

# Too Much of a Good Thing

From homeowner guides to door hangers, great ideas for customer materials travel from company to company. This cross pollination has helped many companies improve buyer communication. However, at the same time it does increase the volume of information builders provide to home buyers.

Customer conflict also stimulates the expanding mountain of information. For instance, after a confrontation with a homeowner about landscaping, a builder is likely to develop several pages of landscaping explanations and limitations. Finding such material is easy; a rich supply of information and formats are readily available.

This build-up continues, sometimes spawned by the daily frustrations of company personnel. An orientation rep might create a several page handout regarding orientation policies. Although these policies are covered in existing documents, seldom does anyone ask why what's already written down fails to produce the intended result. Since the buyers show no sign of being aware of the policies and even less inclination to follow them—the orientation rep reasons—we need to tell them again.

The new versions overlap the originals—as if twice of much of what did not work the first time will solve the problem. These fragments ramble, repeat, and contradict themselves; the informational clutter overwhelms buyers. Each version often delivers a slightly different message, opening the door to multiple interpretations.

Staff consistency suffers, also. One employee knows what one version says, another staff member goes by a different version. Expecting company personnel to speak with one voice is unrealistic with so many scripts in circulation.

Recognizing the massive nature of their materials, some builders decide to withhold information, dribbling it out throughout the process. The dribbling approach (for instance, delivering warranty guidelines and maintenance tips at the orientation), recognizes the symptom, but ignores the cause. This method wastes the best opportunity to align expectations. During the early stages of the buying process, customers are in an *informational gathering mode* and are most open to accepting a builder's information.

Correct, complete, well-organized information does not overwhelm buyers. In fact, most of them welcome it as a sign that their builder understands the magnitude of the task *and* can successfully manage a myriad of detail.

## Take Control

Builders have the ability and an obligation to organize the tangled mass of details so that buyers can make sense of all of it. A productive response includes taking charge of the disjointed mass of information:

- Collect one copy of each document, form, brochure, or handout buyers receive.
- Assemble them in the order your customers encounter them.
- Read all of them, watching for contradictions, repetition, and omissions.
- Keep the end users in mind. How many places do homeowners need to look to find all of your policies on any one subject? When information is organized, staff members can make more effective use of it as well.

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- Where appropriate, reorganize. Keep like things together and unlike things apart. Say what you have to say clearly, one time—then know where to find it.
- The end result should be one comprehensive homeowner guide and a vastly reduced number of miscellaneous, loose papers.

## Educate Personnel

Once the content says all that you need it to, check on how effectively you are using the information. Ensure that personnel who have contact with customer have read and understand all of your customer literature. Make reviewing one portion of it a routine staff meeting topic.

Add controversial topics to the agenda for one or more of your planned customer meetings. In extreme cases, consider *highlighting* it by re-printing the exact information on an NCR form for the buyer to read and sign. Include a reference to the page of the homeowner guide where the information appears. For instance, to highlight landscaping issues:

*We wish to particularly draw your attention to our warranty guidelines and policies for landscaping. The information below appears on pages <x> through <y> of your Homeowner Guide. Please read them carefully—your signature below acknowledges your understanding of this information.*

## Update

Policies, procedures, and buyer materials need regular updating. If you identify an area of recurring confusion or conflict, rather than adding more material, review your existing literature:

- Is the content adequate?
- Does it cover the main points in a clear and logical order?
- If key points have been omitted, add them to the existing information rather than creating a new and separate document.

In the ongoing circulation and exchange of items among builders, you will inevitably encounter new materials. Before adding any new information or forms to your processes, compare it to existing materials. There are a lot of things you *can do*. The challenge is to identify what you *should do*—and then do that well.

- Does the new information or format fit your company culture?
- Does this new presentation serve a need not addressed with current materials?
- Would it be better to fine tune the existing information or should you revamp completely?

For years builders gave too little information to their buyers. Now many are giving too much: everything they created and anything else they find as well. Well-organized and effectively used materials create the realistic expectations that lead to customer satisfaction and profitability.