



A on **Gamble** **Gambrel**

Cascade's Customer Service Pays Off



by Dale Erlandson

ON A WEDNESDAY morning, the phone rang on Mike Farr’s desk. The caller wanted to know whether Farr, VP of Sales at Cascade Mfg Co in Cascade, IA, was interested in a challenge.

A homeowner was rebuilding a house that had been swept away by a tornado. Determined to avoid a second catastrophe, he’d worked with a commercial framer to have steel beams embedded in the existing concrete foundation that had survived the storm. Now, he was ready to wrap a house around that frame, and he was getting a little impatient. He’d been talking with other truss manufacturers for a few weeks, but as yet had no designs to review and was aiming to move things along. And the project would be big: a 15,000 square foot home that included a pool house.

Farr says his philosophy for approaching projects is always: “we can build anything if you’re willing to pay for it.” It was clear from the unusual nature of the call and the reluctance of his competitors to get involved that this project would require a significant investment of time and effort. He was confident, though, from the size and scope of the project that it could pay off. He hung up the phone, saying he’d be there in two hours.

RAISING THE STAKES

Farr arrived to measure the framing and take notes on the owner’s ideas. “I took a very hands-on approach,” he says, both because he thought it would be a good project for Cascade and because a close connection to the owner was necessary. “There were no house plans,” Farr says. Just the frame, the image of the finished house in the owner’s mind and—making a unique challenge even more unusual—a paper model of the home the owner wanted built, meticulously crafted and perfectly to scale. Without any architectural drawings other than the steel beam layout provided by the framer, Farr jumped into the only option he could see: “You really had to sit down and interview the owner,” he says, so he did.

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An Iowa homeowner, rebuilding a house that had been swept away by a tornado, worked with a commercial framer to have steel beams embedded in the concrete foundation that had survived the storm. The challenge for Cascade was to wrap a house around that frame—without any house plans!





Diligent customer service resulted in a successful project: a challenging design, smooth installation and no back charges.

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The owner talked Farr through his model. Farr listened and, with a lot of pointing and waving his hands to reflect the desired roof lines, explained the design aspects that might need tweaking. The trusses the owner had in mind weren't the style Cascade typically made. No problem there, Farr said. They'd made gambrel trusses before and if the owner wanted to add an inverted gambrel vault to the typical shape, they could make that happen. The 50- to 62-foot clear spans the steel beams and existing foundation required could also be accommodated. Cascade regularly builds long spans for agricultural and commercial buildings; the absence of interior bearing would create an interesting challenge for their design team.

Farr explained that the owner's original vision called for trusses that would need to be spliced together in the field. He was pretty sure he could achieve the same roof line in a much more practical way by altering the trusses and

making them in one piece. Was that acceptable? The owner and his sons talked over Farr's ideas and decided they sounded good. They were interested in moving forward.

A few hours after he'd arrived, Farr was ready to head back to the office and put together designs for the homeowner to look over. It was at this point that one of the owner's sons pulled him aside to mention that the owner—who had built the paper model and checked Farr's design calculations in his head almost as quickly as Farr could pull them from his calculator—was blind. He was looking forward to the designs, but Cascade would need to continue to put in extra time with this project to talk him through their plans.

DOUBLING DOWN

Farr went back to the design team, whose first question, of course, was: where are the plans? Farr explained the situation, overrode the skeptics, and two days later was meeting with the owner again to go over the designs.



This was a very unusual process. Typically, the Cascade designers play a small role before a contract is signed, although the amount of involvement depends on the complexity of the job. Often, only a half-hour commitment from one member of the sales team is needed to secure a project and, until that point, the design team isn't required at all.

The steel beam framework required clear spans of 50-62 feet.

Now, Farr was on his second visit, beginning an ongoing process of revising plans by feel. The owner might hold his hand against a wall or above a table asking, what if we changed things by this much? Farr would get out the tape measure, roughly determine the distance and adjust the ceiling height or truss rise to suit. By the end of the second visit with the owner, Cascade had invested 40 hours in the project.

The extra effort was worth it—the owner was satisfied with Farr’s commitment and ready for a contract.

HITTING THE JACKPOT

Communication and creativity were the hallmarks of this project. From the time Farr first heard of the job, in April 2014, to the time Cascade’s part was complete in October of that year, Farr checked in with the owner every week. The exceptional customer service meant taking the time to understand the owner’s vision and making sure that every department at Cascade moved the project forward, even when doing so was a departure from standard procedure.

The design team needed to work backward. With no building plan, they designed the trusses to sit on a steel frame rather than simply specifying walls to support their trusses. Special hardware was needed to attach the wood trusses to plates on the steel beams and to ensure the scissors trusses had enough rigidity to transfer the roof load to the frame without flexing outward. The drivers and loaders, hesitant about their ability to safely deliver the product, needed to rethink how they loaded the trusses.

Six months after Farr answered the phone, Cascade was fin-

ished. The shipping department loaded the gambrel trusses with the bottom chord ends hanging off the flat bed rather than the peak, and the trusses arrived without any damage to the webs. Farr was on hand to oversee what he says was “the only problem we had on the entire job”—a misplaced top and bottom chord on the second-to-last truss to be installed. A replacement was built in the field and installation continued without any slowdown. Today, although the owner hasn’t moved in, the pool is ready for water and the schoolyard-sized playground is ready for grandchildren.

Farr says Cascade was able to take on the project only because they were ready for the extra effort the project required. “I think the other truss companies,” the ones who didn’t move fast enough to secure this homeowner’s business, “were a bit overwhelmed,” Farr speculates. He says



The owner hasn't moved in yet, but the pool is ready for water and the schoolyard-sized playground is ready for grandchildren.

he understands why: “I’ve never had a project that was this large and there was no plan.” The attentiveness to the owner worked, though: the designs were unusual but feasible, the installation went smoothly, and Farr’s diligence in checking in on every step of the project eliminated all back charges. In the end, Cascade’s gamble on gambrels was a successful—and profitable—endeavor. ■

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