how could I get curious in that relationship in how I approach the person and then in building that relationship as well.

One of the things I wanted to ask about, because you talked a lot about organization and a lot of the clients that I work with want to be organized and have their processes set, all of those wonderful things to focus on. But I find one of the things that comes up then is a challenge of somebody who's organized like you are, has their process, and then the designer has worked very hard to get very organized in their process.

And so what is your take on bringing those two pieces together so that the impact of having a process is still realized, but everyone can kind of work their own process?

Mark: Man, that is one loaded question. I think if I could answer that question, I might be a professional therapist. I don't know the answer to that question. I mean, this isn't meant to sound arrogant, but I guess I'm just thinking about it out loud. If I'm the builder and I have the client, like they are already under contract and I'm bringing in the designer, it seems like the normal way that goes is the designer sort of has to morph into whatever the builder's process is, to the degree that the builder is willing to let up some control and say you do your thing as long as it's done in this manner.

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But you're talking about something that's really difficult because I think this is why, also this probably speaks to why it's so hard for builders to change designers. Because once the designer sort of integrates into the system that they already know, there's a lot of benefit and a lot less abrasion in the build process and communication because they already know what you expect.

And I really feel for designers because unlike a client, maybe a client builds once in their life or twice in their life. If a builder has a different process once or twice in their life, not a big deal. And as a builder, the homes I build, I'm building my process and I'm trying to always improve it, but I only know what I know.

But an interior designer, you're going to work maybe with several builders, 10 builders, lots of builders. You could be working with three different builders at the same time and all three of them could have a different process.

I really think being a chameleon and being able to modify some of it, you could still have some core principles, but how can you morph into what the builder has? I don't actually know some of the back end information that the designers do, but I really appreciate it when they have documentation ways of like, I like it when it's signed off. Like one of my big things is documentation. They'll say, here it is. Well, okay, did the client sign off on it? Oh yeah, they told me.

Man, I've had a few that the projects went south, if you will. And we need very clear documentation, like a signature on paint colors. Like how many times have we gone through paint and the designer says, nope, the paints are approved and the client, you get them up on the wall and they're like, nope, I didn't approve those colors. Then I'll say to the designer, do you have documentation? And if they do have documentation, it's a much easier story. But if they don't, it's a mess.

Now the client has the driver's seat again. So now someone's going to have to pay for that. Now, is it me, the builder? Is it the interior designer? Do we do it collaboratively? But now we obviously have interruption in the smooth process with the builder, or sorry, with the client. And so anyway, documentation is key. Whoever is leading it, documentation and sign-offs are super crucial.

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Desi: 100% agree. And I think really what you're saying is work with the process that the builder has. And also know what your really important non-negotiables are in your process where you know, okay, this is really going to be a big deal if this doesn't happen. Or this is going to be something that's going to really contribute to a better result for all involved.

And then bringing that to the builder and staying in curiosity and thinking about how could we make this work together so that it's not a you against them, but it's a we bringing the process to the table as a whole.

Now, let's circle back. Let's go back to those challenges. You mentioned the sign-offs and everything like that. I think that's a good place to go from here. There's, of course, going to be challenges when you're in a building scenario. Things are just going to happen. And so I thought maybe we could talk a little bit about how you navigate challenges with the client. And specifically how do you work with the designer to help navigate challenges so that it's more of a united front?

Mark: Oh, good question. I think conflict management is probably, it comes up on every job, every build you'll ever have, to different levels. I think there's a humanity approach. There is an openness approach that I think I've benefited from and that I really try to do. I'm not perfect at it by any means. But the idea is just like, how do you work through it together?

This actually goes to something we haven't been talking about, but I've been thinking a lot about lately, is how do you identify your ideal client? And if I've done a good job as a builder of making sure that the client we're working with is our ideal client, conflict resolution with that client becomes a lot easier because you're working with them. It's kind of like, I use the analogy a lot of times about picking who you want to be around, essentially a builder or designer for a vacation.

Do you want to go spend two weeks on an island with the Johnsons or the Murphys? I don't know. I can't take the Johnsons, but the Murphys I could do. My point is, you might like your neighbors just fine, but it doesn't mean you want

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to spend two weeks on an island with them. And where I'm going with this is that if you have identified your client, and this is the hard part, sometimes you just have to put coins in the meter, gas in the gas tank. Not every client is going to be your favorite client. Not every builder is going to be your favorite client.

The only thing I would say different about that, though, is if you have a builder that you don't really enjoy being around, try to find a different builder. Because again you're talking repeat business over and over again. Where I think a client, it's kind of expected that you'll have, at least in building, one build most likely with that client. And then it'll be decades before they build again, if at all.

The advantage of being a designer is now, because you've gotten in with the build, you can do the sale on the furnishings. And then every couple of years, you have the relationship of the updates. So once you're kind of in with that client, you hope to be their forever lifestyle consultant/designer.

Yeah, I kind of lost my way on what the core question was. Oh, the conflict.

Desi: Let's just not talk about it.

Mark: Yeah, let's not talk about conflicts. Yeah, I mean, honestly, the one that I use the most often is actually a verse out of the Bible which is, a soft answer turneth away wrath. And it's really going in and saying, I'm really sorry, Desi, we made a mistake. I guess first it's identifying triage. I'll call the designer. Okay, give me the story, what happened? I'll call the project manager. What happened? If I don't know about it personally.

So I'll try to gather all the facts. Then I'll talk to the homeowner and try to explain, okay, this is what happened. This is my understanding of why. So a lot of it is just bringing enlightenment because sometimes this "mistake," most of them tend to be miscommunication. And so we either didn't listen to the client, we didn't ask the right question, or somewhere along the line communication broke down. And so then it's us reestablishing, hey, this is what happened. This is the problem. This is how we intend to fix it.

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And it's not always good news. And sometimes it's just really bringing them in and saying, this is what we're going to do. And this will cost more, potentially, and we will share in some of that cost. Or Mr. and Mrs. Homeowner, this was something that was directly a result of something that you did. Here's the options that we have where we're at now, but this is going to be the nature of things.

Those ones are the hardest ones because you're indirectly saying it's your fault. And no one really wants to be accused of it being their fault. So you really have to say, as a team, kind of make it feel like you're not shining a spotlight in their face saying it's your fault. Hey, here's our options to make it better, which one would you like to go down? So maybe kind of redirect.

Desi: Yeah, I loved how you phrased that. And you went straight to solutions. You acknowledged there was something that happened without needing to dwell in it. And then you got to, and these are the solutions we can present to you. And you put the ball back in their court then, where they get to choose which solution they want to go with.

Mark: Maybe it's because I'm also a man, that men try to do – So my wife says I'm not the greatest at empathy because I went straight to solutions. That's why I'm laughing. That's a typical husband conversation, like I just want to solve the problem. It reminds me it's not about the nail. I want you to tell me about how you're feeling.

And honestly, my mom was an interior designer and I think I learned a lot from her about how to be with my clients. And my wife has said oftentimes, she's like, you're more patient with your clients and listening to their issues than you are with me, if you will. And I was like, well, I don't know how to answer that question without getting in trouble. So I plead the fifth.

I guess the point of it, patience and empathy, it is a muscle. It's an exercise. Some people are better at it than others. I will tell you that the longer and longer that I build, the harder and harder it has been for me to be patient with kind of the same story over and over again because, honestly, after you've done this for

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enough time, a lot of the same complaints, the same issues, the same processes, they just repeat themselves.

The difference is us as professionals, we've seen it 100 times. But for that client, it's the first time. I don't know if it's an age thing or if I'm burned out or what the deal is. I find that I have less patience. It's not that I don't care. It's not that I don't have empathy. It's just like, man, do I have the patience to go through this right now?

So it's really making sure, I'd say the other thing is make sure you're balanced. This is a lifestyle thing. Do you exercise? Do you eat healthy? Do you sleep? Are you your best self for when you have these meetings? I personally like to have meetings early in the day. I'm a morning person, so I try to avoid having really difficult conversations in the afternoon, because frankly, I'm just more tired in the afternoon and I'm not as fresh. I'm going to be better at resolving an issue in the morning, personally.

Desi: Yeah, me too. And I find that if it's going to be later in the day, then I'm going to worry about it all day.

Mark: Yeah.

Desi: And rehearse what's going to happen, what could happen, all of those things. And then it kind of is a day gone by. That's a very unpleasant emotional experience.

Mark: Yeah, for sure. And sometimes just because you know the right situation doesn't mean you're doing it right. I mean, I have one right now where the email has been sitting in my box for two weeks and there's no reason why I shouldn't have already answered it. But it's really, I keep putting it off because it's a really bad one.

And I need to deal with it. And that's usually not my MO, but for whatever reason, you make excuses, I got to do this, I got to do that. I have a podcast with Desi at one, I'll do it after. Well, by the time this is over it's 2:00 and you're like, ah, it's a Friday afternoon. Can it wait another day? It's waited two weeks.



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So I mean, another builder, it's good advice. And I guess my point is, you can know what to do and still not do it. And this is where you hopefully have people around you that can encourage you, your teammates, your family, whoever, podcasts that you listen to, listening to Desi, having you be their coach. That's actually where a benefit of not being as emotional, having a coach can really help you get past some things because it kind of helps you.

But I asked him one time, and he has way more things going on than I do in his life. And he says, I just don't sit on things very long. I make very quick decisions and I move past it because I can't afford it. It would be like having a restaurant and having 100 people in the restaurant. You've got to take the order and move on and get it off your plate because you've got 99 more orders coming in and you've got to roll.

And so I think there's a lot of value, and it might not even be the right decision, but make a decision and then move past it.

Desi: Well, and I think often, fairly soon after whatever the challenge is that presents itself, you do know what you want to do. The challenge is doing it. I think often we think we need to think about it a lot more, but we've already kind of thought about it and processed it and know the next step. But it's the doing that can get a little bit tricky and harder to navigate sometimes.

Mark: Yeah, that's true.

Desi: Yeah. Okay, that's great. Now that we've brought the tone of the podcast way down, talked about all the negative stuff, why don't we end on an upswing? And let's talk about how we maximize – Actually, I don't like the word maximize. What is the word I'm thinking of? I can't think of the word.

Mark: Like extortion? Like I'm just squeezing out the most of everything?

Desi: Yes, exactly. Yes, you nailed it right there. So how do we continue to nurture, and I think you may use the word optimize, the relationship between designer and builder for mutual future success?

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Mark: I think you continue to evolve it, whether it's – We can talk a little bit about how even with marketing, right? Being very present in each other's businesses, even if you're not working on their jobs. Essentially, we're in very difficult businesses, really high-touch, super emotional businesses. And so I think having super fans that support you is really helpful both for a mindset, both for the person receiving it, but honestly for the person that's also giving it too, right?

Like if you're at a game cheering people on, like you're invested, you're in it, even if you're not on the field playing the game. And I think as a designer, if your builder of choice, the builder you're working with, or honestly this applies to even after you've sort of got the sale, you've got the relationship, like keep the relationship. It's the little touch points.

It's more than just the Christmas card or the Christmas gift or something like that. It's the unexpected thing. It's the meaningful comments. Hey, we noticed you posted something, amazing work. You as an inside professional realize how hard this business is, so if you can basically connect with that other person on a human level and just say, hey, you did an amazing job, that must've been a really hard house. Excellent design. Kudos to you. Nobody is above being validated.

And I say validated versus complimented because I feel like validated is deeper and appreciation is deeper. And not that people don't want compliments, I think that's fine. But if you really want to connect on an emotional level, I think it has to be more meaningful and deeper. And yeah, anyway, I guess that would be my answer to how to keep building it up.

And I think maybe to add to that is pushing design. Some builders are not super design forward. And so there's many times where the designer can help elevate the builder.

Actually, we haven't talked about that at all. The designer absolutely can help and should help, and it's their duty to help elevate the home. The hard part sometimes is twofold. A builder is too stubborn, maybe a builder has bad taste

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and is not open to their opinion. And the worst cocktail is if the client has no taste, but also has a strong opinion.

That one is actually the hardest because now both you as the designer and me as the builder have a really hard time because we both want to elevate this house and the homeowner just can't get out of their own way, nor will they empower you to do what you're good at. That's actually the most frustrating, now that I think about it.

Desi: Yeah, that is really frustrating.

Mark: I have one right now and it's not, it really kills your creativity and it really kills the enthusiasm for it when you can't. I mean, they hired you because you're good at what you do and now they won't let you do what you do. So it seems very counterintuitive.

Desi: It is very strange, I think, yeah. And if only we could just say, hey, you remember why you hired me?

Mark: I did. I flat out asked.

Desi: Oh, you did, you did, okay.

Mark: I was not subtle about it because it got uncomfortable, not heated. It was a little bit like I really wanted to understand. I felt like if I could understand their logic, I offered to pay for something for the client. I said, which is crazy, I can't believe I did this. So they were going to do something that was not very attractive. And I said, guys, I feel like this is a mess. The home is amazing. I found out what the difference was in the price. And I said, will you allow me to give this to you as a gift so that we can do this? And they said, no.

I was shocked. I'm like, I thought the reason you're doing this was about price. And they're like, it isn't. We think that if you do this, you're going to get us somewhere else. And I was just like, oh my word, if you really think that of me, why did you hire me? Like, that's not a way to go through a relationship. And I

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just flat out said, do you want my opinions or you just want me to do what you tell me to do?

I mean, that's about as straight as a way you can ask it. And they said, we just want you to do what we ask you to do. And I was dumbfounded. I can't believe he answered that way.

Desi: Yeah.

Mark: And I said, okay. I mean, what am I going to say?

Desi: What else are you going to say?

Mark: Yeah, I mean, I could not, without getting fired, and it wasn't a sword to get fired on. Fine, we'll build something that I don't think is in their best interest or the home's. But they are paying my bills and I will do what my client asked me to do. That's really the first time in my career it's ever been tested to that magnitude.

Desi: That's real talk.

Mark: Yeah, I'm really bringing you down on a Friday afternoon with some real talk.

Desi: No, I think this is great. I feel like there needs to be more real talk about these conversations. I coached a client recently on that exact thing where she was hired, presumably, for her very unique style. And the homeowner just kept trying to want do a left turn. And it just got to this point where this is causing so much internal friction to keep fighting this, that I think the best thing to do is just do what they want so we can be done with the project and move on.

Mark: I mean, everyone is sort of above it. And I'm going to use this silly story about my sister and I in college. So I went, I was not in a relationship at the time and I thought, okay, I need help shopping. And I have blue eyes and I think I look good in blue, I suppose. But I looked in my closet and every shirt I have is blue.

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So I remember telling my sister, I said, we're going to go shopping together. Don't let me pick out a single thing that's blue. That's your one job today. So we go shopping and guess how many shirts – Or when I came back, what color do you think the shirts were that I bought?

Desi: Blue.

Mark: They were blue. The reason I bring up that example, it just comes to me now, is like people want what they want. And I feel comfortable in blue. I like blue. It's just kind of what it is. And this, to go back to the designer, like I want a modern home, but really I'm a traditionalist at heart. And so I don't have the ability to design a modern home.

If I really want a modern home, the only way I can really do it is to remove myself from the situation. I'd find a designer that's great, a builder that can execute it, and an architect that can do it. Here's what I want. You have to trust. And if you don't trust it –

And this is where everyone's personality is different. It sounds like a dream come true, but you couldn't have a client say this is what I want to see in 12 months and come back. I know everyone would be like, oh, that'd be amazing. I would love that. But I'll tell you what, we need the client's input. We need parameters.

I asked an architect the other day, can you design me something? He's like, we're doing it as a speculative, like a marketing piece. And he and I both agreed there's too many possibilities. I mean, I can design anything. It could be any size, any value. It could be anything. And because we know all the stuff, it's like you're almost paralyzed by all the decisions.

It's way easier when a client comes and eliminates a lot of things. Like I want a main floor because I have arthritis and I don't want a two-story. I want a more modern home because I grew up, I mean, you need those data endpoints to really infer you as an artist to create something. So we actually, shockingly, need

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the client, or I feel like at least in my mindset we need the client to help give us some more data points to really help us shape what it's going to be.

Desi: I love that perspective. That's a really unique approach to thinking about the client and their input because often I'll hear from designers that they just wish they had basically the scenario you laid out.

Mark: But then what happens is the designer is building their house. They're not building the client's house. And again, it sounds tempting. It sounds great. But you also are not going to live in that house. It doesn't suit you. And there have been times where I have made my voice too strong, and because I can be persuasive the client did what I asked and they didn't like it. And we actually had to redo it for them.

The example is I'm tall, I'm six foot two. My homeowner at the time was like five, five, five, four. And I typically like higher countertops, especially in vanities and like bathrooms and things like that. We'll go to 38, sometimes 40. My line is you're brushing your teeth, you're not baking bread. Why do we feel like we need to have – The old homes you remember, would be like 28 or 30 inches?

Desi: Oh my gosh, so short.

Mark: I'd be just like, what are we doing? I could wash my kneecaps in there. But like your kitchen island, traditionally, is 36 inches. So I made this big deal about raising it up. You're going to like it. You're going to like it. I did a good enough job asking questions, so she believed me.

Well, every fall she does a lot of canning. They live out in the country. And by the time you put a big boiling pot on top of your cooktop, her hands were as high as her shoulders. Her shoulders were so sore from canning and pounding and cutting, she just wasn't – I let my bias overcome her need. I got so zeroed in on what I wanted. And so we cut her island out. We picked up her island. We cut off two inches and lowered it back down to 36.



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And I haven't ever forgotten that lesson. I still like tall countertops, but I do explain that often to my clients. I've used that example a number of times. But anyway.

Desi: Yeah, that's a great example. And I appreciate that you're willing to share those "failures."

Mark: Oh yeah, we got lots of those. Tune into *The Curious Builder* podcast, you'll hear all about the failures.

Desi: Yeah, no, I really appreciate that because I think it's so easy to look at a builder like you and see the finished product. And the same thing goes with so many other people we look at online and think that everything goes smoothly. It's always exactly as it should be. The clients are always thrilled.

And it's like, yes, of course, that's what everyone's going for. But things do happen and you can still ride those waves, navigate the challenges and come out with a great end product and a successful firm too.

Mark: I mean, it's a lot like, I mean, we obviously live in the age of social media and the stuff that really resonates with me personally, not so much professionally, is like I'm a dad of three. And I see like there's this one episode, they're called the dumb dads or whatever. They do press conferences of all the things that they've done wrong with their kids. It's hilarious as a dad, right?

Because to your point, we live in a society that glamorizes all the good stuff, but we all relate to the things that go bad because, shocker, everyone has bad stuff that happens to them. So there is a relief in the therapy, the empathy. Today, I mentioned offline before we got talking that we did this 28 builder networking group that I'm really excited about launching even this year. And a big part of why it feels so good is just collaborating.

I mean, this podcast right now, I hope your listeners that follow you can hear real talk from other designers to realize like it is hard, it is tough, but it's a lot like you're doing it together. And someone described it once as like a bunch of silos that when you drive down through, I guess, a rural setting, you see all these

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silos. Does the silo of corn know it's next to another silo of corn? But it's all insulated, it can't see it. But like you all came from the same field and you're all corn. That's a weird analogy.

The point of it is by taking down these walls, and I think that's what podcasts in general over the last four or five years have done, or as long as I've been aware of them is just really getting to the heart of we all have a lot of challenges and you're not alone. You're not dealing with the same, everyone's dealing with very similar problems. It's okay to fail. It's okay to share about it and move forward and get better.

And as long as you do that, I think if you have kids, isn't that the same message you tell your kids? Like you made a mistake, do better next time. And if you don't, I'll still give you a hug and a cookie.

Desi: Yeah, but we don't extend that same kindness to ourselves.

Mark: That is true. That is 100% true. That's very accurate.

Desi: Yeah. Well, that feels like a good place to wrap up. Anything else that you want to share with us that you're like, oh yeah, I for sure wanted to mention that today?

Mark: Well, I can't say yet where it's going to be because we haven't signed the paperwork yet, but we will be doing four live events this year in Minneapolis. And one of them actually is announced. That's May 16th, it'll be The Curious Builder Live with the Contractor Coalition. So that'll be Morgan Molitor, Brad Leavitt, Nick Schiffer and Tyler Grace. So we'll have kind of a panel that's open to anyone that wants to buy tickets to that event. It'll be right in North Minneapolis.

We have another one coming up in July that is not confirmed, but it'll be more centered around designers and lighting. And then we're going to try to do something in Q3 pending some final approvals. But essentially, it's going to be kind of like a maker's, I have this idea that I want to celebrate things that are done by hand. So we'll have somebody like Jackson Schwartz on who does

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hand-blown glass here in Minneapolis, like a Mercedes Austin who makes handmade tiles.

And I'm looking for one more. So anyone in the audience that wants to do a recommendation of like a handmade artisan, I kind of want to do a panel. We buy a lot of things. And I would like to talk to those people that make a lot of things that we put in our homes. And so it's going to be kind of this maker's networking event.

And then the last one is still pending. So I guess stay tuned for some of these live events happening here in Minneapolis coming up this year.

Desi: Oh, that's so exciting. I'm really hoping I'm going to be able to make it to one of them one of these days. Your dates seem to keep conflicting with things that I have to go to for my children. Or I should say things I'm choosing to go to with my children.

Mark: As well you should. We didn't talk about it today, but lifestyle is very important. Choose your kids over a networking event. Or actually bring your kids with, teach them a little bit about the industry. Show them what mom's doing.

Desi: Yeah, that's true. This morning, my son was just kind of sitting around before school and he's like, are you well known? And I thought, well, I don't know, I guess it depends on how you define that.

Mark: My daughter – Oh, go ahead.

Desi: It is fun to kind of loop them in on what's happening.

Mark: My daughter's funny because she's seven, she's very into Taylor Swift, like all of us should be. And I'm a fellow Swifty. But anyway, I guess my point is she's like, she's into famous. Like, is this person famous? Is that person? And she always relates it, are they as famous as Taylor Swift? I'm like, to be fair, I'm not sure anybody is as famous as Taylor Swift. And like every once in a while, she'll pick like Elton John and I'll be like, well, he's probably more famous than Taylor Swift but only because he's older and been around.

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Anyway, her point was, she's like, dad, are you as famous as Taylor Swift? I'm like, no, not even a little bit. Thank you for the compliment. Maybe we'll see if Taylor Swift can come on the show, it'd be awesome.

Desi: Let's get you at the Vikings game one of these days. And we'll see if we get any pan shots to your face.

Mark: Yeah, that will never happen. That's highly unlikely, especially since I'm a radio voice. So anyway, that's how it goes.

Desi: All right, well, thank you so much for coming on, Mark.

Mark: Yeah, thanks for having me.

Desi: It was really nice to chat with you and I'm really excited for listeners to hear this. And of course, go check out Mark's podcast, *The Curious Builder*, some great conversations happening over there. Go check out his website as well, because it is gorgeous. And I'll, of course, be back next week with a brand new episode.

One last reminder that enrollment is open for To Do To Done. We are kicking off February 16th for that five-week coaching intensive where we'll take a business boosting project and take it from start to finish, which definitely could include some outreach and marketing. So until then, I'm wishing you a beautiful week. Have a wonderful weekend, Mark. And I'll talk to you all in the next episode.

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