

Too Much of a Good Thing

From homeowner guides to door hangers, from DVDs to emergency phone number stickers, great ideas travel from company to company. This cross pollination has helped many companies improve service. However, it also increases the volume of information builders provide to their 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, print them on NCR (no carbon required) paper and ask buyers to read and sign it. Finding the 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 the employee ask why what's already written down fails to produce the intended result. In fact, he or she may be as unaware of existing materials as the customers are!

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Trade contractors and suppliers may get into the act as well. Frustrated with warranty work orders about some aspect of their part of the home, they create a fact sheet—about brass fixtures, shrubs and sod, cabinets, and so on. Now another item is added to the stack of papers customers receive. Also another font, format, paper quality, and writing style.

The new versions overlap the originals—as if twice of much of what did not work the first time will solve the problem. Tacking new items onto already voluminous material without coordinating it with existing information occurs because builders are usually (1) busy and (2) frustrated with customer demands. This combination leads them to grab at any promising new tool in a desperate hope that it will be the key to customer satisfaction. This layering, proliferating, and inbreeding of materials results in a swirling patchwork quilt of information.

These fragments ramble, rove, repeat, and contradict themselves; the informational clutter overwhelms buyers. As the material increases, so does the home buyers' exasperation. As overlapping information accumulates, each new version often delivers a slightly different message. This meandering opens the door to multiple interpretations by customers.

Staff consistency suffers, also. One employee knows what one page says, another staff member goes by an older or newer 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, sharing bits at a time with buyers, just in time for the next event. This, they think, avoids overwhelming buyers with too much information at the time of contract. But buyers are put off by the clutter, not the amount of 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 myriad details.

The “just in time” approach (for instance, delivering warranty information at the orientation or closing), recognizes the symptom, but ignores the cause. This method wastes the best opportunity to align expectations: during the early stages of the home buying process customers are in *informational gathering mode*: they expect to learn new information, and they are most open to accepting a builder's procedures. Further, when information is provided weeks or months after the contract was signed, buyers have an opportunity to say "You didn't tell me this. I don't agree to it."

Builders can organize the tangled mass of details so that buyers can make sense of all of them. A productive method includes two efforts: 1) take charge of the disjointed mass of information and 2) educate company personnel regarding the content and effective use of their own tools.

Take Control

To begin streamlining buyer information, consider the following steps.

- 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 and repetition. For instance, warranty exclusions often appear in the contract, warranty, warranty guidelines, and maintenance hints—and are sometimes slightly different in each location.
- Keep the end users in mind. How many places do homeowners need to look to find all of your guidelines and policies on any one subject? When information is organized, staff members can make more effective use of it as well.
- 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 loose papers.

Highlighting

When you identify an area of recurring conflict, rather than starting over, first review your existing materials.

- Is the content adequate?
- Does it cover the main points in a clear and logical order?
- If key points have been omitted, can you add them to existing information instead of creating a new form?

*Keep like things together
and unlike things apart.*

Once the content says all that you need it to, check on how effectively you are using the information. You may decide you need to emphasize it more in casual conversations or add it to the agenda for one or more formal 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.

Updating

Policies, procedures, and buyer materials need regular updating. Better approaches are being developed all the time and good service programs improve continuously. However, before any new idea can be of benefit, the new material, form, or format must be compared to existing materials and information.

Evaluate new materials or ideas systematically. A review of the item might simply yield some good points to incorporate into existing information. You might decide that the new presentation is so terrific that you eliminate your original and replace it with the new version. Perhaps you decide the idea is wonderful for other companies, but not suitable for yours. 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?
- Do you have and are you willing to commit the resources (think “service capacity”) for a new procedure? For example, sending the painter back two weeks after move in for an hour of owner-directed touch up.

Reader's Digest Version

Several reasons exist for developing a short overview of your information—

- ▶ A concise overview impresses prospects—in person or by mail.
- ▶ An overview offers sales staff a way to provide the buyers with the big picture and get them started understanding the details.
- ▶ Most people learn best by getting the big picture in mind first, then filling in the details.

If you want a Reader's Digest version, work from existing materials. Just as most builders prefer to be the home buyers single source for labor and materials, the information builders provide to customers works best when it comes from a single source. For most companies this is their homeowner guide.

Informational clutter overwhelms buyers.

All information you want to give to your buyers should be channeled through the guide. All versions of that information should derive from it. Select the points to include and mention that the “complete details which can be found on page <x>.”

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. Appropriate content and effective use, not volume, will do the job. Well-organized, consistent materials create the realistic expectations that lead to profitability and customer satisfaction.