

Homeowner Guide:

How Do You Get Customers to Read It?

They won't read it, any more than any of us read a dictionary. Think of the homeowner guide as a reference, like the dictionary: a place to find answers. The secret to success with a homeowner guide is to **establish its authority** just as society established the authority of the dictionary in all of our minds—we all saw many other people, over time, use the dictionary and follow what it says. Integrate your guide throughout the process in the same way, let customers see frontline personnel use it and follow it. Suggestions on how to accomplish this acceptance are listed below.

Read

Ask all staff to read it—even the receptionist, accounts payable staff, and the payroll administrator. Everyone. Let them know this living document is subject to revision and updating. Therefore, each staff member should create a "Homeowner Guide Revisions" file and make note of their ideas for future updates.

Mark

As they read or work with the guide, front line personnel in particular will benefit greatly from marking their copies. Highlight key points to show buyers, add paper clips or sticky notes to pages so they can quickly and easily locate what they need to share with customers. Staff copies should look used.

Display

Once company personnel are familiar with the guide, the next step is to help buyers become familiar with it. Begin by displaying your guide at your sales and selection centers; place a copy on the kitchen counter in inventory homes.

Mention

Talk about the guide routinely in the sales presentation. This first mention should be casual and brief. "When you buy one of our homes, you'll receive a copy of our homeowner guide. You're welcome to look through the display copy if you like." (Have loaner copies on hand for serious prospects who ask to take one home.)

Deliver

At the contract signing, deliver the buyers' copy. The most effective guides help buyers throughout the process by presenting routine information in a concise and well-organized format. Buyers derive a sense of the home buying process being under control when they can see what's coming up next. They are also impressed with the professionalism of the builder.

Review

Go over the guide briefly at delivery and point out the overall organization and topics covered. Bulleted summaries at the start of each section make this easy. The preview should take 3 to 5 minutes. This is also the time to recommend the following points to buyers:

- Read through maintenance information prior to making selections. Understanding maintenance tasks involved with various features and finish materials may influence their choices.
- Bring the guide to all scheduled meetings—we'll be referring to it and adding paperwork.
- Store documents and even color samples in it for convenient reference.

Acknowledge

As part of this delivery, ask that buyers acknowledge receipt of the guide. It can be mentioned in the contract and listed on the buyers' contract agenda. Some builders include a clause that allows the buyers to cancel the contract within 72 hours if they object to anything in the documents. Such a clause makes people realize the importance of this material. You will rarely lose a buyer, and if you do, that loss is probably for the best.

Assign

The salesperson should suggest to buyers that reading the first few sections (finance and selections) will help them navigate the initial steps in the process.

Remind

Ask buyers whether they have had a chance to read their guide and whether they have any questions about it. Let them know prior to each meeting (when setting the appointment) that “details about this meeting and a copy of the agenda we will cover can be found on pages <x> in your homeowner guide.”

Refer

When questions do come up, refer to the guide for an answer. "I believe that's covered in our guide. Let me look it up for you. Well, here on page 18 it says . . . so that would mean we will . . ." You are showing buyers by your example that the answers they need are in the guide.

Discuss

Include one or more references to the guide in every routine meeting. At the frame tour, open it to the page describing that meeting and say, “We’ve come about half way through this process; here’s where we are today, doing your frame tour.” At the end of each meeting, open the guide and show buyers where they can find information about the next meeting. At the orientation, demonstrate how easily they can locate maintenance and warranty information. As the tour of the home progresses, mention several times that information presented is covered in writing in the guide for later reference—showing them the page.

Carry

When buyers see the builder’s staff with their homeowner guides on their desks, in their vehicles, and under their arms, the buyers realize this information gets used. Warranty reps can carry a copy to warranty inspections as a reference (tempered by common sense, of course).

"I believe this item is discussed in our homeowner guide. Let's look it up . . . Yes, right here the book says we will . . . and as a homeowner your maintenance on this item includes . . ."

Because the book is doing the talking, the warranty rep does not appear to be making a personal choice.

Quote

In extreme cases, quote the guide in follow up letters to homeowners and include a copy of the page to which you are referring with your letter.

Feedback

Customer feedback can be an excellent source of ideas for future revisions. Asking customers to evaluate the book is another way to stimulate their interest in it, and such reviews often generate some great ideas.

Revise

Annually, collect the notes from staff, comments from homeowners, and the trades. Update the contents to keep information current and accurate. Generally warranty leads this effort because it has the largest section of the book. However, all departments should update their own sections, and one person should edit the new material for consistency of style and friendly tone.

File

Label each edition with the date you begin using it. Then file a master for future reference. As revised editions are completed in the future, repeat this step.

When companies complain that their customers pay no attention to the homeowner guide that is often a sign that the company is not using it effectively. When sales people hand the buyer the guide and say “This is important, you should read it” and nothing more happens, customer will follow the company’s example and pay no attention. When company personnel are seen using the guide, it becomes significant to buyers, too; they develop an interest in using it and even more important, a respect for what it says.