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Sara Sargent/Medill

Alan Andrews' stone veneers business, North Star Stone Inc., was hired by Heritage Signs Ltd. in 2007 to construct columns for Libertyville's welcome sign.

## As real estate slumbers, Libertyville remodeling business benefits

by **SARA SARGENT**  
Apr 22, 2008

A housing market characterized by tepid home sales and prices is benefiting Libertyville-based remodeler North Star Stone Inc. Business is up 15 percent this year.

As owner Alan Andrews sees it, his stone veneers offer a compromise for folks who own dated-looking houses and feel they have to decide between selling and fully renovating.

"We're trying to help people who want to stay in their homes and modernize," said Andrews, who opened his custom stone veneers business in 2004. Revenues topped \$750,000 last year. "We're helping people transform their homes," he declared.

At North Star Stone, Andrews and his workers manufacture synthetic stone at their local factory and use that material in refurbishment projects for home interiors and exteriors.

North Star's stone—made from Portland cement and an aggregate—is both cheaper and easier to work with than real stone, according to Andrews. The thinner and lighter properties of synthetic stone allow him to install it over existing brick, and manufactured stone permits color customization.

Andrews' masons use this stone to beautify facades and to build fireplaces, wine cellars, outdoor grill areas, fire pits and columns.

"What people like about what we do is that it's one-stop shopping," Andrews remarked. "We provide installation, design, coloration, materials—we're the whole package deal. No need to purchase the stone yourself and find a mason, an architect, an installer, a contractor."

"That is why we decided to go with Alan," said Joyce Jones of Elmhurst. "We looked at some other providers who would get the product, but you had to find your contractor to do the installation. We didn't want that."

"For us it was livability," said Gail Berman of Deerfield, who hired North Star for a renovation project in 2006. "Our house was built in the early

'60s and it was a little dated looking. The stone just gave it a whole different texture and flavor and feeling—it looks current.”

For each prospective project, the consultation process is three-part. When a customer enlists North Star's services, first Andrews visits the home.

“When assessing a property, we must take into consideration how the stone would look, the style of the home, what kind of stone would look best, the height of the house, the house's colors.”

Next, he discusses his vision with the homeowners. “We listen to what you want,” Andrews said. “We ask questions, we make suggestions.”

Finally, Andrews creates what he calls a “visualization,” a digital mock-up of the home with the proposed renovations—the modern version of 3-D plastic models.

Once homeowners decide what they want, the first step of production is manufacturing the stone in a specific color, shape and size.

An average project, according to Andrews, takes five to seven business days for installation, and the cost ranges from \$10,000 to \$15,000. “What I'm always trying to do is be budget conscious: How can we do this to make it more affordable?” he said.

“Logic would say if you're making your home more beautiful, you're getting that investment back,” Andrews said.

And Andrews is right, according to Eric Landry, associate director at investment researcher Morningstar Inc. “If you're trying to sell your house, anything you can do to differentiate is helpful,” Landry confirmed. “There is more supply now than virtually ever before on the market so there's a lot to choose from. Anything you can do to set your house apart may improve your chances. Make it stand out.”

Although remodeling can increase the curb appeal of a home to sell it, Andrews said, some of his clients are looking to stay in their homes.

He said he attracts and maintains customers through innovation. “I'm always asking: How can I create this? How can I make it better? We try to do something new,” he remarked.

By way of example, Andrews said he finds “new, creative ways to make something look interesting” by using two different types of stone in the same facade, turning stones at different angles or mixing up the size and height of the stone he uses.

Gail Berman was so pleased with her result that when Oprah Winfrey asked her viewers “Do you have a favorite thing?”, Berman told her about North Star's remodeling. “For me,” she explained later, “that was something in the area of home remodeling that made such a difference in the way my home looked.”

Looking forward, Andrews said he expects his current rate of sales growth to hold over the course of the year.

He likes doing business in the local area. “I plan to stay in the Lake and Cook counties market—my aspirations are to continue to grow here,” he said. “I'm not looking to sell to Home Depot. I'm not selling a commodity; I'm selling the total package, which makes me different.”



Sara Sargent/Medill

*North Star Stone Inc. workers Amparo Avila, Waldo Villagomez and Juan Fulgencio apply the company's own stone veneers to the exterior of a Libertyville home.*

## **Business Profile**

Company: North Star Stone Inc.

Business: manufacture and installation of stone veneers

Address: 1921 Industrial Drive, Libertyville

Owner: Alan Andrews

Founded: 2004

2007 revenue: \$750,000

Employees: 10

Web site: [www.northstarstone.biz](http://www.northstarstone.biz)



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