



Home Address

Building Better Service

Seven Step Service Tune-Up

Searching for ways to attract willing home buyers can be an intimidating challenge in our current economic environment. Company personnel are stretched to the limit, budgets are tight, and the clock is ticking. How do you land the next sale?

A simple and inexpensive approach can be to conduct a brutally honest review of how home buyers are treated from their first visit to, well, long after move in. Consider these seven aspects of your service program and adjust where needed.

Think Holistically

Plan your services as one continuous process from sales through warranty. Internal communication including smooth hand-offs buyers creates a cohesive experience for the buyer. Each part of the new home experience should relate to and support all of the others.

Think in terms of a *service team* rather than separate departments. Search for and eliminate disconnects, inconsistencies, and glitches—they are usually easy to correct once you spot them. Regular meetings of the service team to share insights and discuss how to work successfully with each buyer keeps everyone on the same page and the buyers well-cared for.

Clarify Included and Selected Features

Discovering at delivery that the crown mold shown in the master bedroom of the model home is not included in their home makes buyers furious and destroys trust.

Many companies rely on memories—first the sales person's and then the customer's—to make these distinctions clear. In this antiquated approach the sales person walks through the model with the buyers to point out optional features. One or more items might be missed by the sales person or forgotten by the buyer.

Equally risky is providing buyers with detailed specifications and expecting them to sort out the differences between what's listed and what's shown in the model. These practices needlessly put reputations for honesty at risk—the absolute last thing a builder wants to do in today's scandal filled business environment.

Sales people *should* take buyers through the models and detailed written specifications are *appropriately* part of a purchase agreement. Yet neither of these ensures the clarity of included or selected features as effectively or easily as a model home information sheet—one for each model. Decide what is included in the base price of the home, what is displayed as a potential selection and put the information in writing, room by room.

Present Warranty Accurately and Positively

Sales professionals are happy to present solid information to buyers—when they have it. Management has a responsibility to ensure the sales team understands the limited warranty and can discuss it accurately with prospects and buyers.

Role play these conversations—they need take only a couple of minutes. Topics of importance include types of coverage, duration, warranty staff, and basic procedures. In particular, confirm that the distinction between “materials and workmanship” coverage and “structural” coverage is clear to sales people and that they describe them accurately to buyers. Keep the sales team informed about the work the warranty staff does so they can mention warranty to buyers with confidence.

Orchestrate Communication

Home buyers have always appreciated good communication—being kept in the loop—as their new homes are built. In today’s environment, where establishing and maintaining trust is more challenging and more important than ever, this communication has jumped from nice to essential.

Ideally, customize this part of the process to suit your buyers. Ask if one partner is the preferred contact and what is the best mode: phone (home, work cell?), email, fax? Provide them with appropriate contact details: main office, sales, selection, construction, closing, and warranty at a minimum. Include details about normal hours of operation for each.

Agree internally to parameters for managing customer contacts to create consistency. Variations in responsiveness are interpreted by customers as poor service. Imagine that their sales person always returns calls within hours but after move in warranty takes several days. Having become accustomed to sales quick response, the shift is viewed as a service deterioration: They were attentive until they got our money, now they don’t care.

Replace this unintentional offense with a plan that applies to all departments. For example, phone calls and emails should be acknowledged within four hours. Then set an expectation with the buyers of *one business day* and beat the expectation ninety-five percent of the time.

Deliver Complete and Clean

After managing thousands of details over half a dozen months to get a home built, the superintendent may not give the last screen or paint touch up priority attention. While this attitude may be understandable, allowing it to set the standard for delivery condition can cost future sales. Delivery condition is one of the acid tests of your reliability. All of the promises—expressed or implied—are fulfilled or proven false by delivery conditions.

At orientation the home should be ready for the buyers to move into. Regularly reviewing of honest orientation paperwork (no phantom lists, please!) allows you to identify trouble spots in delivery preparation. Again, once known, most can be eliminated.

Institute Proactive Warranty Visits

One of the least costly, quickest, and easiest ways to foster customer loyalty is to simply *invite* home buyers to set their first warranty appointment *before* they close. This is readily done at the orientation (or the confirmation tour if you conduct those). The simple adjustment to traditional procedures (“Send a list in at 60 days”) has been shown to (1) impress buyers, (2) reduce calls to the warranty office, and (3) generally result in shorter warranty lists for this first visit.

Take advantage of the long-standing image of builders turning their backs on new homeowners after move in. Within that context, you can differentiate your company and boost customer loyalty.

Think Long Term Relationship

Having gone to all the work of establishing healthy relationships, why let them languish? Keep homeowner actively engaged, your name in front of them in positive ways for *years* after closing. Statistics show most referrals occur after move in, why not continue to gather the rewards you worked so hard to earn? When existing homeowners are ready for their next home, ensure they purchase from you.

Email maintenance reminders and tips, social or educational events (always include “Bring a friend”), and updates about new product lines or locations can stimulate more sales. With marketing budgets tight and consumers depending more and more on word of mouth referrals, a long-term relationship with veteran customers may be your best link to new buyers. 🍷

The Book Shelf



Heads spinning from the last several years of struggle, uncertainty, downright disaster, and the overwhelming sense that we’ve all been sold a bill of goods about the value of hard work and the rewards it brings....many outstanding people in the home building industry find themselves in the unfamiliar (and uncomfortable) process of re-inventing themselves.

You may have ventured into light commercial or perhaps remodeling. You may have closed your home building company and returned to handling tools on a daily basis, working for other struggling companies. Perhaps you are a customer service manager or a quality control director—now assisting customers at a Home Depot.

We have to search a long time to find any individual in the home building industry who has not been affected by the housing recession. If despair, rage, fear, or frustration have taken up residence in your psyche at a time when what you need most is the energy and focus to re-invent yourself, begin to break free of these dreary companions with one or both these titles.

- **The Resiliency Advantage: *Manage Change, Thrive under Pressure and Bounce Back from Setbacks*** by Al Siebert (paperback, \$11.56; Kindle, \$9.99 Amazon). A favorite line about open-mindedness and creativity appears on page 65 when Siebert quotes Ken Keyes, Jr: *You can’t learn what you believe you already know.*
- **Resilience: *Discovering a New Strength at Times of Stress*** by Frederic Flach (paperback, \$12.50 Amazon). On page 120 Flach observes:

The key to the resilient personality is, above all, flexibility: to be able to call on those particular strengths that are needed to meet particular challenges, to be logical and highly organized when logic and organization are called for, and to be able to be wildly illogical and even let things pass by undone in the interests of discovering unpredictable possibilities.

In addition to the practical advice each of these authors offer, the most worthwhile aspect of both books is the way they label what many of us have been facing. That, in and of itself, provides a sense of control and a reassurance that solutions are available.