

a big part of being a good manager, and it creates a culture of success in this department.”

Management Excellence - Consultant

Next Step Design

No. of Employees: 34

Portfolio Highlights: Chefs Club by Food & Wine, New York; The Miami Beach EDITION, Miami Beach, Fla.; Andaz Maui at Wailea Resort, Wailea, Hawaii; Chicago Athletic Association Hotel, Chicago; Nico Osteria, Thompson Hotel, Chicago

Tagline: “Equal Parts Instinct & Ingenuity”

By Amanda McCorquodale, Contributing Editor

After nearly 30 years in the foodservice design business, J. Russell Stilwell, FCSI, Principal, Next Step Design, and team have built a reputation for high-level foodservice design that facilitates chefs, optimizes productivity, generates energy in the space, and wows patrons.



“The Next Step team thinks like operators and chefs and understands how kitchens flow and what guests will see,” says Jeffrey Beers, Founder and CEO, Jeffrey Beers Int’l, a firm specializing in architecture, design and planning. Beers recently worked with Stilwell’s Annapolis, Md.-based firm on a restaurant with a uniquely challenging bar design.

“It was oval shaped with a central tequila tower, and the equipment would be visible to guests from all sides,” says Beers. “The Next Step Design team not only developed a custom under bar system that was seamless, it enhanced the overall bar design. The team also developed a custom glass walk-in cooler for the beer kegs above the kitchen that became a main focal point to the dining room.”

Before founding the firm, Stilwell started as a dishwasher in 1972 and then worked his way up the culinary food chain to a Culinary Institute of America-trained sous-chef. “When I worked in kitchens, some places were so ridiculous in terms of ergonomics that I was shocked to find out that foodservice design was an actual profession,” Stilwell says.

When an equipment-supply company was looking for someone with a culinary background to help design kitchens, Stilwell jumped at the chance. In ’87, Stilwell launched Next Step Design and built his business using a culinary approach by hiring people with foodservice backgrounds. “This allows us to communicate with the people that actually work in kitchens, allowing us to design from a more visceral standpoint,” he

says. As the name “Next Step Design” suggests, Stilwell is also very process-oriented, and his team delivers incredibly detailed drawings that are above what is standard in the industry.

Over the past three decades, Next Step’s approach has been a big win with clients. “We continue to go back to Next Step Design for every project,” says Michael Kitchen, V.P., Acquisitions & Development, Aparium Hotel Group. “Frankly, they make our lives easier.”

“I love working with the Next Step Design team,” agrees Jay Coldren, Managing Director, Dean & DeLuca, “because they don’t just solve the problem of, say, specifying a stove. They solve the whole picture: how to get the stove in, how it should look, where it should be positioned for maximum efficiency, and what the best brand is for maintenance long term.”

Since 2006, Next Step has grown from six to 34 employees, quadrupled in sales and expanded from one office to locations in Chicago, New York and San Francisco with a Canadian office on the horizon.

That growth is especially noteworthy considering the economic downturn in ’07 that brought nearly every business sector to a halt. “During the recession, we created an aggressive marketing and development plan in which we called on our market’s 50 top clients,” says Stilwell. “Just about everyone said all of their U.S. projects were on hold but that our product was exceptional so we should keep in touch. Now they make up our core business.”

Stilwell is aware that such growth comes with its own challenges. “I don’t want the business to get so big that it starts to dilute our product or that we lose the core DNA of the Next Step culture,” he says of the main office, which he describes as very casual with employees in jeans, a ping pong table for a conference table, and a fridge stocked with beer. “As I bring in people from other companies, I almost have to deprogram them to get them back to free thinking,” he says. “People just turn off their creative juices when they’ve been at a place where no one encouraged or considered their ideas.”

In the summer, Stilwell hosts monthly Fun Fridays when the team knocks off early for a fun lunch, volleyball match or a gathering at his home. “This team works extremely hard and I often feel like I have to chase people out of here. But it’s important to me that our employees have fun and have a life,” he says. “People say that makes me a nice boss, but it really just means I’m a smart boss.”

As ’17 approaches, Next Step will celebrate its 30th anniversary with a big party and rebranding launch with a revamped website and logo. Already strong in the hospitality sector, Stilwell says, his team will branch out in the coming years to new market segments such as workplace dining and high-end health-care. “We’re going to keep growing,” Stilwell says, “but we’re also going to double down on our high-tech, high-touch approach to client relationships. We think long term. I have restaurant groups that I’m happy to

say I've done business with for 25 years.”

Management Excellence - Dealer

Birmingham Restaurant Supply (Bresco)

No. of Employees: 60

2016 Sales Volume: \$31 million

Company Motto: “Treat every customer and client in such a special way that when the transaction is complete, they will come back for more *and tell others how great it was.*”

By Amanda McCorquodale, Contributing Editor



Despite its current prominent location that encompasses one full block of downtown Birmingham, Ala., Birmingham Restaurant Supply (Bresco) had very humble beginnings. George Tobia, President of Bresco, founded the company in 1974 with his cousin and a small business loan. “We started out of the trunk of our cars. Back then, nobody really delivered, so we told everybody if they gave us an order before noon, we’d deliver it the same day,” says Tobia.

Forty-two years later, Bresco has grown from a 1,000-sq.-ft. warehouse to a 132,000-sq.-ft. location. Tobia bought out his cousin in '81 and the company now does just as much restaurant supply as they do designing and building out kitchens. Despite Bresco’s exceptional growth and the decades that have passed, Tobia says, the company’s humble start still drives the business.

“When you start with nothing—\$2,000 of borrowed money on your father’s name—you appreciate everything you get,” says Tobia. “Gratitude still permeates here. I truly believe that when you take care of the small things, you create magic moments and it comes back to you tenfold. If the crisis is at 10 p.m., we’re going to get out there and fix it.”

“Knowing that we can trust Bresco’s team with making things right if challenges occur helps me concentrate on training my team,” says Keith Richards, Founder and Chief Development Officer at Taziki’s Mediterranean Café. “I’ve been a customer with Bresco for over 30 years and their customer service keeps me coming back. They make you feel like you’re a rock star.”

Another recent client David W. Porter, CCM, G.M./COO of Greystone Golf and Country Club, agrees: “Bresco’s follow-through during and after installation is amazing. We’ve been open for close to a year and they still stop by to check on the equipment.”

Beyond outstanding customer service, Tobia believes that his team really shines in working with the customers on the initial conceptual design, in the high-quality engineering drawings and specified products, and lastly, in their ability to complete a turn-key, clearly-defined project on time.

“Our word is everything,” says Tobia, recalling a recent challenge when four orders came in in the same spot out of state and Bresco had six weeks for the build-out. “Because this was a very good customer of ours, we had our entire purchasing staff drop what they were doing and immediately dive into these four jobs,” says Tobia. “We were able to get them all ordered, delivered and installed not only on time, but early.”

“When I signed a contract with Bresco, George committed to me that they would provide expert attention to our project and they have exceeded our expectations,” agrees Shannon Howell, President at Devcon Services Group, who worked with Bresco on the Henderson Resort Hotel in Destin, Fla. “At every turn, whenever we needed a change or a quick answer on anything, Bresco delivered. Any company can provide equipment; great service is what counts.”

Tobia also attributes Bresco’s success to their in-house installation crews. “The general contractors and end-users we work with like seeing the same person project to project,” he says. “There’s also not a long chain of command. If installers need something right then on the site, they are going to get it.”

According to Tobia, having one central, large location is a big plus as well. “We can stage multiple projects in this facility and we have control. We can check for freight damage; we can ship complete. This enables a lot of hands-on quality assurance along each step of the process.”

That hands-on knowledge of inventory mirrors the face-time Bresco employees enjoy as a team. “We’re a tight-knit, well-connected group and it’s working very well,” says Tobia of the office culture, which includes flexible hours for parents, lunch-and-learn events, charity social events, and a monthly catered lunch. “But you’re only as good as the new people you bring in.”

In addition to finding and training new talent, Tobia is excited about a new test kitchen in the works in his facility that will be completed by the end of 2017. “Right now, we have to drive 45 minutes to a demonstration kitchen,” says Tobia. “With this in-house set-up, we can stage regular demos with restaurateurs, child nutrition directors, potential chain operators and chefs.” “What a rewarding industry,” concludes Tobia. “It’s been a joyful experience. Heck, you have to work every day with all the competition. But we have a nice, loyal following that believes in us and comes back to us again and again.”