

# Guaranteed to Succeed

by Mary James



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Ricardo Cabrera of Applied Home Performance is up to his neck in flex duct.

**W**hat are the ingredients needed for success as a home performance contractor? A flair for entrepreneurship and a thirst for knowledge certainly help. Robert Mitchell, owner of Applied Home Performance in San Anselmo, California, has both in spades. What were you doing when you were 11? Riding bikes around the neighborhood? Lobbing water balloons at unsuspecting siblings and friends? Mitchell was the one offering to fix your bike for a fee.

Seventeen years ago, Mitchell opened a restaurant featuring fine breakfast fare. He then expanded his restaurant empire with a couple of neighborhood cafes and several estab-

lishments serving up tasty Mexican menus. In a county better known for trendiness than for steadiness, all of his restaurants are still going strong, but Mitchell has moved on. Seven years of kitchen service left him yearning for a little more variety in his professional life. He decided that if he could design and construct restaurant kitchens, he could also remodel homes. For ten years he did just that, working on restorations of older homes in high-end areas of San Francisco, finding and installing refurbished knob sets from the early 1900s, restoring doors and windows on vintage Victorians, and tracking down elusive electrical troubles. Then Tim Locke, executive direc-

tor of the California Building Performance Contractors Association (CBPCA), walked into his life.

“It was pretty random,” says Mitchell, referring to how he first got hooked on home performance. He was taking a seminar on estimating job costs in order to improve his business operations, during which Locke gave a ten-minute presentation on the CBPCA. The introduction may have been random, but Mitchell’s response was typical of his eagerness to learn. “It intrigued me, even though I wasn’t sure what it was about,” he says. Wanting to find out more about this organization that purported to teach how houses really work, he signed up and took his first class



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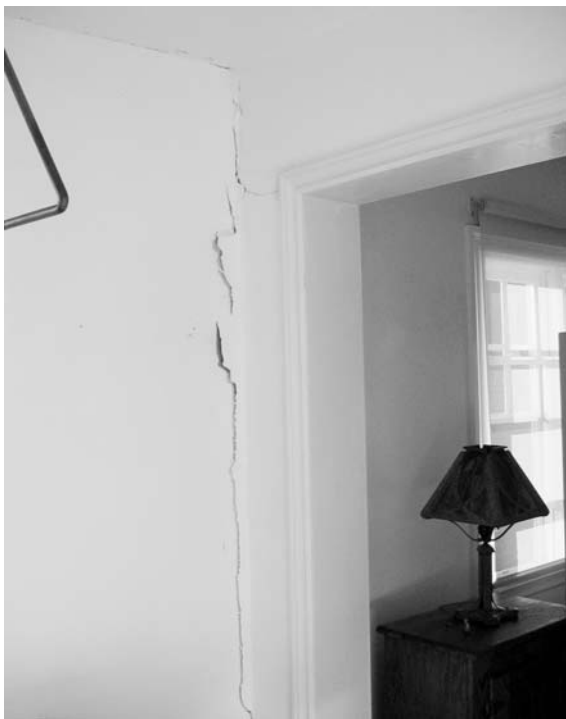
Robert Mitchell and his wife, Aurora Mitchell, take a break from their home performance business.

safety.” All that testing makes it easy to show the customer that by the end of the job, the performance targets were hit.

But how do you sell home performance in mostly sunny Marin County, where a 40°F day is a rarity and a 90°F day means that the fog is sure to be blanketing nearby San Francisco soon, bringing local temperatures down? “I don’t think money is the biggest concern,” says Mitchell. “People are more concerned about their health and safety, and the health and longevity of their largest asset, their home.”

The blower door and Duct Blaster testing that Mitchell has performed since he took that CBPCA class have revealed plenty of problems in the local housing stock. He’s found return air ducts that are littered with rat feces and, in one house, rat poison. In another house, the homeowner had stuffed a pillow into a register because he didn’t like the breeze. In other homes, simple visual inspections have let Mitchell pinpoint “the little stupid things that cost so much later”—now that he knows what to look for. For example, a new client called Mitchell because he noticed that a crack was opening in his drywall. Mitchell’s initial inspection of the home revealed that—thanks to a fairly recent remodel—the stucco had been installed with no weep screed, and its bottom edge was buried under about six inches of soil. Mitchell found extensive termite and moisture damage. “Basically, the lower two feet of the walls were gone,” he says.

His new understanding didn’t come from just the one class. That was just the beginning. He has since retaken the class twice, bringing employees each time. He has taken advantage of free classes offered through the local utility, Pacific Gas and Electric Company. He also attended the national Affordable Comfort conference last year, where he was very impressed both with the presenters’ skills and with their willingness to share their knowledge. “I’m used to the restaurant business, which is very cutthroat,” says Mitchell. “We steal from each other’s menus.” At Affordable Comfort, he talked with one presenter who was even



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A lengthy crack in the drywall was the homeowner’s first evidence of extensive moisture and termite damage.

bers having more than once during that first class. He had always loved the problem-solving aspects of his general contracting work; with this class, he was being given the tools to solve the larger problems in home remodeling: why a house wasn’t working and how to fix it. “When most people remodel a kitchen, they put in a giant hood over a giant range and never consider what happens to the rest of the house and the potential for CO hazards,” says Mitchell. Those days are gone for him. The big advantage of his building science education is that now he has the ability to do things right. “We can test a house before we begin a job, looking at the complete home and all the systems involved and how

they interact, says Mitchell. “We also test as we go to make sure our work is progressing toward the desired goals. And we always test out, including combustion

about a month later. He took three of his employees with him.

“Oops, we shouldn’t have done it that way,” was the reaction Mitchell remem-

willing to tell him what his profit margin was on the services he provided.

In addition to these classes, Mitchell has enjoyed the mentoring help provided by Tim Locke and Rick Chitwood, diagnosis and remediation trainer for the CBPCA. “I’m a hands-on learner,” says Mitchell, so testing homes with Locke and Chitwood has been particularly helpful. “The learning curve has been huge,” he says, but he’s loving it. What he seems most excited about is that now he can remodel a house correctly and leave the occupants with a truly better home. “The cool thing is, you can give a house a thorough checkup,” he says. And after the work is done, there are ways to check the results. “We can guarantee our work, because when we test out, we’ll show you,” says Mitchell excitedly, practically bouncing in place.

His enthusiasm almost overflows when he speaks of the new testing equipment he’s gotten: a CO tester and data loggers for measuring current, relative humidity (RH), and temperature. The data loggers aren’t absolutely necessary, he concedes, but they give him additional information about a house. He is working on leases for a blower door and a Duct Blaster, and using loaner equipment from the CBPCA in the meantime. He recently purchased the Right-Suite software for duct sizing and load calculations. He would also dearly love to have an infrared camera for tracing air leaks. “I like toys,” he admits, grinning.

His transition to a home performance contractor has not been all fun and games, however. Getting a home performance business organized is a challenge. Mitchell wants to be able to offer comprehensive services to his clients, because he understands the time pressures of families with two working parents. “Trying to find all the trades you need to get your house fixed is really time consuming,” says Mitchell. “I want to be able to handle the whole package.” He would like to get his own HVAC license, but he hasn’t yet. He has mastered *Manual J* and *Manual D*, as well as the need to properly seal ducts. Until he gets his license, he hauls the HVAC equipment into place, redoes or



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Mitchell was called in recently to repair the mistakes of a remodeling contractor. The bottom 6 inches of stucco were left buried under the soil, leading to moisture and termite problems.

seals the duct system as needed, and then calls in a refrigeration technician whom he has worked with for years to get the system hooked up and the air flows balanced.

His years as a remodeler mean that he already has some of the other employees that he needs in place—his wife, Aurora Mitchell, handles payroll and much more, for example—but not all. He has taken four employees to the various CBPCA classes; only two of those four are still with the company. “It’s hard to find people who think beyond a nine-to-five mentality,” says Mitchell. He is willing to educate his employees to help them better understand how homes work, because he thinks home performance offers a huge opportunity for all of them. “I try to tell them that if we do it right, we can all do well,” says Mitchell. “Every house has problems.”

And therein lies Mitchell’s biggest problem for now—but he’s not really complaining. “My biggest challenge is that I can’t keep up,” he says. Seemingly, everywhere he turns he runs into another potential job. He spent four hours testing the house of his daughter’s teacher, who has been having respiratory problems. “The return air is using

joist space that runs through the garage, and you can see the lights in the garage through the filter grill,” says Mitchell, clearly horrified. There is rat urine throughout the duct system. She can’t wait to get him in to fix her problems, but he’s having trouble finding the time even to write up an estimate.

It’s not surprising that he has no trouble finding houses that need fixing. He clearly enjoys helping people, and now that he has the skills—and yes, the toys—he needs to truly understand what repairs are necessary, his enthusiasm for his profession is practically contagious. What potential client could resist this winning combination? His business philosophy hasn’t changed much since he ran his bike shop as a child. “I like to take care of people’s needs and make them happy,” Mitchell says. His introduction to building science is giving him a better way to do just that. “There is so much exciting knowledge out there,” says Mitchell. And so many houses in desperate need of the application of that knowledge. Mixing that knowledge with the need seems like a recipe that’s guaranteed to succeed.



Mary James is the publisher of *Home Energy*.