

# Kirkpatrick & Assoc. 'biggest little firm' in hotel design

BY AMANDA C. KOOSER | SPECIAL TO NMBW

Kirkpatrick & Associates was once introduced at a Hilton hotel owners' conference as "the biggest little firm you will ever meet."

The Albuquerque design business, which specializes in hotel interiors, is one of only a handful of design companies with an invitation to display at the annual Hilton conference for current and future hotel owners.

"It was a great compliment," president Susan Kirkpatrick says.

Kirkpatrick & Associates handles every aspect of interior design, from custom carpeting to paint colors to furniture selection, and sees the project through from ordering to delivery to installation. Creativity is a must, but there's more to the job than just selecting colors that go well together.

"It's one thing to be creative, and it's another thing to pull all the pieces together to get that hotel opened," Kirkpatrick says.

## Vital Stats:

**Company:** Kirkpatrick & Associates  
**President:** Susan Kirkpatrick  
**Address:** 6608 Second St. NW, Albuquerque 87107  
**Phone:** (505) 342-0402  
**Website:** susankirkpatrick.com  
**Employees:** six  
**Revenue:** \$3.3 million in 2011

## Strategies:

1. Pay as much attention to the managerial side as to the creative side of your business.
2. A hands-on owner can differentiate your business from the competition.
3. Find ways to recharge your excitement about your work.

She says management skills are critical to success in this field. Those skills include prioritizing the office work flow, scheduling design deadlines and job site shipments, and communicating quality requirements to manufacturers and suppliers.

The company took on its first hotel project 17 years ago, a Hampton Inn in Durango, Colo. With just days to go before the scheduled opening, the lobby furniture was nowhere to be found. It was finally tracked down to a dock, where an unhelpful manager wasn't willing to get it trucked to the right place on time. Kirkpatrick told him she would fly down there and drive it herself. That was enough to get the manager in gear. The furniture arrived on time for the opening.

Kirkpatrick says that's when the ball started rolling for the company.

"There's an awful lot of responsibility to get all this stuff together and to the job site on time to open. If it's not there, they can't open the hotel," she says.

The Hampton Inn owner recommended her to other hoteliers. She's been going strong in the industry ever since.

"I really don't market. People just call and say they have a project. I get more calls than I can do the work," Kirkpatrick says.



RANDY SINER | NMBW

**Susan Kirkpatrick of Kirkpatrick & Associates, which designs hotel interiors, says management skill and attention to detail are just as critical as creativity in her field. Kirkpatrick travels often to showrooms to stock up on fabric samples so she can stay current on the latest design trends in her industry and "recharge her batteries" as a designer.**

She's scheduled to do a renovation design for that same Hampton Inn.

Midmarket hotels are Kirkpatrick's primary customers.

"That's where the majority of new hotels are being built at," she says. "We don't try to go after the boutique hotels. We try to make our midmarket properties look like those."

The company has stayed strong during the recession because there are still parts of the country where new hotels are being

built. Kirkpatrick has projects under way in Colorado, California, Texas, Arizona and Calgary, Canada.

Kirkpatrick estimates that 70 percent of her work is new hotels and 30 percent is renovations. Her firm is on track to pull in \$7 million in revenue for 2012.

Todd Brummond, managing member of Trisimo Hotel Group, worked with Kirkpatrick & Associates on a hotel renovation in 2006 and on a new Holiday Inn Express in Brighton, Colo. that opened in 2009. He is

one of her many repeat customers. Kirkpatrick's work is setting the tone for many more Holiday Inn Express hotels.

"[The] corporate office has sent numerous developers through that facility to tour it as an example of what they want their properties to look like," Brummond says.

Kirkpatrick & Associates' main competition is in cities like Dallas and Atlanta. Kirkpatrick's love of New Mexico led her to found and keep her company in Albuquerque.

"I probably could have had a larger business if I had been in Dallas, Memphis or Atlanta, but the quality of life is great here," she says.

Keeping the firm small also allows her to be very hands-on with her clients. That's a feature that was important to Brummond when he was choosing a designer.

"She makes job site visits throughout the job to make sure pictures end up where they're supposed to and furniture is going to fit as we envisioned it. She has a great knack for seeing the big picture," he says.

A large studio building sits behind the Kirkpatrick & Associates office. It is stocked with fabric and wood finish samples.

"I go to the national markets on a regular basis to keep us up to date. We don't have the advantage of being in Dallas where they have all the showrooms," Kirkpatrick says.

She tries to stock up on enough samples to last her several months. Visiting the showrooms helps her stay current on the latest styles and trends for her customers.

"It's exciting because your batteries as a designer recharge," she says.

Kirkpatrick says pricing for her services can vary greatly depending on the project.

"We price everything out and then put a markup on it that includes our cost for doing all of the design and project management work," she says.

She prefers to visit locations in person to get a feel for a hotel's community, clientele and competition.

"I tell clients, it's not about what you like or what your wife likes or what the general manager likes,

we need to design the hotel for what your guests like," she says.

In an age where hotel visitors are likely to share the tiniest details of their visits on online review sites, hotels have to work hard to stand out from the competition. Interior design is a major way they do that.

"They can use interior design as a marketing tool to help establish their property in the market they are in, so that they can be better than their competition, with a fresher look," Kirkpatrick says.