

Multiple Contacts Syndrome

The *Home Address* office has recently received half a dozen calls from builders seeking ideas for what we now call Multiple Contacts Syndrome (MCS). This latest home buyer behavior consists of some version of the following:

A home buyer calls her sales person (loan officer, design consultant, superintendent, closing agent, warranty rep—just fill in your job title) then almost immediately emails the same individual regarding the same question.

Fifteen to thirty minutes later (sometimes less), the same buyer repeats the contact, asking whether the first message was received. After another ten to twenty minutes (again, sometime less), the process is repeated but this time the target is another staff person (supervisor, department head, or company owner)—or perhaps even two.

If you are keeping score this now makes three or more phone calls and three or more emails in just under an hour. This is a mild example. In extreme cases of MCS, the home buyer may actually show up in person, unannounced, asking to talk to someone (anyone) in person about what the buyer perceives as a major issue.

As entertaining as this scenario is so far, here's where it really gets interesting: Often some of the second (or even third) parties contacted by the customer do not know about the first calls and emails. They may begin researching the customer's issue while across the hall or across town, the original person is already working on it.

This chaos reaches its pinnacle when all of the people contacted by the home buyer get back to her—each with a different answer. This happens because it is unlikely that all of them know the historical details or thoroughly understand the procedures of other departments.

Not only is this chain of events a serious drain on company resources (better invested in being productive for these same callers) but the variety of responses delivered to the customer creates even more chaos. No wonder those who experience this are asking *What's going on? How should I respond to this trend?*

What's Going On?

This behavior developed after the housing bubble burst and our economy (along with life as most of us knew it) collapsed around us—traumatizing many consumers. Today's home buyer brings a dramatically different set of attitudes to the new home process. One major trait of the recovery (?) consumer is understandable hand-wringing combined with extreme distrust and a touch of arrogance: *I'm positioned to buy a house when you aren't selling many, so show I should have every detail exactly how I want it.*

Builders end up with customers who verge on obsessive compulsive. In short, they want their hands held. If that doesn't happen, things spin out of control and you get MCS.

Objectivity

Start by gathering statistical data. If you hear yourself using “always” or “never” to describe your situation, take a step back and let go of some of your emotional response to this issue. You are likely to discover that about 15-20 percent of home buyers exhibit this syndrome. Buyers do not “always” do this, nor is it true that buyers “never” wait one day for an answer. Even so, 15 to 20 percent is enough to turn what was once a reasonably smooth running organization into a bumper car ride so this in no way means you can ignore the behavior.

Analyze the Data

Which staff person or phase of the new home process stimulates the most contacts? Is there a particular community, project manager, sales person, or other individual involved? Look for patterns. If over half of the challenges develop soon after selections are complete, that tells you that the buyer was getting sufficient attention up to that point but then the attention slacked off. That suggests a procedural issue needs to be examined.

On the other hand, if 82 percent of these incidents occur with customers of the same sales person, design consultant, superintendent, or warranty rep, start with that individual and strengthen communication practices. Suggestions follow below to get you started. If the pattern is generalized, plan some workshops with each team.

How Can You Respond?

In response to this trend, consider the suggestions that follow. You may want to use a combination. ***Your goal is to maintain customer loyalty at the same time you preserve company efficiency and your personal sanity.***

Universal Service Guidelines (USG)

By establishing performance guidelines for all company personnel in the area of communication you create consistency, predictability, and a level of excellence that appeals to all types of customers: employees, associates, and home buyers.

If USG is a new concept for your firm, you may want to read [Universal Service Guidelines](#). Additionally you can download and customize a sample of these guidelines specifically aimed at [company communication practices](#).

Useful Contact Sheet

Most homeowner guides include a page titled “Who’s Who” or something similar. These typically list the names and contact details for the professionals a buyer will work with during the new home process: sales, mortgage, selections, construction, closing, and warranty at a minimum.

Take another look at that material and ask whether you can make it more helpful by adding office hours and other communication details. Download [our updated version of this page](#) and customize it for your homeowner guide. By including some key points about how your company communicates you help the customer become comfortable with your practices. Any time you haven’t explained what home buyers should expect, they will make up their own version.

Customized Customer Communication

Turnabout being fair play, ask customers how best to reach them including days and times they are most readily available. Do the buyers in front of you prefer to be contacted via email, cell phone, or their home phone? Which partner is your primary contact? Can you call them at work? Discussing these details offers yet another method to reinforce orderly and effective communication. Your meeting agendas can include this topic as a standard item to review (circumstances can change). Take notes about the customer’s preferences and follow them as much as possible.

Community Team Meetings

Use your community team meetings as a regular opportunity for the personnel who work together to get updated on current issues with each customer. Routine review keeps all staff on the same page and responses to buyers become more consistent. When you’ve identified a buyer with MCS, you can alert colleagues about the situation. Contacted by this buyer, colleagues will know better how to respond to calm the customer and at the same time avoid duplication of effort.

If community team meetings are a new process for your company, you will find detailed discussion in the [Community Team Meetings](#) article and a sample agenda on the last page of [Sample Meeting Agendas](#)

Schedule Follow-Up Communication

Make it a routine practice to wrap up each customer meeting by discussing the next regular meeting. Review who the buyer should contact with questions between now and that next meeting.

To take this approach to the next level, provide the buyers with an [Interim Questions](#) form on which they can note questions. Set an appointment with them to chat about items they think of. Adding this step between meetings may seem like more work—but it is less than having buyers call & email randomly as items come into their minds. Knowing they have a set time to talk with you will help the majority remain comfortable and multiple contacts will diminish.

Some professionals have discovered that most of these contacts can fit into a standard time slot on their calendar: Friday from 10:00 to 11:00. This practice is efficient for the staff person and reduces the possibility of overlooking a promised call. If a particular buyer needs a time outside of that schedule, set it as an appointment your calendar.

Review When Information Is Dispensed

Many companies miss the point that expectations need to be aligned and customers need process details *in advance of events rather than at the time of the event*. For instance, telling a buyer how the selection appointment works when they arrive for the selection appointments is too late. That buyer has been wondering (and perhaps worrying) about these details for days or weeks.

That wondering (or worrying) often translates to calls and emails. When buyers know what's coming next and how these steps occur, they will stay calmer. Using the selections appointment example, review the information in your homeowner guide. Is it complete, clear, and genuinely helpful? Consider whether a selection orientation or open house hours one or two days a week would be helpful as a way to introduce this process. Take a similar approach with all stages of the new home experience.

Company Intranet: Customer Journal

Provide colleagues with updates on each buyer and any current issues—whether routine or difficult—with brief notes in a company Intranet. Keeping in mind that a court can demand copies of this electronic journal; limit entries to facts—names, dates, events. Hold any “venting” for another time and place.

With facts available on the company's system, any staff person contacted by an anxious buyer can check in to see if someone else is already involved or at least who has been working with the buyers most recently. Before multiple employees start addressing an issue, they would have a chance to learn that a colleague is already dealing with it.

The home building industry has never experienced times like those we are going through right now—and for the foreseeable future. Traumatized buyers are volatile and often fragile; they are distrustful and some are in need of nearly constant reassurance. Turn this to an advantage by developing attitudes, systems, and paperwork to provide comfort. The contrast between your firm and pretty much every other organization the buyer encounters will be dramatic. You will stand out as an oasis of calm in a world gone mad.