

Service Forum

Wind Driven Snow in Vents

From Wisconsin: With recent snowfalls, some of our homeowners have experienced condensation coming down through bathroom exhaust fans. We've also had some snow intrusion into soffit vents. Our position is that these vents are installed per code and we are unable to control the blizzard conditions. Have builders changed their stance on this? Also, any magic words to help our warranty department through the phone calls?

Most builders are still following exactly the policy you described. Fixing weather related damage is not a precedent I would recommend setting. Unless something was installed incorrectly or a material failed, builders have no responsibility for these issues. Limited warranty exclusion of weather damage is information homeowners have from the beginning but may need to be reminded of.

To accomplish this, consider an email to all homeowners alerting them to such events at the beginning of the winter season or when large storms are threatening. List tips about such things as pet safety, ice damming, attic vents, and fireplace/bath fan dripping. Suggest preventive steps homeowners can take.

For instance, mention that they can install plastic over their attic insulation below visible vents—snow collects on the plastic, melts, and evaporates without harming insulation or drywall. Include a reminder to step only on wood members of the attic to avoid injury or drywall damage. If fencing or trees are damaged, homeowner insurance might apply, and so on. A reminder *before* such things happen is better than a “no” after the event.

Warranty personnel should listen patiently and be empathetic. Some of them can probably relate their own experiences in coping with a storm's effects. In responding to complaining homeowners, begin with agreement: “Yes, that was a terrible storm; we've had a dozen or more calls. You did the right thing, we can provide some suggestions that may help.”

In some cases wisdom suggests investing time in a warranty inspection. A visit to the home by a knowledgeable technician can reassure a homeowner that this maintenance issue is truly a maintenance issue. Having a list of several potential drywall repair people and painters can be useful. Sometimes the homeowner just doesn't know where to start; if you can solve that they will follow through.

Hand-Offs

From Oregon: I do orientations and warranty inspections and I'm trying to come up with a workable way to get accurate details about the buyers I'll be working with. I tried stopping in at the sales office the day before the appointment but often the sales person I needed to speak to was off. I've used email and phone messages and a simple fact sheet. One sales person told me he didn't have time for any more paperwork. What are other companies doing to address this?

Sharing background information is referred to as a hand-off. The more smoothly company personnel manage this, the better; quire frankly, the home building industry has yet to master this. (Rest assured that front line professionals coast to coast are nodding their heads in recognition of your dilemma.)

At an orientation I observed I asked the builder's rep he knew about the home buyers. His response was "Well, they don't speak much English." That was all he knew.

Later that same day, at a closing office I asked the question again. "I guess he's from New York." The same closing agent complained that she has to fight to get accurate buyer phone numbers so she can reach them to set the closing appointment. And in a design studio—"I heard that they're mad about a tree—I'm supposed to give them something."

In each of these scenarios, more details were readily available; what was missing was an efficient system for capturing and distributing those details.

A smooth hand-off is a process by which one person or department conveys background information about the customer to the next person or department that will work with that customer.

The information might be demographic, financial, practical, or emotional. Background information increases understanding and improves preparation.

An effective hand-off procedure generates benefits for the company and for the home buyers. Sharing such information helps reduce customers' need to repeat their story. When company personnel have an opportunity to discuss a situation in an unpressured setting (translation, without having the buyer right in front of them), responses are better thought out and more diplomatically delivered.

Smooth hand-offs begin in the sales office. Buyers volunteer a good bit of information in their conversations with sales people. Details might be related to purchase decision, selections, or concerns the buyers have about the building process.

A thoughtful buyer profile can contribute a standardized set of details. The best means to manage this is on the computer. In any case, stick to the facts, no opinions or predictions. (Remember a judge can require that these details can be shared in a courtroom by way of "electronic discovery". If you think the customer would be less grouchy if he got more sleep, keep that opinion to yourself.)

Who are these buyers? Where are they from? Do they have children? Pets? Hobbies? An elderly parent living with them? Where do they work? Have they expressed any worries? What has their previous new home experience been? Are they moving up, down, or across? Include a spot for the sales person to note how to pronounce unusual names and make notes regarding language barriers as applicable.

As each staff member works with the customers, more information can be added. Questions or concerns noted, along with how each was resolved. As history accumulates, personnel who will

work with the buyers in the future have some insight into each customer's history, interests, and concerns.

Another opportunity to share insights and information would be the community team meeting if your company holds them. These are typically 30-45 minute meetings at the sales office once a week or perhaps every two weeks. The sales team, super, and as often as possible warranty sit down and review each customer's status as well as community items. Sometimes selections, mortgage, or closing staff are involved—even if only by phone.

One more point—the incentive to sales people to invest time in the hand-off process is that it enables all staff to care for customers more effectively. That leads to more referrals.

One-Visit Repairs

From Pennsylvania: We'd become pretty good at getting closure on our warranty work orders then the market shifted and our system seems to have fallen apart. Our best warranty rep retired and was not replaced. Now appointments get missed, homeowners wait at home all day and someone shows up at 4:45 but can't do the repair, or half of the work gets done but the promised return visit never materializes. I catch the results by phone and email.

Effective repair appointments begin with accurate diagnosis and sufficient details about the repair item. With your veteran expert gone, this may be one root cause of your frustration. The technical knowledge of warranty reps is critical to getting this part right. Training and experience are invaluable in this work. Who is doing inspections now? How can he/she learn more about diagnosing items accurately?

Conveying all details to the repair technician on the work order is next. Back up these efforts by being accessible if questions arise. With the right information the trade knows exactly what to do, what materials and tools to bring, and how much time to schedule in the home.

Emphasize the goal of "one visit repair" from the beginning with trade contractors; include this topic on your trade contractor orientation agenda. With veteran trades, a phone call may be in order. Ask how things are going and what you can do to help ensure warranty items are completed efficiently. Although sales are down, a builder's warranty obligations (and therefore the trades') to homeowners continues.

Some repairs legitimately involve several steps by one trade or require the efforts of several trades in sequence. Explain the steps to the homeowner and plan on the extra administrative attention needed to move trades through the home in rapid succession.

Keep in mind too that many trade contractors have let staff go due to the current market conditions. Work with them to create efficiencies. When possible organize appointments geographically to reduce road time. Apply the work date approach, where the homeowner arranges access to the home at least 10 business days out and all trades get this date on the work order.

Finally, invest some time analyzing each work order that causes this kind of problem. First the number may not be as large as it seems; because these situations carry some emotional baggage they can be magnified in your memory. Get an accurate count and then look for common causes. Is this just one or two trades? A particular product line? A few busy homeowners? As you identify root causes, look for those that can be eliminated and address them one by one.

Consider a technical solution. For instance, our Homsoft system opens each day with a list of follow up items. Reminders or confirmation calls take very little time when a concise list is readily available. For a demonstration of this system, call Tracey Gundersen in Minnesota at 952-201-5036.

Mr., Ms., Doctor, Colonel, Junior?

From Texas: We sold a home to a retired colonel. He and his wife have moved in and the question of how to address him has caused a debate in our office: Do we still use colonel or Mr. because he is retired?

This homeowner is still addressed as Colonel, regardless of the fact that he is retired. Address correspondence to Colonel and Mrs. John Smith (the salutation would read Dear Colonel and Mrs. Smith:). In conversation, address him as Colonel Smith until he says “just call me John”. His wife is Mrs. Smith until she says to use her first name.

This question sent us to our reference shelf where we found fascinating information in such abundance that space prohibits our doing justice to it. The question about the correct form of address for retired military personnel is just the tip of the honorable iceberg.

When do you use Miss, Mrs., Ms., and Madame? Is the homeowner a widow? A divorcee? How should you address doctors? Church dignitaries? Politicians? Judges? What if the homeowner you are writing to is “junior” or the 3rd? When do you use “esquire”?

The variations and circumstances are so numerous that our best suggestion is that you obtain one of the books mentioned, or another you find that covers the subject clearly. Of the ten titles we consulted, the best sources turned out to be books titled *Letitia Baldrige Complete Guide to Executive Manners* and *Emily Post’s Etiquette* (16th edition).

The time and effort you invest consulting a good source on this is worthwhile. As Baldrige says, “To address others properly is not only a questions of courtesy, but also of a well polished company image, continued good business relationships and profitability.”

In other words, the retired colonel and his wife may have friends in the market for a home. Show them your professional best.