

# THE NEWS-PRESS

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## Success story: Clients get advocates when hiring designer

Firm's satisfaction rate has given it a steady flow of projects throughout Lee, Collier and Charlotte.



Karen L. Benson, owner of Karen L. Benson Associates Interior Design recently celebrated the grand opening of its new division Inspire Traditions. (left to right) Vanessa Pena, Karen L. Benson, and Jaime Goss are the three principal members of the design team. / Terry Allen Williams/news-press.com

Karen L. Benson sees her firm's interior design projects as a big puzzle.

She'll take anything on, whether it's adjusting lighting and rearranging furniture, or knocking down walls and introducing new textures and colors to a home or office.

"I think we're our clients advocates," she said. "We listen, we stick to their budget and in the end their project looks like a beautiful part of them."

That golden rule has served Fort Myers-based Karen L. Benson and Associates well at a time when design is sometimes seen as more of a luxury than a necessity.

The firm's satisfaction rate among clients has given it a steady flow of small- to mid-size projects throughout Lee County with some in Collier and Charlotte counties and out of state.

From January through November the company collected \$120,000 in design fees compared to \$104,000 for the same period a year ago — a 15 percent increase year-over-year.

### When you go

Karen L. Benson and Associates Interior Design

**Where:** 2037 W. First St., Fort Myers.

**When:** Monday-Friday, 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m.

**Contact:** 334-4111 or [info@klbinteriors.com](mailto:info@klbinteriors.com) for more information.

**Website:** [klbinteriors.com](http://klbinteriors.com)

**Cost:** Design work starts at \$85 per hour for work with a junior designer and can run from \$110 to \$225 per hour for work with a project designer; holiday decorating runs from \$110 an hour; Inspire Transitions moving runs from \$40 to \$80.

Owner Karen Benson says she has built a thriving company by:

Being the client's advocate, showing them grace and listening to their needs.

Keeping a tight reign on funds, and never borrowing money to manage cash flow.

Developing services customers need and expanding the business to offer those services.

Is business thriving in the tough economy? Are you willing to provide specifics for a weekly feature on successful local businesses, such as revenue numbers and tips for success? Share your story by contacting Business Reporter Yvonne McClellan at 335-0492 or by email at [ymcclellan@news-press.com](mailto:ymcclellan@news-press.com).

The uptick in revenue stems in part from her background in commercial design and her knack for breathing life into a client's design vision.

"She really knows how to look at plans and make the plans sensible and family-friendly," said Fort Myers resident Nancy Antonio, 58.

Over the past 20 years, Benson led the design for several remodeling projects in Antonio's stilt home off McGregor Boulevard. Benson knew how to tweak the home's design to make it better than Antonio could have made it on her own, she said.

Where the porch had been there's now a dining room, and a new porch was added on. Beams were added to the kitchen ceiling for a cozier feel, and sliding glass doors were traded in for French doors, Antonio said.

"We can make their space fit their things and their lifestyle," Benson said.

Her background in commercial work has informed her residential design projects, and about 20 percent of the firm's projects are commercial work for companies such as Vincent Salon, Sun Harvest Citrus and McGregor Cafe, she said.

Benson has also cut expenses at the firm through the downturn by scaling back overhead costs.

She has cut travel to major markets where they had previously shopped for finishes and furniture, and instead researches online and built upon relationships with suppliers to gather the latest design trends.

The company keeps its operation small in an 800-square-foot office, but has increased staff in the past five years. Benson's added a designer and an assistant to her team and is expanding the suite of services her business offers.

Benson also has a personal practice of never spending money she doesn't have and has maintained that in her business as well.

"I don't like to buy on credit," she said. "It is very, very important that when a client's check comes in, it goes exactly to what it's supposed to."

This week, the firm launched Inspire Transitions, a new division of the company that offers guidance and moving services for people who are moving to a smaller home or apartment.

The concept will offer design guidance and moving services to customers who are downsizing, helping with everything from sorting belongings, packing and moving, to setting up all their belongings in their new home, she said.

"You can be very talented and just the best at something, but what we're doing — it's very intuitive and it's very personal."

Written by  
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