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Program lets homeowners monitor construction sites Builders' clients stay connected to work progress around the clock

By Frank Nelson, Special to The Times
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WHEN Tooey Courtemanche, then running an Internet business in the Silicon Valley, began building himself a house just outside Santa Barbara, he soon became frustrated trying to keep tabs on a project 300 miles away.

His solution, with the help of his tech-savvy staff, was to create an online program that put him right alongside the contractor, architect, engineer and other key players with access to progress reports, budgets, schedule changes and other project information. It worked so well that in late 2001, he launched Procore Technologies, a company offering these same communication and collaboration tools to homeowners, their contractors and other building industry professionals.

At a time when people are increasingly using multifunctional cellphones, laptops, BlackBerrys and other mobile devices to stay in touch -- at home, in the office or in the car -- Courtemanche thought it made sense to extend this connectivity to home-building projects, where poor communication can waste time and money.

"Most people are never going to spend more than they do when buying or remodeling a house," he said. "Now they have the tools to remain closely involved in the progress of their job."

TV producers and business partners Susan Baerwald and Marcy Carsey ("The Cosby Show," "Roseanne," "Grace Under Fire") were handed those tools by their contractor, Bill Parris, president of Cunningham Parris Construction, when they began building in Summerland, Calif.

Five years ago, they paid slightly more than \$1 million for a property in this beach community 10 miles south of Santa Barbara. Three years later, they scraped the site clean -- except for trees -- and began building a small cottage connected by a walkway to Just Folk, their shop selling antique and contemporary American folk art.

During construction, the program provided a "wonderful way for me to be more than an observer," said Baerwald, who is enthusiastic about using online communications to keep everyone connected. "It gets a lot of information to a lot of people."

Though she traveled to Summerland from her Los Angeles home most weekends, Baerwald used the program to view photos, designs, drawings, plans and invoices online. She and Carsey also had meeting agendas posted and could add items for discussion.

Baerwald, who is comfortable with computers, found the online experience very user-friendly. "It seemed to have all the bells and whistles I needed," she said, suggesting the only drawback might be if a project member were not a computer person.

Although a number of seemingly similar products are on the market, they tend to be aimed at major contractors and large-scale developers. Leading names in the field of project management software include Primavera Systems, Meridian Systems, Sage Software and Autodesk. However, their products are generally not designed for individual homeowners.

Procore lets residential owners monitor progress on their building projects as closely as they wish, whether they are three doors down the street or on the other side of the country.

The long-distance connection appealed to L.A. resident Amy Lippman, who has been using Procore during the major remodel of a second home she and her husband, Rodman Flender, bought about four years ago in Santa Barbara.

Lippman, a screenwriter and producer, and Flender, a film and television director, live with their 10-year-old son in Bel-Air. She said she's been through "multiple remodels" in Los Angeles but only while living in the homes.

'I'm not there'

"One of the scary things about this remote remodel is that I'm not there to see what's happening and how everything's going," said Lippman, whose project started in February. She hopes it will be finished around the end of November.

She found out about Procore through her contractor, Signal Construction Co., based in Santa Barbara, and felt it was important to stay in touch with what was happening at the site every day.

Whenever she logs on to the program, Lippman has access to a wealth of fresh information – the daily schedule, weather forecasts, graphs charting the progress of the job. "I want every day to be involved and know what's going on."

Lippman said she was so enthused in the early weeks that she went a little overboard, sometimes firing off five or six e-mails a day to key figures running her project. Monitoring her work from afar, she must rely heavily on photos, but other users also check on quality periodically with personal visits.

Dave Gross, his wife, Dawn, and their three children live in Ventura and are building a 9,000-square-foot, five-bedroom, seven-bathroom house, with home theater, office and workshop, in Camarillo. The founder and managing partner of Santa Barbara-based Great Pacific Capital, Gross liked the look of Procore when he came across the company at a venture capital forum in June 2006.

Work started on his home in January, his contractor began using Procore in July at Gross' suggestion, and by August, Gross had invested \$1.5 million in the fledgling company.

A mechanical engineer by trade, Gross said he appreciates Procore's attention to detail and its efficient use of communications, aspects that he thinks help avoid or minimize delays. "Trying to get things right the first time around can save a lot of time and money."

Gross also likes the special features. Those include automatic reminders that gently nudge architects, designers, contractors or others in the network until they reply to requests and a "warranty period" that allows homeowners to continue using Procore past the project completion to wrap up any loose ends.

At the end of each project, homeowners are given a CD-ROM containing all the photos, reports, permits and other records from the job, including user manuals for the home's appliances. Procore also stores the information in the archival safety of cyberspace for a small fee. Other features include a log of online digital photos, although some clients opt for 24-hour live webcam coverage of the construction site; with equipment and setup costs, this option can cost an additional \$4,000.

Reaching out to consumers

To date, Procore has mainly been pitched at contractors who pay \$95 monthly for projects costing less than \$200,000 or \$195 per month for larger ones and who in turn pass the cost on to homeowners. But the company is working to extend its reach directly to consumers. Courtemanche said homeowners across the U.S., plus Canada and Mexico, are using the program on projects ranging from bathroom remodels to new \$30-million homes. Roughly two-thirds of all projects are residential, the rest commercial.

Those using the service are able to sign up online without the need for special software or training. Through e-mail, faxes and phone calls, all parties can access daily logs from the contractor, schedules and reports from subcontractors, input from engineers, architects and designers, and what Courtemanche calls "all the nitty-gritty at the job site."

Lippman has appreciated being able to stay on top of the details for her second-home project in Santa Barbara. "One thing that's really good is the impeccable record-keeping. Everything's documented in a single communications file that's available to everyone."