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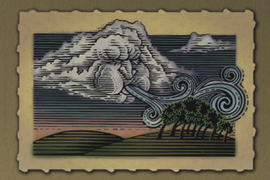

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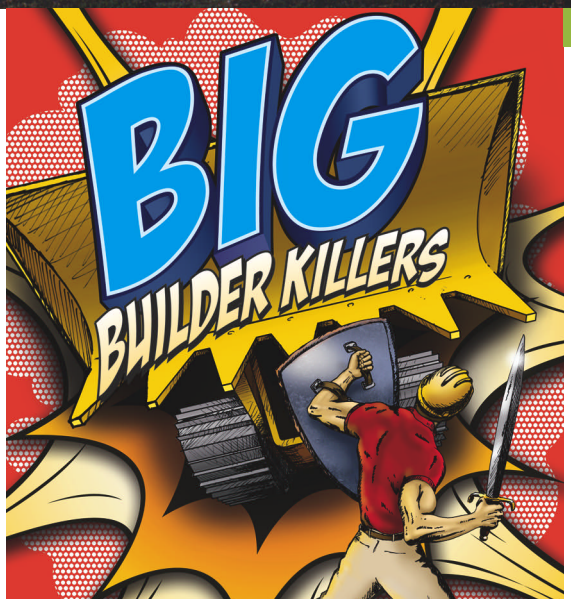

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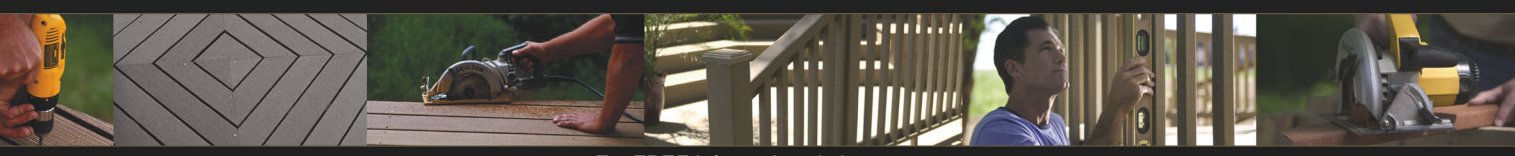

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In the March 2006 issue of Professional Builder, *reader Mark Turner of Abdo Development wrote a letter to the editor regarding a November 2005 column by Contributing Editor Scott Sedam. The following is a reader's response.*

LETTERS

Development and Discounts

Good Development?

I just opened up your November issue of *Professional Builder* and read the article "Its Sprawl or Nothing" by Scott Sedam with much disappointment about the thoughtfulness or real evidence provided in the article. Scott brags that he flies all around the coun-try and sees plenty of open space out-side of cities — conclusion there is no real problem concerning urban sprawl because there is plenty of farm land available. Well Scott, if I got on a space ship and went to outer space the earth would like very blue and pristine — should I also conclude that this planet has no real environmental problems. To provide anecdotal evidence from 2000 ft Scott insults not only the intelligence of the reader, but seriously misrepresents the issue at hand.

The only thoughtful thing Scott has to say in the article is that the real issue is "good development vs. bad develop-ment." This I agree with, however, what Scott fails to mention which is the real key to the problem and that is what constitutes good development. Scott seems to suggest sprawl is ok as long as it is award winning sprawl. I can drive (not fly) around the country and drive an hour out of the city and find many projects that look great — nice mix of retail and open space throw in some Starbucks Coffees Shops a couple of Barnes and Nobles booksto-res — hell even give the homeowners 32 different colors of vinyl siding and EIFS colors to choose from — custom and award win-ning neighborhood — you betcha!

Well this is what middle America has come to look like and I think it sucks. Good development is not buying farm-land creating new McTowns far away from the urban core of cities. Good development is redeveloping inner city cores and neighborhoods that have been neglected and abandoned by the sprawl movement. Good development reconnects to the historical and archi-tectural past of a city. It has people liv-ing and working in the same urban core which much less dependence on commuting, energy, and public high-

ways. Good development has a soul which is conscious of a city's arts, enter-tainment, and nostalgic past. Good development awakens a sleeping city, rather than abandoning it. This kind of "good development" done right is logis-tically hard and expensive to do — trust me our company has been doing it for over ten years in Washington D.C.

Scott suggests that the public is too ignorant to understand "the relationship between density and house pricing."

Well Scott, a funny thing happened on the way to downtown. The public did understand this relationship and have economically awarded the develop-ers for the thoughtfulness of such urban redevelopments.

No farmlands had to be sacrificed for the real renaissance of Washington D.C. over the past 10 years. You don't give the public enough credit Scott.

My advice to you is to get your head out of the clouds on this one.

Mark Turner
Abdo Development
www.abdo.com

Discount Housing

As a builder, I was happy to read your "Perspective" column in the January 2006 edition of *Professional Builder*.

Certainly, I would like every builder and especially the ones in our market to buy into what you said. However, as a businessman and a life-long member of a free market economy, I must disagree with you.

Your perspective ignores the simple economics builders face today: housing supply is increasing. More homes are listed/built each week than are sold in our market.

Demand for housing is down in our market due to increased interest rates, increased levels of unemployment, etc.

Basic economics tells us that the price of housing will fall. The same house that was worth X dollars yesterday is now only worth X minus Y dollars.

I think is false to say that discounting disrupts the value equation and that it hurts the industry. Value is not deriva-tive of costs — a fact that many builders find out the hard way. Value, by defini-tion, is what a customer is willing to pay for a given good or service. As a customer myself, I know that with the current market conditions, I would be a fool to pay list price for a house, regard-less of who the builder is.

In addition, I am not necessarily sure that discounting is bad for the industry. It allows all builders to reign in some of our costs — or at least slow the rise in costs. Smart subcontractors know they cannot perform their traditional first of the year plea for price increases, because they see the ads in the paper discounting homes.

They know that the market is tough and they know that their services are only worth what people are willing to pay at any given time for them — that their wages are really only the result of a larger convergence of labor supply and demand curves.

Believe it or not, we actually reduced costs in some of our key trades for 2006 vs. 2005 (same reputable contrac-tors as the past 10 years).

So, while discounting homes costs us money today, I am convinced we can make that up later on when we can sell houses for full price, but we have effec-tively lowered or held pricing for impor-

both the public and private sectors. Idealism does not automatically translate to realism.

There are many other talking points that could be made about this issue, but the bottom line is that Scott Sedam may not have approached the subject with the hard, cold facts, but his conclusions would have been the same had he.

We will continue to develop green fields, and there is no way around that. Much of prior developments do "suck," but responsible developers and planners from both the public and private sectors are working very hard to avoid the mistakes of the past. We will succeed in some cases but not in all. If you are one of those responsible developers, then keep up the good work. Meanwhile please don't preach from "outer space" without putting forth solutions to all the problems down on earth.

Anthony Trella
Deerfield Beach, Fla.

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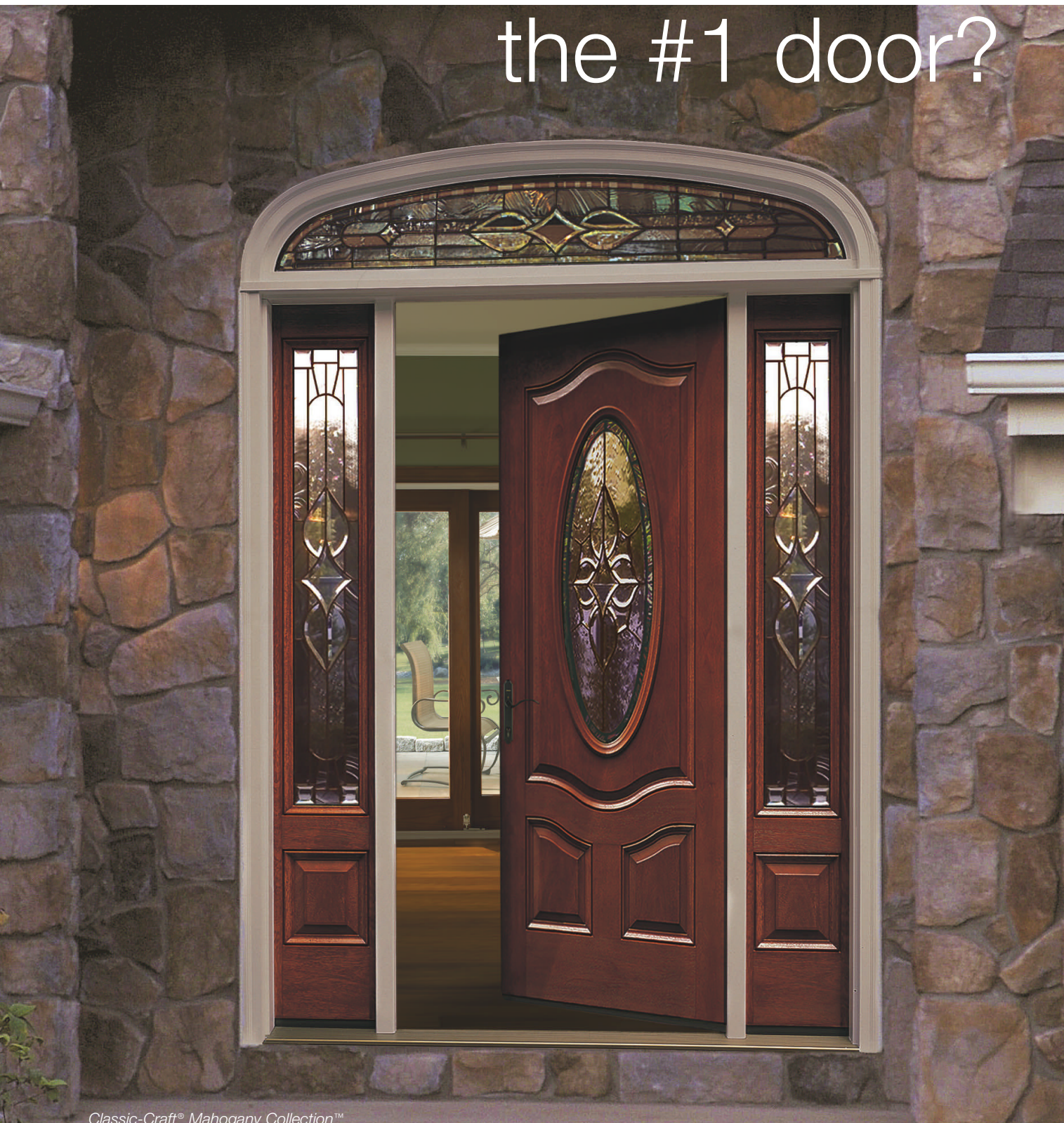
What's behind the #1 door?



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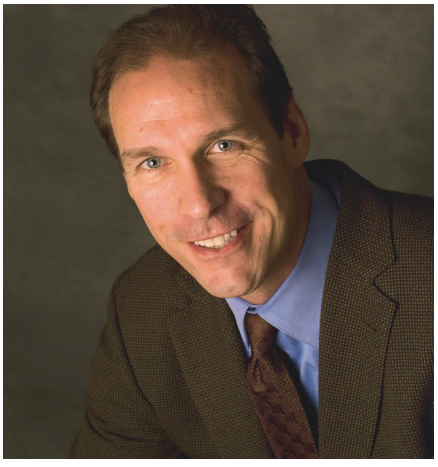

Home builders have always faced competition, but as the industry has increased in sophistication, the competition has increased significantly. It's easy to succeed against fly-by-night operators as long as you don't compete on price. It's much more difficult to compete against quality competition that offers good craftsmanship, meets customer demand and delivers strong customer service.

So, how do you compete? This month, we provide some tools in our feature "Big Builder Killers" on page 50. Whether you are up against the large builders for land, labor or prospects, there are specific techniques and advantages builders can turn to that allow them to succeed.

The most important of all of them is differentiation. Why are you bigger, better, smarter, greener, faster or whatever than your competition? Defining that characteristic within your company, building a strategic plan to support it and creating a marketing plan to broadcast it are the essential steps necessary to compete.

It is not enough these days to say, "We build quality homes." Quality is a word that zooms right past a home buyer. Prospects want to hear specifics.

A great example of this occurred in Carmel, Ind., a couple of weeks ago. The Estridge Companies put its money where its mouth is and showed the community they serve that they truly believe in the "Customer for Life" spirit. How? They opened a retail store in a lifestyle mall, integrated the store with their design studio and put their offices on the second floor.

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It's a great new concept being supported by industry leading manufacturers such as Kohler, Andersen Windows, MasterBrand and LP.

In its market, the Estridge Companies just clearly differentiated itself.

Details: The Foundations of Success

The 2006 *Professional Builder* Benchmark Conference will be held September 26–29 at the Ritz-Carlton in Lake Las Vegas. For more information, go to **www.ProBuilder.com/benchmark.**

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DESIGNLENS
Where do you go for inspiration? For home builders, there's another place to turn when you want to find a great idea: DesignLens. DesignLens is an online library of residential design and decorating ideas that allows subscribers to search by room, theme, floor plan, region or lot size. Need great ideas for elevations of Queen Anne-style homes? Want to see what builders in California are doing with powder rooms? The 30,000 pictures feature model homes and historic neighborhoods, providing strong inspiration and real solutions.

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Proactive Solutions

>> BY LAURA BUTALLA, SENIOR EDITOR

A Neighboring Solution

The New Jersey Department of Community Affairs, in concert with more than 20 philanthropic foundations, has found a solution to an age-old builder problem: create a sense of community between existing neighbors, city officials and developers.

A do-it-yourself, collaborative procedure led by neighbors of the proposed project seems to work best. "When the neighbors of a proposed project initiate this collaborative procedure, usually everyone participates — regardless of past confrontation," says Karl Kehde, the principal researcher who participated in more than 500 meetings between neighbors, developers and city officials.

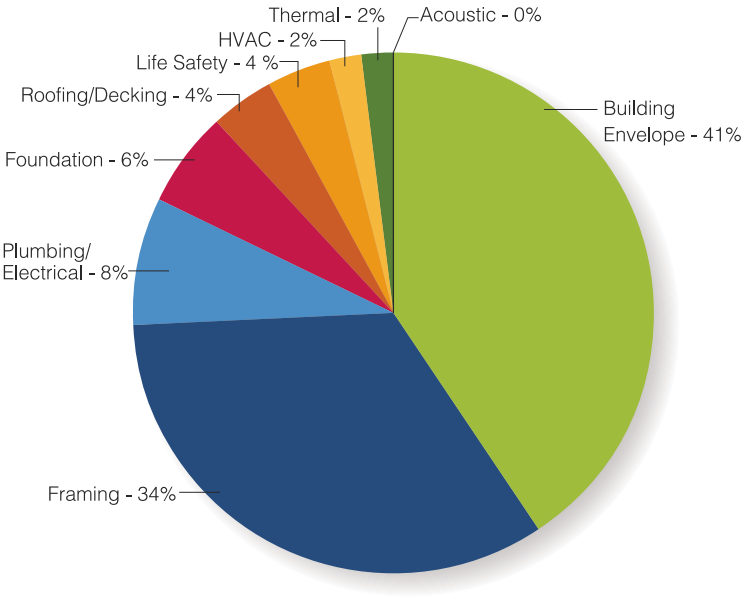
From the collaborative meetings, a guidebook came to life: "Smarter Land Use" by Karl Kehde. Written for the neighborhood groups that host the meeting, the guidebook provides the proper information to set up and succeed with the new process. "It provides information to all the stakeholder groups who are going to participate," says Kehde. "Developers need to have the guidebook to know exactly how the meeting works, what they do in the meetings and how important it is for the neighborhood group to host it."

In conjunction with the guidebook, Kehde recently developed a Web site called Landuse.org, which provides a free download of the guidebook. A history of the research done to reach this new process, testimonials and success stories are also found on the Web site.

"Achieving a sense of community among all land development stakeholders is the road to the best economic growth," says Kehde. "We discovered a step-by-step procedure that mends relationships across the board and achieves profitable development designed specifically to benefit the surrounding neighborhood.

"With this process, the neighbors actually invite the builders to join their team and get to know them as people and share their expertise as far as what should go on the site that will be of greatest value to the property value and quality of life to that area," says Kehde. "It makes them (builders) easier to be heard by a neighborhood, and they become part of the neighborhood team. They're no longer the opponent."

Single-Family Homes' Highest Risks



BREAKDOWN OF HIGHEST RISKS of builder defects on single-family new home construction. Building envelope and framing issues account for 75 percent of all risk issues in the top 10.

>> BY FELICIA OLIVER, SENIOR EDITOR

Top Builder Defect Data for New Single-Family Home Construction

A SURVEY OF LEADING CONSTRUCTION DEFECTS identified by Quality Built, a risk management and quality assurance service, shows that building envelope/house wrap installation flaws, improper framing around windows and doors, and missing structural straps and connectors are the highest-risk defects found in newly constructed, single-family homes.

The findings were obtained during a construction data collection process conducted by Quality Built field inspectors on 31,995 completed homes and condominiums across 27 U.S. states for the 12-month period ending Oct. 1, 2005.

"None of these defects for either category would be visible to a homeowner or building owner upon completion," said Stan Luhr, Quality Built CEO and survey author, "but the defects can be easily corrected during construction if identified early through a quality assurance program."

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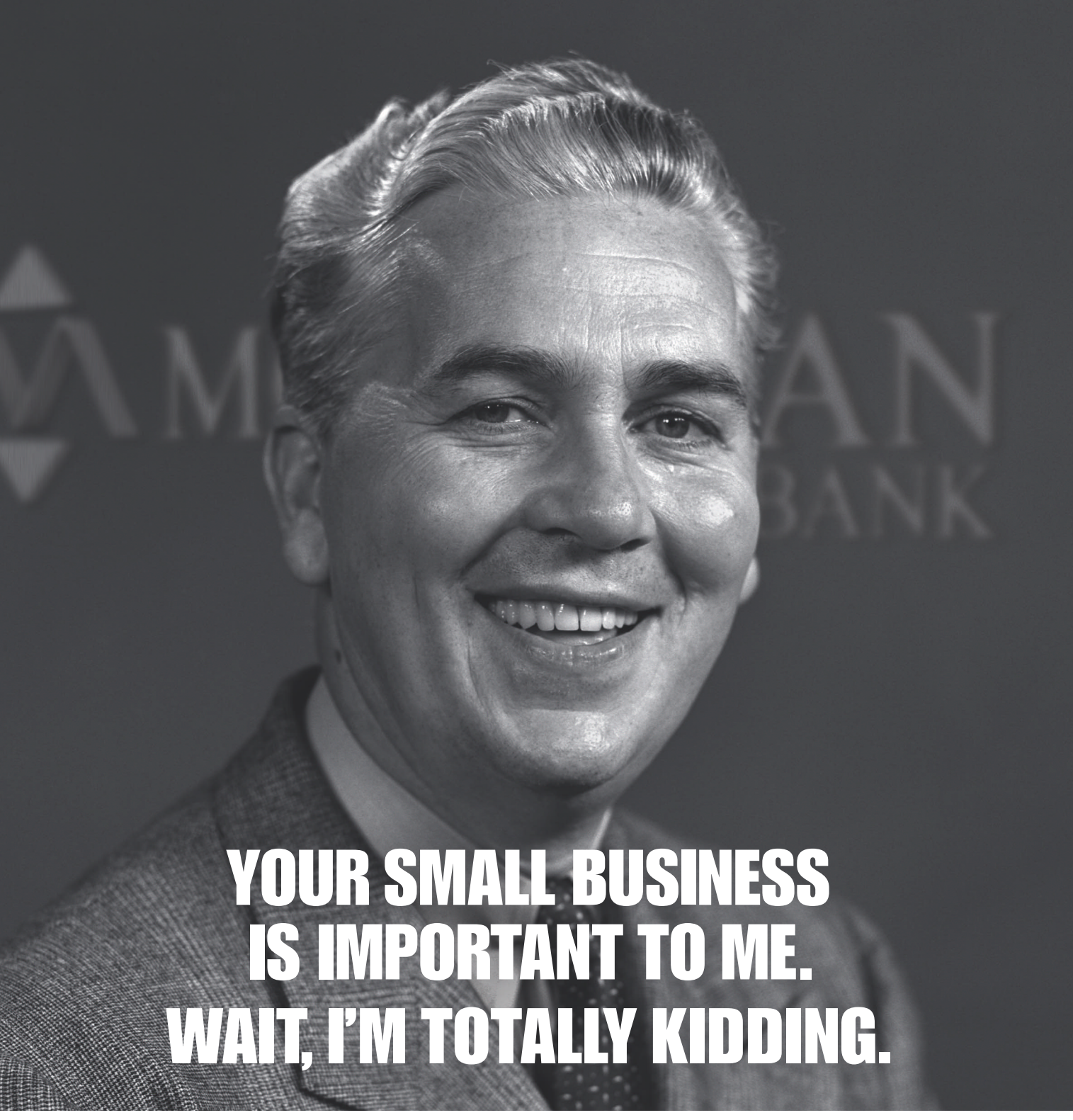

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>> BY **SCOTT SEDAM,** *TRUENORTH DEVELOPMENT*

LESSONS LEARNED

A Sales Agent Named Stella

PHOTOGRAPH: HULTON ARCHIVE

It's a hot Friday afternoon in late July. As a third-year superintendent on a project that's holding its own even while sales have tapered off in your city, you have just experienced the month from hell. The monsoon-like rains last week left you way behind schedule, and you are desperately trying to catch up.

The boss has made it crystal clear he needs every closing scheduled on your job this month — plus two more. It's been one thing after another — bargaining for trades, negotiating with inspectors, trying to solve drainage problems, wondering who keeps vandalizing your construction trailer, keeping customers happy, training the new guy — and the list never ends.

Your once sensible schedule is now in shambles, but you've got a plan and think there's a chance you can turn this mess of a project around. Arriving by 6 a.m. and departing after 7 p.m. every day is not much fun, but you do what you have to do.

It's almost 5 p.m., and even this late there are still trucks snaking through the project, delivering materials for homes in all phases of construction. The mud from the rains has turned into dust kicked up by the traffic. Mixed with the humid air, the dust creates a dull, brown haze that hangs over the community, and the sweat stains on your shirt look like a bad tie-dye job.

> **You are on a mission, and you have just enough time to walk the last three houses to confirm where you are on the schedule, update everything on the computer, finish the paperwork and leave the trailer by 6 p.m.**

But you are on a mission, and you have just enough time to walk the last three houses to confirm where you are on the schedule, update everything on the computer, finish the paperwork and leave the trailer by 6 p.m. You can make eight or 10 phone calls on the way home, shower, pick up the girlfriend by 7 p.m. and maybe, just maybe, get to the game before the first pitch is thrown out at 7:35. At

the price she paid for those tickets for your birthday, you are thinking this would be a really good idea. You'll take her out for a late dinner after the game and try to make up for the neglect you have shown her of late.

It's now 5:15 p.m., and you cross the street looking much like a race-walker, narrowly avoiding a fork lift driven by a wild-eyed guy who is as intent on getting out of here as you are. You wonder, is his girlfriend mad at him, too?

You start up the drive of house No. 3 and just faintly, cutting through the roar of the receding lift truck, you hear it: *"Honk! Honk!"* You keep walking, but your body instantly reacts. You cringe, shoulders tensing and drawing together. A grimace crosses your face, your brow furls, eyes narrow. You hold your breath but keep moving. If you keep walking, you can pretend you don't hear it.

And there it is again: "*Honk! Ho-o-o-onk*." Awww crap! You want to believe that it's not really meant for you, yet you know it is. But who is it? Joe, the inspector who has been tormenting you? Chuck, your boss who has been on a rampage this month? Your squirrelly new assistant superintendent? Maybe one of your trades, wanting his check after he didn't show up *twice* this week?

Between you and the sound is a dumpster, a load of roof trusses and two portable bathrooms — there are enough obstacles that you can steal a glance without the driver's knowing you saw. At least you *think* you can. So you keep walking to maintain the ruse and sneak a look.

It's even worse than you thought: a white Buick Park Avenue with Stella at the helm and the Real Estate Prime magnetic sign on the door. Stella, about 50, always asking someone about something, always wanting this or that.

You're a superintendent! You're not *supposed* to know real-estate agents! But you know Stella because Stella demands to be known.

But not now. Not *today*. You resolve that *today* you do not know Stella because *today* you are going to get this last house inspected. *Today* you are going to get out of here by 6 p.m. *Today* you are going to make it to the game on time. You keep walking and disappear into the house.

You resolve that *today* you do not know Stella because *today* you are going to get this last house inspected. *Today* you are going to get out of here by 6 p.m. *Today* you are going to make it to the game on time. You keep walking and disappear into the house.

Let's take a break for a moment. This young man, barely 25 and three years out of college, has just faced a moment of truth. He may not work for your company but someone very much like him does. What should he do right now? What do you hope he would do?

Have you trained him well enough to know? Does the entire company, starting at the top, demonstrate the consistent behaviors that will make the decision easy for him? Is the support there to back him up, every day?

Before you decide, let me give you some more details. Stella was the No. 1 outside salesperson for your company the past two years. She has pulled a ton of buyers in, especially from the highly motivated and often company-backed relo market. She is demanding and often difficult to work with, but the buyers she brings are eager and almost never cancel. Stella is money in the bank.

At about 3:45 p.m., Becky, your community sales rep, sent a text message to everyone saying that her son had broken his collar bone playing soccer and that she was closing office to meet her son at the hospital. Becky left a note on the door reading, "Family emergency, please come back tomorrow!"

There's a couple in the car, Doug and Beth Hartmann from Charlotte, N.C.. They are in town for a house-hunting trip and have money and flawless credit. The new employer is buying their old home and covering points on the new one. Beth is going overseas for two weeks beginning Monday, and they hoped to close a deal before they depart tomorrow on a 10 a.m. flight back to Charlotte.

They had searched the Internet, narrowing it down to five candidates and contacting Stella's firm, and Stella was now taking her to your project, saving the best for last.

Now you are in the house, walking into the master bath to see if the scratched-up fixtures on the Jacuzzi tub were replaced. Through the window you glance back down and see Stella on her phone.

You watch a moment as she presses it closed, turns to a middle-age couple in the car and throws up her hands in that "*Can you believe this*?!" motion. She throws the Park Avenue into reverse, turns around and starts back, but the fork truck has returned and she has to stop and wait for him to get by. And in that moment, the reality hits you, and you know what it's time to do.

You catch air in your throat, partially swallow a scream and start off down the stairs, three steps at a time through the family room, out through the garage down the drive.

Come on come on come on come on ... the fork truck is clearing and the brake lights go off, Stella is moving. Just a few ... more ... strides. ... "Stellaaaaaaaaa!" you yell through the dust cloud behind her car, wondering if she can hear. **PB**

Scott Sedam is president of TrueNorth Development, a nationwide consulting and training firm focused on quality, process improvement and organizational development. He can be reached at scott@truen.com.

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>> BY **RODNEY HALL,** *THE TALON GROUP*

H.R. DEPT.

The Link Between Motivation and Loyalty

Among the many builders we work with around the nation, one is hands-down the leader in employee retention.

For the past 20 years, this builder's ability to develop and retain exceptional talent is significantly higher than any other home builder we've seen. That's not unheard of for a small- to medium-size builder, but this top 10 player brings in hundreds of new hires annually, from entry-level college grads to experienced managers.

What is behind the builder's success? I could point to several factors, but one that stands out is the time it takes to determine whether a candidate will thrive in the organization.

Part of the interview process includes sending candidates to Gary Williamson, Ph.D. Williamson is an industrial psychologist and managing partner of a human resource development firm that specializes in the evaluating employees. What makes this unique from the typical assessment process is how candidates are surveyed for personal motivators.

The survey originated from the two-factor theory of motivation developed by Dr. Frederick Herzberg.

Herzberg's theory states there are two kinds of rewards for people at work: hygiene factors and motivators.

Hygiene factors keep people from becoming unhappy at work, but they do not motivate people to produce higher-level performance. They are necessary and essential to an employee's professional well-being but don't motivate them to go the extra mile. Instead, hygiene factors often turn out to be causes for dissatisfaction.

Motivators encourage people to shift into that higher gear, to reach their potential and to become passionate and thrive. Motivators are usually accompanied by excitement and job satisfaction.

Rewards can fall under either category. Some frequently identified rewards in the home building industry include recognition, authority, compensation, creativity, mental challenge and the opportunity to develop others.

Williamson's survey results are shared with candidates to help them determine compatibility with the new opportunity. If the opportunity provides greater rewards than what they currently have, there is a greater chance for a long term fit.

So, how does this influence our client's success?

Besides screening for strong mental abilities or vocational experience, our client looks for candidates who will thrive in the organization.

And when employees thrives, they usually succeed and stay.

Before moving one of your prized employees into a new role or making a move yourself, compare the rewards profile against the opportunity.

The same formula applies to internal job changes and transfers. Before moving a prized employee into a new role or making a move yourself, compare the rewards profile against the opportunity.

Next month, we'll take a closer look at rewards and how to develop your own profile. **PB**

Rodney Hall is a senior partner with The Talon Group, a leading executive search firm specializing in the real-estate development and homebuilding industries.

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Keynotes: Teamwork and Leadership

Patrick Lencioni

Patrick Lencioni is the founder and president of The Table Group, Inc., a specialized management-consulting firm focused on executive team-building and organizational health. He has been described by the One-Minute Manager's Ken Blanchard as "fast defining the next generation of business thinkers." Pat's passion for organizations and teams is reflected in his writing, speaking and consulting. He is the author of five business books, including *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, which was on the New York Times best-seller list. His new book, *Silos, Politics and Turf Wars*, came out in March 2006. Pat consults to executives and speaks to world-class organizations, addressing thousands of leaders. Prior to founding his firm, Pat worked for Sybase, Oracle and Bain & Company. He also served on the National Board of Directors for the Make-A-Wish Foundation of America from 2000-2003.

Keith Harrell

Known for his energetic, innovative presentations, Keith Harrell is a dynamic life coach who specializes in changing behaviors through a positive attitude. While growing up in Seattle, he aspired to become a professional basketball player. Although he never realized that dream, The Wall Street Journal says, "What sets him apart . . . is driving ambition and an attitude that refuses to flag." Through his company, Harrell Performance Systems and his book *Attitude is Everything: Ten Life Changing Steps to Turning Attitude into Action*, Keith specializes in helping companies achieve and maintain their goals. Harrell spent 14 years at IBM, where he was recognized as one of the top sales and training instructors. He is widely regarded as one of the country's best speakers.

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>> BY PAUL CARDIS, *NRS CORP.*

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Loyal Customer Rally

Create big gains for your business's top and bottom line growth.

As a professional builder, you probably work hard and invest a lot of resources to ensure your customers have the most satisfying experience possible. But good — or even great — satisfaction ratings do not equate the most profitable return on your investment. For that, you need to convert your most satisfied customers into legions of loyalists — happy homeowners who are eager to rave about your business and generate untold referrals.

Before you can focus on developing loyal fans, it's helpful to understand why their loyalty is so important. First, loyalty translates into a steady stream of customer referrals — the lifeblood of any home building operation. Second, loyal customers are more flexible and tolerant during the purchasing and building experience. Third, loyal customers help build positive brand awareness simply by talking favorably about your business. This kind of behavior doesn't always yield immediate referrals, but it goes a long way in supporting the superiority and quality of the brand.

No company understands the power of loyal customers better than Harley-Davidson. In the mid-1980s, the motorcycle company was on the brink of bankruptcy — largely the result of significant problems with customer satisfaction and product quality. As it began the hard work of reorganizing, it also focused on its No. 1 asset — its customers.

The company began capitalizing on its most avid fans by launching the Harley Owners Group (H.O.G.) in 1983. Today, the group has about 1 million members who are passionate about owning a Harley. Membership definitely has its perks, too. There are organized rallies, magazine subscriptions, rewards, trip planners and a simple devotion to the group's mission: to ride and have fun.

By creating a thrilling experience around its products and appealing to its most satisfied buyers, Harley-Davidson has developed a subculture of loyal customers who are tremendously tolerant. Not only do these customers generate referrals, but they also continue to strengthen the brand by embracing it as a lifestyle.

Most builders could be doing much better if they followed Harley's example and maximized the loyalty of their most satisfied clients.

All of this hard work has paid off for Harley, which has seen its stock price change from 34 cents to more than $60 per share.

Most customer relationship management (CRM) programs provide a respectable return on investment, but most builders could be doing much better if they

followed Harley's example and maximized the loyalty of their most satisfied clients. Studies show that your happiest customers drive the most referrals, and by focusing more attention on these home buyers, you can achieve greater returns than if you focused equal attention on unsatisfied home buyers.

Before you can target your happiest customers, however, you must identify them. The best way to do this is with a reliable measuring system, such as professionally designed and executed customer surveys.

A lot of home builders survey clients at closing, but our research finds that this surveying method delivers artificially high scores. That's because social desirability effects — the need to be likeable and to avoid conflict — kick in when the builder rep is present. The same thing happens to many people when they are dining in a restaurant and the waiter asks, "How is everything." Most people will say "fine," even if the steak is too rare or the pasta is overcooked. It's a lot easier than complaining, which carries the risk of being labeled socially undesirable.

Our research shows if you survey home buyers seven days after the closing, builders' satisfaction ratings drop 12 points on average. That is partly because the euphoria, hopefulness and excitement the home buyers experienced when closing on their home has waned, and the reluctance to complain or create conflict has subsided — a much better gauge of who is happy and who is not.

Banking on the Best

Once you have identified your happiest customers through reliable surveys, you are now in a position to target them for various CRM programs.

As you go through the surveys of your most satisfied customers — those who say they would recommend you to another home buyer — try to determine whether your happiest customers are absolutely delighted with their purchasing experience. You'll be surprised to discover how many of your satisfied customers are not raving fans. And there lies the opportunity to make them delighted so that their rate of referrals goes up. Your task is to figure out how to convert them from satisfied customers into loyal advocates for your business.

Is this really worth the effort? You bet. Our research shows the transition from good to great satisfaction will result in customers going from making one or two referrals to making 10 or more referrals.

As you are looking over the surveys of your most satisfied customers, focus on a couple of the areas with the lowest scores. Most companies ignore this, reasoning that an overall positive rating is good enough for them. They believe that they fought hard to get to this point and are content to rest on their laurels, not realizing that they left half the money still sitting on the table.

The fact is, this is the easiest time to wow customers because it takes little effort to follow up and fix many of the problems they cite. Most home buyer complaints at this point have to do with cosmetic aspects of their home features, such as cabinets, drywall or paint. Many of these items are inexpensive fixes and will go a long way toward delighting customers.

If these items are not addressed to the customer's complete satisfaction, the home buyer is likely to tolerate the situation and consciously or subconsciously hold back referrals. In the end, you want them to be so delighted that they're talking to everybody about how great you are — maximizing your return on making them happy.

Always Room for Improvement

One measure of how well you are satisfying customers is how many of your home buyers have referred 10 or more prospects to you. Using this assessment, even the very best builders in customer satisfaction can benefit by tapping into the power of loyalty. Consider the NRS Award winners — the builders who rate tops in customer satisfaction. The following winners tended to exceed other companies in the number of referrals they receive:

- Desert View Homes has 11.8 percent of its home buyers making 10 or more referrals.
- Pulte Homes Arizona has 19.3 percent of its home buyers making 10 or more referrals.
- The Green Company has 25.7 of its home buyers making 10 or more referrals.
- John Lang Homes Denver, NRS Diamond Award Winner (No. 1 Builder in North America in customer satisfaction), has 40 percent of its home buyers making 10 or more referrals.

These results show these award-winning companies receive tremendous value from its relationship with its customers. Regardless of whether each one engages in this type of good-to-great activity to maximize referrals, all of these companies focus hard on making their home buyers happy. Of course, having a system in place that encourages referrals and rewards clients for making referrals is an important part of the equation.

I hope you can find the path to yielding maximum returns on your customer satisfaction investment. There's nothing more powerful than customer loyalty to create business success. **PB**

Paul Cardis is CEO of NRS Corp., a leading research and consulting firm specializing in customer satisfaction for the home building industry. He can be reached at pacardis@nrscorp.com.

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Exclusive DryLock installation system

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>> BY **JOHN RYMER,** *NEW HOME KNOWLEDGE*

NEW HOME KNOWLEDGE

The Importance of Time Management

John Rymer

I hear a lot of new home sales professionals talking about not having enough time to get everything accomplished. There is a lot to do: meet new clients, attend meetings, provide updates to customers, forge real-estate agent relationships and maintain the sales center. What steps do you take to ensure the right things get done every day?

LOG ON For this and other topics related to new home sales, visit us online at **www.ProBuilder.com/bestpractices**

Kelly Boeher

Midwest mid-size builder
Annual Sales: $13 million; 74 homes

TIME MANAGEMENT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT TO YOUR SUCCESS IN NEW HOME SALES. It all starts with organizational skills. You have to be organized to get everything accomplished. The way that I stay on top of my "to do" list is to come in early and stay late several days per week. The great thing about this is that you are working when the sales office is closed and you don't have interruptions. I find my chances of reaching my clients at home is much better when I make phone calls after hours. I find that's when they are willing to take time and talk.

I also feel that you need to use technology. Many customers prefer to receive e-mail follow-ups. I also use e-mail blasts to keep my customers updated on what's new. It's a great way to stay in touch.

I also make sure I find time to improve my skills as a new home sales professional. Course work and training classes are essential to achieving your goals and [becoming] the best you can be.

Reed Schweizer

Local Florida builder
Annual Sales: $55 million; 315 homes

TIME MANAGEMENT IS SUPER, SUPER IMPORTANT TO YOUR SUCCESS. During the week, I concentrate on activities that can get done during the week: I meet with mortgage companies, title companies, [and] deal with administrative issues, marketing issues and customer follow-up. The weekends are for meeting new clients. That's when I concentrate on new customers and new leads and minimize other issues. So it is new clients on the weekends and take care of business and existing clients on the weekdays.

Debbie McGee

California regional sales team
Annual Sales: $70 million; 120 homes

I HAVE A ROUTINE IN THE MORNING AND ANOTHER ROUTINE IN THE AFTERNOON. I do it every day so I never get behind, and I'm more organized. I have a certain time for follow-up and another time set aside time for customer issues. If I skip my follow-up or miss some administrative reports one day, it just puts me further behind the next day. My routine also includes keeping current on my competition and looking for maintenance items in my model center. This structure also allows me to have some extra time for the things I really like, such as attending a sales training seminar or MIRM class. I find that attending the classes makes my presentations much smoother and prepares me on ways to deal with tough customer issues.

You need to make sure that you have proactive follow-up, not just when you need extra sales. Good habits, like bad habits, are hard to break. So that's why I try to set aside time each day for those things that will make me successful. **PB**

TERRELL OWENS, RIGHT, GOT BENCHED by the Philadelphia Eagles for undermining the team.

PHOTO BY STREETER LECKA/GETTY IMAGES

HOW I LEARNED TO ... MANAGE EMPLOYEES

Building Bench Strength in Sales

Selling is a contact sport, and every day is game day. We asked some of the best managers how to coach a winning team.

Last November, the Philadelphia Eagles suspended All-Pro receiver Terrell Owens indefinitely amid a public flap over his already-signed contract and his criticism of teammates. "The Eagles have a system, and he didn't fit in," says building consultant Bob Schultz.

New-home sales coaches can't harbor superstar egos that don't fit in, either. Too often, the right people in the wrong jobs make it hard for builders to work efficiently and profitably. To run an effective team, managers need to examine the entire system by which they hire, train, manage and reward their players.

They need to go deep.

Schultz, founder of New Home Specialist Inc., has his own philosophy for doing so. Of course, the industry is bristling with qualified experts who don't all agree on the same system. But few can argue with one of his key tenets: that every sales organization must be based on "sound management principles and processes."

Staffing up

Some small builders rely on outside real estate agents to generate leads. There are plenty of outside agents with a knowledge of the local market, and they don't require any up-front investment. But as a growing builder takes the

plunge to bring the function in-house, he or she gains the benefit of presenting a consistent public face to the customer — from image and message to policies, procedures and product knowledge.

Research suggests that a builder needs one salesperson for every 40 homes of annual volume, consultant Lou Csabay, vice president of The Sharrow Group, says. "But so much depends on the size and type of builder, homes and market." Some builders boost that number past 100 as hot projects draw long lines and grand opening campouts. Aside from the question of under-pricing, this turns salespeople into order-takers. "This isn't really, truly selling," Csabay says.

"The market has been so hot for the last couple of years that, in most places, if you just showed up and didn't screw up too badly, you did okay," Schultz adds. He says builders ignore their own "irrational exuberance" each January when news hits of a new industry sales record. They fly down to the International Builders Show to "pat each other on the back ... and they give out all these great sales and marketing awards [that] aren't based upon sound principles or processes."

Maybe management has grown complacent. And maybe today's sales employees weren't around to experience the housing market of the early 1990s. But it's time for the industry to get back to basics.

Drilling the fundamentals

Every sales manager has stories of superstar sellers whose egos seemed bigger than the rules. But even superstar athletes need constant reinforcement or they'll miss scoring opportunities.

There are scores of training opportunities in the industry, from NAHB's Institute of Residential Marketing to consultant training. Just as important as those formal training opportunities are informal ones, such as the Monday morning sales meeting, where actual versus budgeted traffic and sales numbers, for example, reinforce objectives and accountability. Other meetings, such as those with construction superintendents and design studio employees, further reinforce knowledge of important processes and details and fall into the method of Management By Objective.

Additionally, sales managers must utilize the practice of Management By Walking Around, which was popularized by Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton. Schultz says sales managers should spend 70 to 75 percent of their time face-to-face with the salespeople coaching, teaching, mentoring, role-playing and watching post-game replays of mystery-shop videos. Managers, too, must reinforce the adherence to the actual process of making a sale. (See sidebar, Blocking & Tackling.)

"Our salespeople are specifically trained to take people through the home and point out its features," John Luhn, co-owner of LifeStyle Homes in Melbourne, Fla., says. "And as they're doing that, they're also trained to talk about who LifeStyle Homes is, our role in the community, what we try to give back." Luhn tapped consultant Bill Webb for enhanced basic training as well as to have people sell "in a way that best exemplifies who we are."

Webb, owner of William N. Webb Company in Amelia Island, Fla., says the best buying experience is one that "lifts customers out of their reality into a dream [and] creates such a good experience that it becomes very difficult to turn away." His benchmarks are BMW, Rolex and the Ritz Carlton, which can command $400 a night for a hotel room because the hotelier treats customers like royalty.

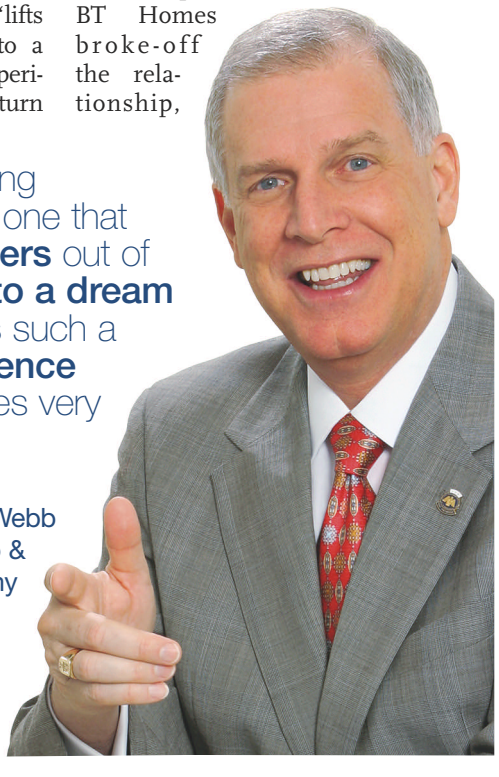
Compensation replay

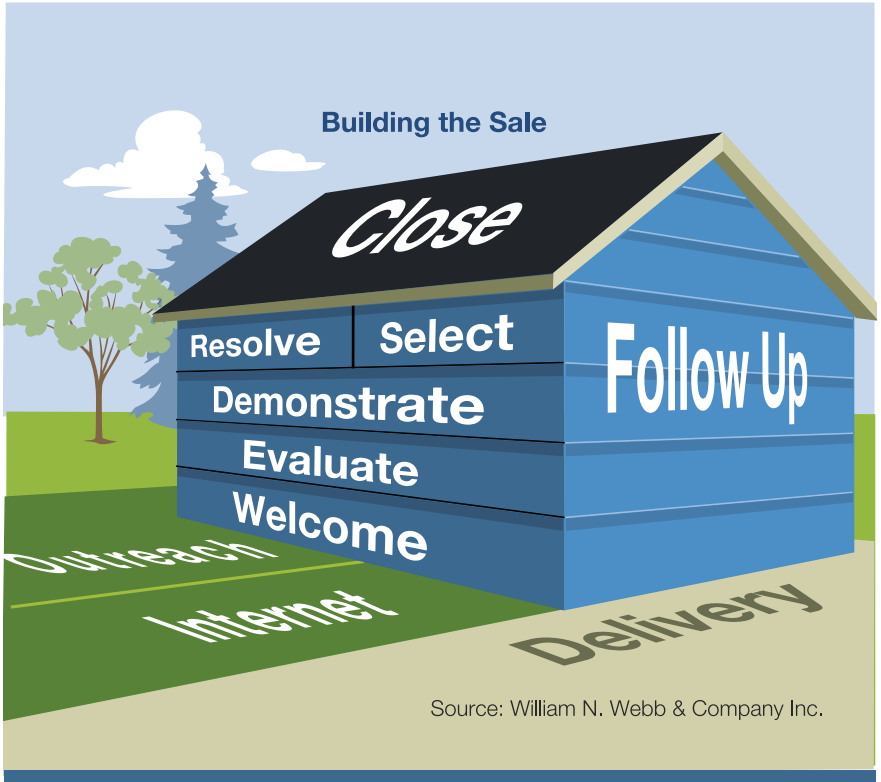
How builders treat their internal customers is another matter. Opinions differ on the best compensation strategy. Options range from full commission to full salary and all points between.

LifeStyle Homes' co-owners "came up as salespeople," says Luhn. He likes the ability "to pay a higher rate" to his exclusive, independent contractors who work on commission against a draw. "We like people with that kind of entrepreneurial spirit working for us." The company sold "in the low 200s last year," and trends indicate LifeStyle Homes will top 300 this year, even if much bigger builders are setting a trend away from this type of plan.

But you don't have to be a Giant. BT Homes in Santa Fe, N.M., with 136 sales last year, pulled the plug on a seven day-a-week commissioned representative who "didn't want to share the pot" with a second rep. So BT Homes broke-off the relationship,

> The best buying experience is one that "**lifts customers** out of their reality **into a dream** [and] **creates** such a **good experience** that it becomes very difficult to turn away.
>
> –Consultant Bill Webb
> William N. Webb & Company





Source: William N. Webb & Company Inc.

BLOCKING AND TACKLING: BACK TO BASICS

There are many paths to a sale, but the basic process hasn't changed in generations. Until consultant Bill Webb added an Internet provision for the 2006 International Builders Show's Super Sales Rally, his "Building the Sale" process remained untouched for 20 years. Now, he offers advice for avoiding missteps at each step:

Welcome: Minimize distractions, don't answer the cell phone and let prospects know they're the most important item on your schedule.

Evaluate: Study factors like Webb's "RUSEAP" list of buying requirements, urgency, experience, situation, ability and personality.

Demonstrate: Personally demonstrate the house and its features or you might lose sales opportunities.

Resolve: Treat objections as opportunities — sticking points are a sign of genuine interest.

Select: Give the buyer the features they'll love. This builds urgency and the fear of losing the right house on the right lot.

Follow-up: Cement the relationship before, during and after the sale. Lip service alone costs sales and satisfaction scores.

Close: Handle steps well to have an expedited closing. Seminar tricks won't save a flawed pitch.

Internet/Outreach: Adjust presentations to reflect prospects' brand awareness and Web site familiarity. Webb reports that about half are "return visitors" before they ever step into a model.

Delivery: Enlist the entire company and trade partners as members of the sales team to enhance customer service and satisfaction.

took the function in-house and saw sales rise 65 percent the first year. That was 2002. Profitability has risen 41 percent since, though a new design center and a new business plan share credit. Beth Meyer, sales-managing executive vice president, says commission "creates an atmosphere of unhealthy competition, burnout and greed."

Another "targeted compensation" model — Schultz's term — fits the bill for Keystone Homes in Augusta, Ga. Last year, the company replaced the area's most prominent real-estate company with in-house employees. Sales rose 36 percent as the company sold 86

After an hour or an hour and a half or so, **it becomes obvious** who the **strongest people** are.

–Lamar Crowell
President of Keystone Homes

more units than the prior year. Traffic conversion is roughly one in six, and "our gross margins are as high as they've ever been," says Lamar Crowell, company president. Builders brag about closing one in 10 sales.

Likewise, Jagoe Homes of Owensboro, Ky., is riding high with a 1-4 traffic conversion ratio and uses a Schultz-inspired compensation model. Over a modest base salary, the company pays employees $1,000 for the first 32 homes sold per year (more after that), another $1,000 for meeting a monthly quota, and cumulative thousands more

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The compensation model system **eliminates** "phenomenal **spikes in sales**" that **used to plague** construction starting **schedules**.

–David R. Crowe
Regional sales manager for Jagoe Homes

for doing so month after consecutive month. Executive-level pay is attainable, motivation remains high and the system "eliminates peaks and valleys" to smooth construction starts for the company's slot-production program, David R. Crowe, regional sales manager says. The system eliminates "phenomenal spikes in sales" that used to plague construction starting schedules. A prior compensation plan had sales employees blitzing to close deals at the end of each quarter.

Connected to this debate is whether to pay commissions and bonuses based on the price of the sale or number of units sold. Traditionalists believe a salesperson who risks the extra time to develop a higher-ticket sale deserves a higher payday. Schultz warns that with a price-based model, "it's possible for a salesperson to make $100,000 and the builder not break even.

"This isn't brain surgery and it's not about holding hands and singing Kumbaya. It's a simple retail business plan," he says. Whether it's retail or real estate, commission or something else entirely, is up to the builder. Each can, however, take a first step toward greater sales and profits by reviewing budgets and comparing plans for new opportunities on the path toward greater goals. **PB**

THE TEAM HIRE, SURVIVOR STYLE

All builders want their sales employees to be intelligent and motivated, and to share personal values that match the company's. And there would seem to be few surprises in the way a builder should conduct the recruiting process for that new sales employee.

The familiar tools of recruiting and hiring are all there. There are resumes and referrals, pre-interview packets and questionnaires, background checks and various interviews. To these, consultant Bob Schultz, president of New Home Specialist Inc., adds another wrinkle he deems critical: a final, group interview.

Keystone Homes in Augusta, Ga., warns candidates of a similar trial by fire.

This home-sales hybrid of Donald Trump's Apprentice and CBS' Survivor is "a little like reality TV," Lamar Crowell, company president, admits. But there are no tiki torches and no bad hair. Just an honest career opportunity for a few hard-working souls willing to work long hours and weekends. (They already do that because New Home Specialist and Keystone recruit from the retail employee pool.)

To hire three sales pros, the Keystone company invites up to 10 candidates for the intensive event, which focuses on role-playing. "After an hour or an hour and a half or so, it becomes obvious who the strongest people are," Crowell says. "We want people jumping up to participate," he says, not those who don't bring their "A" game.

If the process sounds brutal, it's just as efficient; candidates are told any offers will come within 24 hours.

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EXTRA POINTS: TOP 10 RETENTION TIPS

Sure, there are lots of great sales contests and annual big-ticket trophy trips. But small gestures count, too. During his 2006 International Builders Show presentation, "Why GOOD Salespeople Deserve GREAT Sales Managers," consultant Joe Colletti cited several imaginative ideas sales managers can use to aid in retention:

1. **Have fun!** Involve your sales staff in team-building programs, from social events to contests to local home building events
2. **Retention bonuses:** Timed payments or awards are earned, therefore more useful than up-front signing bonuses
3. **Getaway weekends:** Good performance might warrant a spontaneous, appreciated gift of family time
4. **Tuition reimbursement:** Grant scholarships or enrollment fees in industry courses
5. **Holiday shopping sprees:** Set a deserved limit, such as $500 or $1000 as the situation warrants
6. **Prepaid gift cards:** Starbucks, credit card companies and even gas stations are getting into the act
7. **Car wash certificates:** Restores a lustrous sheen to sales employees' welcome wagon
8. **Paid birthday off:** Always an appreciated morale builder
9. **Personal housekeeper:** Reimburse employees and their spouses where they live
10. **Free dry cleaning for a year:** Keep your best presenters looking their best

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>> BY **FELICIA OLIVER,** *SENIOR EDITOR*

Proactive Solutions

>> **MOLD FIGHTERS**

Telling the Truth about Mold

A new coalition gives builders and homeowners accurate information about mold and moisture control.

The Responsible Solutions to Mold Coalition recently formed with the goal of providing the most reliable, user-friendly information on moisture and mold to builders and homeowners.

The launch of the RSMC, made possible by a grant from the USG Corp., was announced at the International Builders Show earlier this year.

"While five years ago there was a dearth of information on moisture and mold control, just the opposite is true today," said Frank Nunes of the International Institute for Lath and Plaster, an RSMC member organization. "If anything, the industry suffers from too much information that needs to be evaluated and put into a format that is more useful to both the construction industry and homeowners. That is a role that RSMC hopes to play."

Mold continues to be an important topic to builders and homeowners, especially in light of rebuilding efforts in Louisiana and the Gulf Coast after last year's hurricanes.

"Mold is principally a moisture – control issue. The only way to control moisture and therefore mold is through good building design and construction practices combined with ongoing maintenance," said Donald Mueller, vice president of research and development for USG Corp. and RSMC co-chair.

The RSMC has published a 12-page brochure, "Controlling Moisture Through Better Building Practices," which is available from its Web site, www.responsiblemoldsolutions.org. The Coalition wants its Web site to become a clearinghouse for accurate inform about controlling and preventing mold.

The RSMC's goals for this year include hosting and participating in forums and seminars that would bring experts together to talk about effective new solutions to fighting mold. It also plans to issue a quarterly newsletter.

"We will be at builders' meetings disseminating information and will probably write some white papers," says Johnna Matthews, an RSMC representative.

As of mid-April, the coalition had 13 members representing building industry associations, government agencies and academia. At its initial planning meeting in the first half of this year, a board of directors had been elected and will decide on an operating structure that would tentatively include a standing committee on governance and on scientific affairs. Future goals include participating in industry trade shows to broaden the awareness of the RSMC and recruit additional members.

The RSMC sees its mission as educational and has no plans to endorse products, suggest building code changes or develop independent mold measurement standards. Instead, it will evaluate various technologies without making specific product recommendations and plans to participate in demonstration projects to offer solutions to fighting mold in a variety of settings.

"Everyone connected with the building industry has a stake in making sure effective solutions are embraced in solving this important problem," said Robert Daniels, director emeritus of The Tile Council of North America, another RSMC member organization. "First and foremost, consumers and business owners will be more satisfied with their homes and buildings; builders can avoid expensive callbacks, warranty claims and even litigation; and the financial community can be assured of the long-term security of the investment it underwrites." **PB**

ACCORDING TO THE RSMC'S WEB SITE, the only way to control mold is to embrace best building practices and eliminate sources of unwanted moisture and water.

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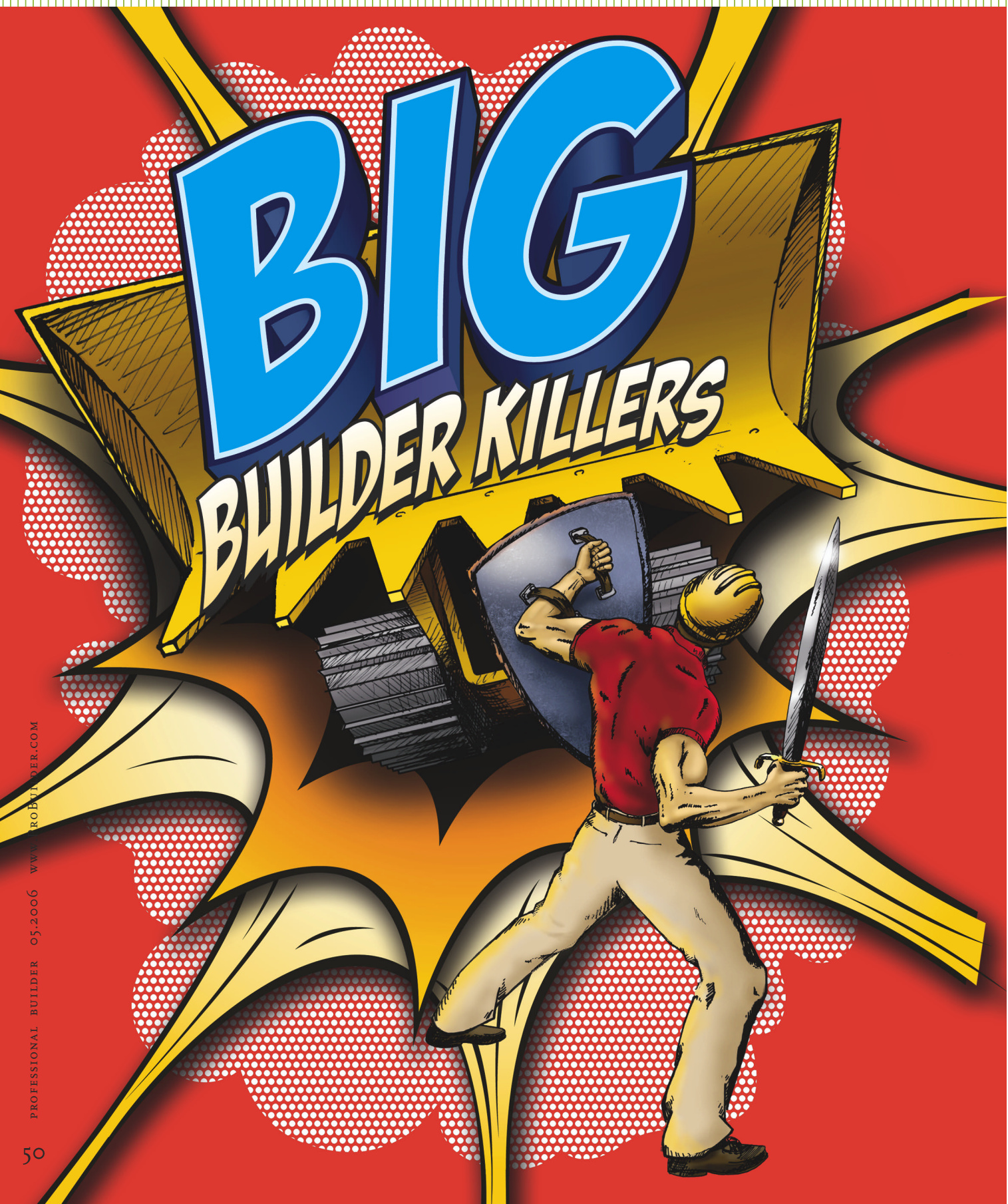

BIG
BUILDER KILLERS

>> BY **MATTHEW POWER,** *SENIOR CONTRIBUTING EDITOR*

"This is not a game,"

says Richard Elkman, president of Group Two Advertising in Philadelphia. He's referring to the growing threat small builders face from Giant firms.

"It's a war to protect your business and your family.

That's something a lot of builders don't understand.

The national builders could come thundering into your neighborhood any day. Maybe one already has. With cleverness and courage, you just might beat these big builders at their own game.

"When the market changes," he continues, "you have to dare to differentiate. Differentiate or die. And right now, the markets are changing dramatically. In Washington, D.C., for example, I know builders who did 50 homes last year, and this year they're doing eight. It's that bad."

Elkman says small home builders need to shout louder if they want to get heard above the megaphone of a national firm. He calls his unorthodox techniques "guerrilla" marketing. He says that sometimes breaking the rules is the only way to get noticed at all. The noose is tightening for the little guy, he says, because big builders will let nothing stand in the way of their growth imperative. Even now, as the economy softens, national builders expect to keep growing — but that requires exploiting ever smaller markets.

"The engine of the big companies is just too big," says Jay Grant of Grant Homes, a builder in Mendham, N.J. "They've got to feed it."

By "feeding" it, of course, Grant means they need to scoop up land on which to build a lot of homes and ensure a regular cascade of closings. In most cases, big builders can outbid any small builder for land. On top of that, their clout with distributors and subs allows them to slam together product faster and cheaper than local competition. Some national firms now have custom divisions that compete directly with local firms. No niche is completely safe any more.

A lot of small builders continue to thrive in their regions, in spite of the advantages of the Giant firms. Small companies have rebelled, defending their turf from Giants by staying flexible, taking risks and understanding the high stakes they face.

In this article you'll learn about some of those techniques and tips, from rolling lots to self-made modular plants. There's no magic bullet out there to protect your market position when the Giants come to town, but it's not time to throw in the towel, either.

Marketing

Break the rules.

"I think the first thing you have to recognize is that Toll Brothers may build 10,000 homes a year," says Richard Elkman, "but not 10,000 in your market. They have the cash and systems, but who are they are in your local market? When you look at them that way, they're not as giant, not as scary."

That "carpetbagger" perception, Elkman notes, can be exploited in many ways.

"They're likely to bring product from another area," he says. "That means you have a design opportunity. Also, you're small enough to change product and advertising strategies instantly. The big firms can't do that. And you can get *down* into the marketplace. The big builder is not looking at niche opportunities like tying in with a local church or leaving fliers at the dry cleaners or a well-known restaurant."

Elkman offers many examples of maverick marketing efforts that have given small firms a boost. For example, one of his clients, Conaway Homes, a mid-size (100 homes a year) builder with homes in Tyler, Texas, was facing a major blow. Choice Homes, a national builder of nearly 5,000 homes a year, was coming to its neighborhood.

"Conaway had to do something to build the size of its company perception-wise," Elkman explains. "So we designed a counter card for all of the local Lowes and Home Depots in the area. What it said was that anybody building a home with Conaway would get a $2,000 to $3,000 discount.

The builder paid for the cards, of course, but the money ultimately came from the home's construction budget.

"This technique linked Conaway up with two of the biggest employers in town," Elkman adds. "And we did it before Choice Homes got settled in the area. That's important. They also came in and paid more for local land than they should have. It's a case where the good old boys [got] together and were proactive. They weren't directing efforts at Choice, but they made it too hard for them to compete."

As a result, he says, Choice Homes left the Tyler market within 18 months, looking for easier pickings.

Getting your community into the public consciousness may mean pushing the limits.

Working with a client in Vero Beach, Fla., Group Two Advertising faced an uneven fight. A large, national builder, G.L. Homes, was coming to town, opening a 600-home community. Lexington Homes also had a community underway, but the parcel did not front on a main highway. Local ordinances restricted signs to one 4- x 8-foot sign, with no flags.

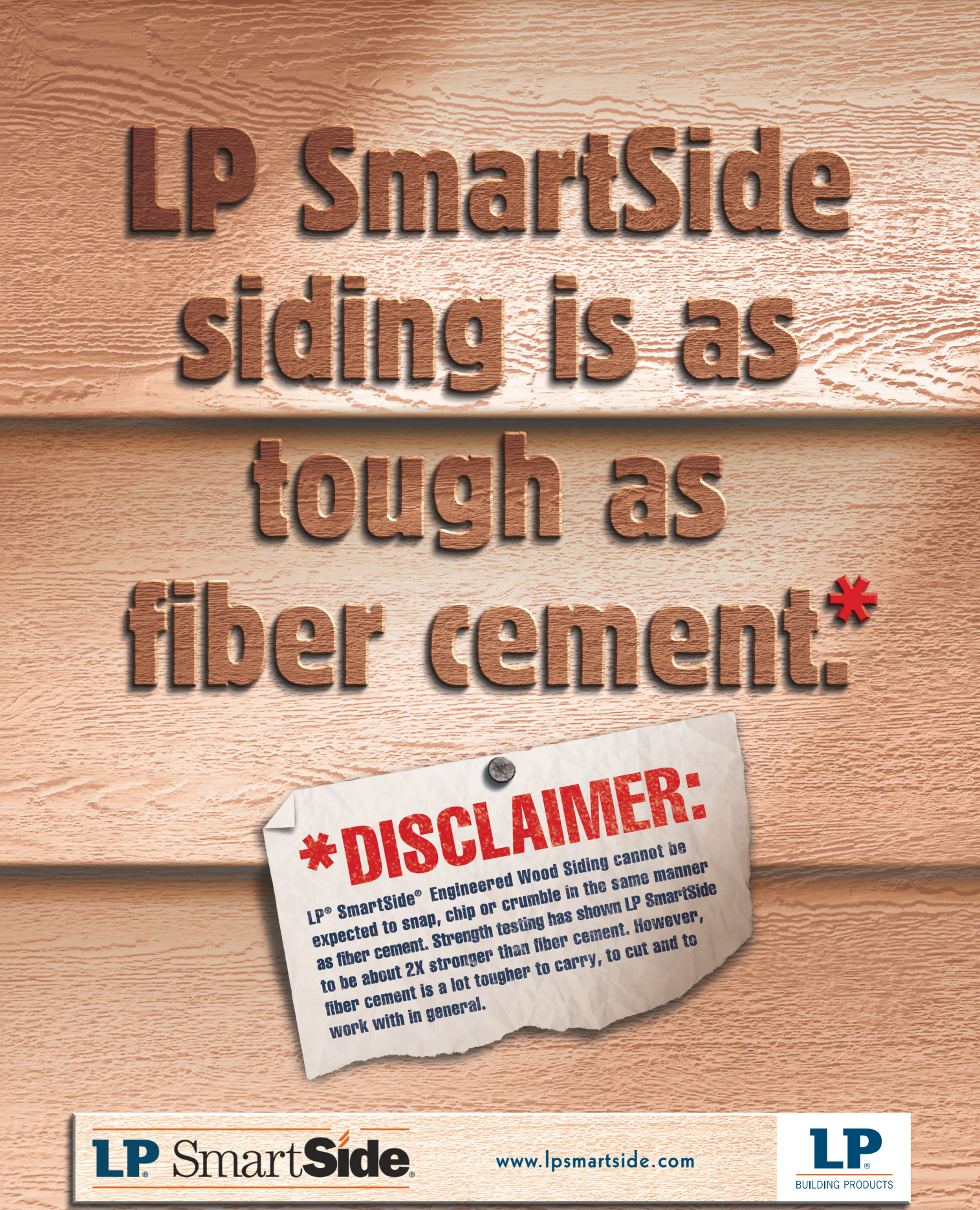
To get around those rules, Lexington piled a huge mound of dirt near the community entrance, then put a trailer on top of that mound. They then tethered a large, colorful balloon to the trailer, advertising their community. After a few days, the city insisted on the balloon coming down, but not before everybody in town knew about the new development. Next, the builder took some guerrilla marketing on the road.

"We rented a bunch of trucks," company president Richard Elkman says, "and put big canvas signs in the back of those trucks. The signs said, 'You can own a home for $50,000 less in our community.' We moved them up and down the street on the day of G.L.'s grand opening. It was very effective."

Reality Checklist

Ask yourself these six questions as you plan your big-builder marketing defense.

What is the position you own?
What is the position you want to own?
Who is your primary competitor?
What is your strategy?
Do you have the money for that strategy?
Do you really match the position you perceive?



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Land

Land Buyer Blues

When land pressures become too great, many small firms retreat behind their greatest strengths: quality, reputation and customer service.

In a recent profile titled "Chasing Ground" in the *New York Times Magazine*, Toll Brothers CEO Robert Toll noted that he spends all day, almost every day, looking for land deals. Most of the big builders now guard their land inventories the way the Pentagon guards its military assets: they're amassing a treasure chest of land for the future, when an acre of dirt becomes even more precious.

In New Jersey, which is increasingly embroiled in development conflict, builder Jay Grant of Grant Homes has had to retool his business due to land inflation.

"Absorption has slowed," Grant notes. "At the same time, the cost of individual lots has escalated phenomenally. The approval process is one of the most difficult in the country."

Big builders, he says, have made the situation even worse for the little guy, by paying exorbitant prices for lots.

"A developer in my home town spent 12 years getting a 17-lot parcel approved," Grant continues. "Myself and several other builders had approached him. We formed a coalition and did all the right things. At first he wanted $400,000 a lot; then he raised that to more than $500,000. The next thing we knew, K. Hovnanian (a New Jersey-based national builder) had come in and bought all of the lots. Rumor is that they paid more than $500,000 apiece — in cash, with no roads and no septic."

Grant says what surprised him most is that the builder is now marketing finished homes on those lots for $1.5 million. He would have had to ask even more.

"I couldn't even make the pro forma work for that price," he says. "They can do that because of their volume discounts and because they beat the crap out of their subs — and avoiding customization.

"At first, the public guys weren't interested in any parcel with less than 50 lots," he continues. "Then it was 30; then 25, then 17. Nobody expected them to get down to this level."

Instead of rolling lots, Grant is now rolling with the punches. He has gone back to his strengths as a custom builder, abandoned spec homes altogether, and refocused on personal contact with clients.

"We're completely on open-book management now," he says. "What closes our clients is when we show them exactly what they're getting for their money. We also charge for estimates. We sell them on our quality and experience. They have to respect what we do."

Grab it, but don't own it.

The strategy of retaining control over land parcel by "rolling" lots is not new. In fact, *Professional Builder* talked about the concept back in 2003. But it merits revisiting, because it's one of the few low-risk tools left to small builders looking for land security. With the sky-high cost of land, head-to-head land bidding wars with bigger firms can get small volume companies into financial trouble in no time.

"Rolling lots works like this," says, Grant. "You need a developer/seller who is patient and has deep pockets. Preferably, these lots have been sitting on the market for a year or two. For example, I did a project in Florham Park, N.J. a few years ago with 10 lots worth $250,000, fully improved.

"I said, 'I'll pay your asking price, but instead of buying the whole parcel, I'll pay you for one lot, and you title me for two.'" Grant continues. "I'll build two spec houses on those lots: that's a prerequisite — spec homes. I agreed to buy the remaining lots within 18 months. In addition, he got 35 percent of my builder profit. We signed the deal, and I made about $9 million in sales with a $250,000 initial investment."

Grant says he used this method for many years, until the big-builder hunger for land simply overwhelmed his market (see sidebar: Land Buyer Blues). He says rolling lot deals have become a quaint relic of the past for him in his "superheated" market, but his Builder 20 chums in other regions still use them frequently, with tremendous success.

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Processes

Some risks are worth taking.

Bill Jagoe of Jagoe Homes has co-opted one of the major strengths of national builders: streamlining processes to reduce operating costs. It's not by accident that his firm often controls a 30 percent market share of new construction in the Louisville, Ky., area.

"I'm able to change things quickly now," Jagoe notes. "I can look at what the big guys are doing and have new product to compete with them out in the market within 30 days. We're just leaner.

"I used to build 100 houses with five supers," he continues. "Now I can build 500 with the same number. Those supers used to spend an hour to three hours in preconstruction meetings on every job. Now we don't even hold those meetings."

But Jagoe notes that those changes didn't come by accident. He brought in a consultant who helped him look at his company with a fresh eye. The biggest discovery: his processes were rife with unnecessary paperwork based on overblown risks. In other words, a lot of his policies and procedures had been put in place because of a single incident. Somebody created a new document or procedure to prevent that incident happening again. But the real risk was negligible — reams of profit-killing bureaucracy.

"We found reports that we'd been running on every job for two or three years that I had never even looked at once," Jagoe says. "It came down to a lot of mistrust in the system. Our staff was managing nine different status boards for example. That was just unnecessary."

Deleting distractions

Next, Jagoe analyzed the number of non-construction activities — such as change orders, warranty issues and other general paperwork. He identified 273 non-construction activities affiliated with every customer. By adding trust back into the system, he was able to immediately remove 137 of those, which "were adding no value whatsoever" to the business.

The firm looked at design and product options.

"We focused on what our clients actually needed," the builder says. "We were maintaining a lot of options that were not selling. We brought it down to about 4,000 options, but they were much better organized. On a quarterly basis, we go through new option suggestions and decide which ones to adopt."

Lean and Mean

Optimized processes give small-volume firms the ability to turn on a dime.

Bill Jagoe of Jagoe Homes says that most builders, big and small, leave themselves vulnerable to national builders in the market only because they refuse to change.

But small-volume builders, he says, have a huge advantage. If they decide to make changes, they can make them almost immediately. Reducing the workload of paperwork at his firm has greatly improved turnaround times. Back in the bad old days, getting out plans and purchase orders and starting jobs took about a month. Now, the average is closer to four days.

"The big firms aren't able to change the same way," Jagoe says. "Once you adjust your processes you can adjust anything you want — including your margins. You just pick up the slack somewhere else."

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"I showed our builders how to modify their brick fronts in a variety of ways, adding color and texture. They loved it and the plans actually cost less than the brick versions."

TERRY FORBORD, PRESIDENT AND MANAGING PARTNER, LAURENT DEVELOPMENT

Left: Dancing Waters by Laurent Development
Below: Liberty on the Lake by CPDC
Bottom: Cobblestone Lake by Tradition

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Apple Valley Mayor, Mary Hamann-Roland says their newest community, Cobblestone Lake, is a major reason people are moving to the area. They are attracted by the enduring appeal of its streetscapes, which are enhanced by house exteriors made from James Hardie® siding.

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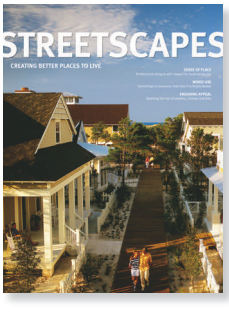

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Modular

Panelize for speed and price.

Many of the national builders have now begun using modular systems to make their work flow even faster. For small-volume builders, panelization is not just a handy tool — it may be a key to survival in certain markets.

Tony Spano, vice president of Bigelow Homes in Aurora, Ill., began looking at panelization strictly as a cost saver. Now he's a believer. His firm took the dive when it took on a project to build 100 single-family homes on 25-foot-wide lots in a blighted neighborhood of Chicago.

"One of the things that drove us to prebuilt systems initially was that the city was very concerned about vandalism during construction," Spano recalls.

By using pre-built wall and roof components the homes could be dried in and thus protected against theft in three days.

"Also, thanks to panelization," Spano says, "we were able to take some of our single-family product from the suburbs and adjust the plan to fit on a 19-foot lot. We had to work in some tight places in the city, and this made it possible.

"We set it up so everything brought to the site could be installed that same day," he adds. "In three days, we found we could complete the exterior with windows, roofing and doors in place."

Bigelow first used the panels after it took over as general contractor for the 100-unit Ezra Homes development in Chicago. Another builder had begun building homes on the site five years ago building 12 homes in that period failing to hit the affordable $120,000 price the city sought. Instead, the builder ended up with $180,000 homes.

By using panelized construction, shallow frost foundations and even-flow production, Bigelow has been able to knock that record out of the park.

"We built 88 homes in one year," Spano notes. "I don't think anybody's ever done that in the city — and we came in at the price they wanted."

Bigelow Homes continues to develop, including multifamily homes in the suburbs and city. They specialize in new urbanism and green building.

"We're a small fish in a rather large pond," Spano adds. "But frankly, while the [big builders] fight over their market share, I'm happy that we can provide 200 homes a year. We consider ourselves innovators."

Instead of buying from an existing modular plant, the builder partnered with a local manufacturer.

As it sought to transfer suburban home plans to a compact, urban design, Bigelow Homes in Aurora, Ill., approached a local truss manufacturer. The two firms based-in partnered to create panelized wall components with just the right technology to speed assembly.

"We brought in our carpenters and design team and they sat together to create a workable system," Vice President Tony Spano recalls. "We actually built the first three models on-site as if we were building them in the factory. During that time, somebody from the plant was standing looking over the carpenter's shoulder all the time. They took that process back to the factory and made it work remotely."

The company's trial-and-error efforts have taught it several lessons about working with panelized structures.

"The connection between installer and manufacturer was extremely critical," Spano notes. "For example, we initially planned to have plumbing in the walls. But we found that our guy could do the job just as effectively in the field as the factory.

"The same was true of electric," he adds. "We ran the conduit but didn't pull wires. We also found that we could add the siding in one day, so there was no point installing it at the factory. And we added the drywall after installation of the panels. We're a green builder, and it was important that insulation not settle during transportation."

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Technology

Untangle your digital presence.

For small volume builders, the aim of computer technology — both in-house and on the Internet — is not to outdo your national competitors, or "futureproof" your firm. Instead, you're setting the bar low — just a little bit better than your closest competitors. Keep it simple.

That's the advice of Joe Stoddard, a manager with Steve Maltzman and Associates, a consulting firm based in Orlando, Fla.

"A 50-home-a-year builder comes to me and says 'We want a system we can grow into.' I tell them 'No you don't.'" Stoddard says. "What they do by doing that is add a year to deployment time. They'd be better off going with a smaller, easy-to-use solution and for a year or two.

"Look," he continues, "You can't go from nothing to automated purchase order system overnight. That's not how it works."

Small builders, he adds, have great advantages over large firms when it comes to integrating IT and Web-based software. The smaller the company, the faster and easier the transition.

"A 10-person company might take a year to get up to speed," he notes. "But a 20-person firm might never make it at all. There's that much of a difference depending on how big you are."

One of the problems often overlooked when you plan a major upgrade in your company's IT capacity, he explains, is employee retention.

"Even companies with a very stable staff will have a 50 percent turnover where the (IT) project is going on," Stoddard says. "It's almost like a second job for them. And if you try to do it a couple times and fail, you end up with disgruntled employees — and a damaged company."

Instead of biting off a huge IT transition, he says, small firms can optimize their workflow with relatively inexpensive, easy-to-use applications. They may even be able to get by with Web-based applications (see sidebar).

"You're far better off using 90 percent of the power of a small application than 10 percent of a big one," he notes.

Forget the Web sites' advice of yesterday. Make it real.

Builders need to stop trying to use their Web sites as a way to tease customers into visiting a model home, Joe Stoddard of Steve Maltzman and Associates says. Those days are over. Builder Web sites for today's generation must give people real information immediately, including pricing.

"The age of hiding stuff is over," Stoddard says. "If they don't find exactly what they're looking for in three seconds, they're going to another site."

He adds that people want to know details about the local community — things big builders are unlikely to offer online.

"Put some stuff about the community. Interview the principal of the local high school. Make it real. Too many builders are being counseled by sales and marketing gurus who came into celebrity 10 years ago, and now they don't get it.

"The fact is that if you're a mid-size builder in Dallas, there are 500 other builders in the region just like you," Stoddard continues, "and no one's going to hang around your Web site if you don't deliver."

IT Budget and Staffing

How much should small volume builders be spending on digital technology?

"The smaller your company, the larger a percentage of your sales you need to spend on IT, including the Web," Stoddard asserts. "But you don't need a full-time person on staff if you apply best practices and do your cabling right. We find that if you have more than 20 employees, you can get by with one quarter-time person. Below that level, you can use remotely managed services. Those are becoming very accessible and affordable."

RECOMMENDED BUDGET AS A PERCENTAGE OF SALES

Small Remodeler	1.5%
Custom Builder	1%
Production Builder (100-plus homes)	.5%

The Right Gear

Economical, Internet based software can sometimes stand in for an IT department.

Not every small builder has an IT department — or should have one, according to Joe Stoddard, a manager with Steve Maltzman and Associates. Instead, small firms can use software packages such as Microsoft Sharepoint to provide key services, particularly documentation for clients.

"Bottom line is that for about $20 a month, you can service 50 customers with password-protected collaboration on the site. You can post all kinds of levels of detail about each project, from before cradle to after grave. That's important."

He adds that the Web site provides a place to store a paper trail of communications, documents and requests from clients. You can also post in-progress photos and control which version of a document is accessed.

"Sharepoint sites are also very portable," Stoddard notes. "As you grow, you just save the site as a template. All the key data is stored in a database."

The ability to reference all of that data, Stoddard explains, has "intrinsic value" to small builders.

"They live and die by references," he says. "Everything is geared toward keeping that reference index high. With a system like this, you can see if your reference index drops and do some marketing."

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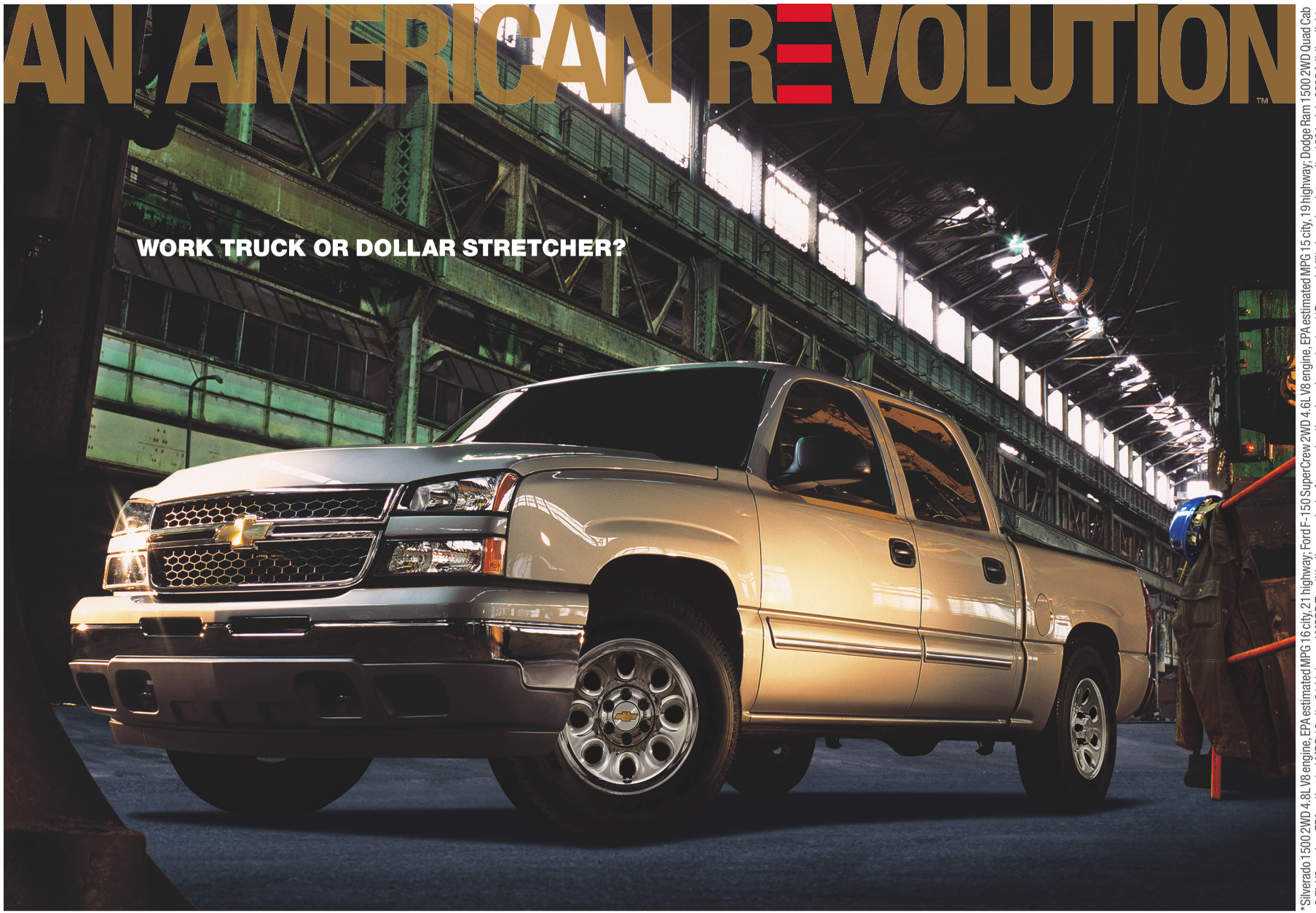

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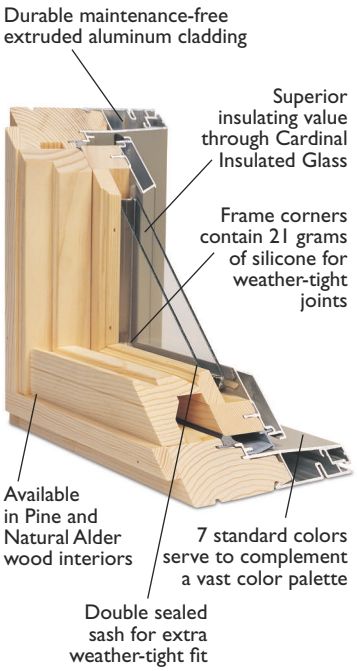

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>> FELICIA OLIVER, SENIOR EDITOR

Cool Roofs in Dark Shades

Manufacturers develop sun-reflective roofs in colors homeowners can warm up to.

Cool roofs — roofs that use reflective materials to limit solar heat gain — can cut cooling loads by up to 20 percent. Conventional cool roofs have light-colored surfaces with colors that work well on commercial facilities with flat or low-sloped roofs.

But homeowners prefer darker colors for their steep-slope roofs, leaving them without a cool-roof option — until now. Manufacturers have developed dark-colored pigments for roofing materials that reflect sunlight instead of absorbing it. These pigments are now being used in coatings for metal roofs, in clay and concrete tiles, and in the multi-colored granules from which shingles are composed.

"For years we've known there's a benefit to having white roofs," says Chris Scruton, project manager for the California Energy Commission. "But most people in residential buildings don't want a white roof, so these cool-colored materials give you a lot of benefit because about 50 percent of the radiated solar energy is in the infrared spectrum. It's heat. And you can potentially reflect that part and still maintain a normal color."

In 2002, the California Energy Commission asked Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in Berkeley, Calif., and Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Oak Ridge, Tenn., to collaborate with a consortium of 16 manufacturing partners to develop "cool" non-white roofing products for the residential roofing industry. The California Energy Commission's Public Interest Energy Research (PIER) Program funded this research.

"We funded the whole project which involves, from start to finish, the development and enhancement of those products," Scruton says. "The reason it's important is that there's a significant energy and demand reduction potential, especially in hot, sunny climates like we have in the Southwest."

The commission's goal is to create dark shingles that reflect at least 25 percent of light and other non-white roofing products — including tile and painted metal — with solar reflectances not less than 45 percent. Reformulating pigmented coating allowed the manufacturing partners to accomplish this.

"They are looking for pigments that have ordinary colors in the visual range," says Scruton, "but have this unusual property of being highly reflective in the infrared range. An example of that is chlorophyll [found in] plant leaves. It's highly reflective in the infrared. That's part of the reason why leaves on trees stay nice and cool even while they're out there absorbing sunlight."

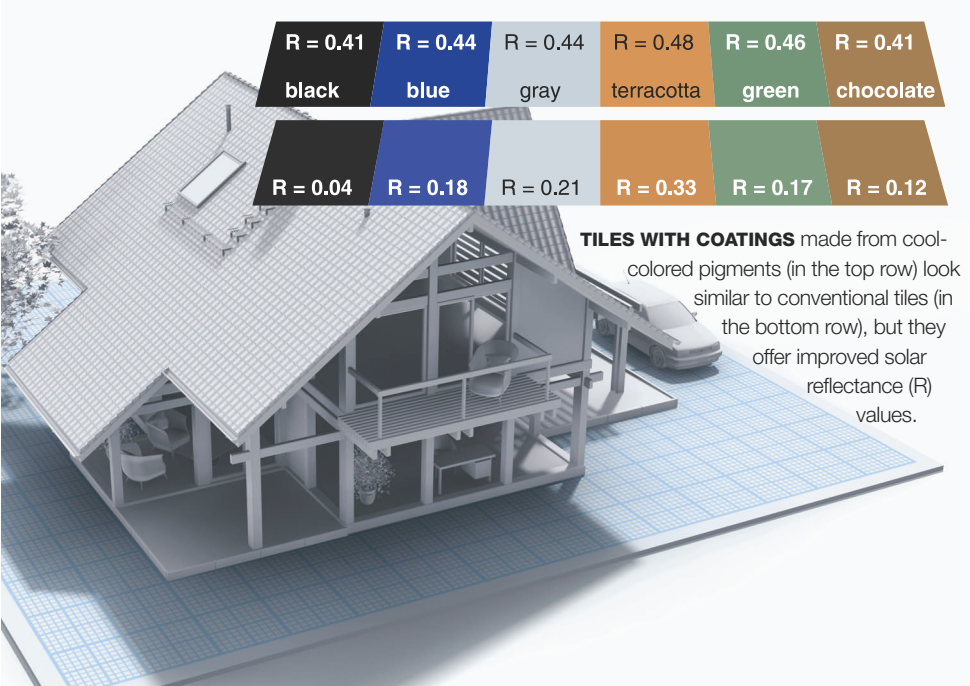
Elk Roofing, a Dallas manufacturer that is using granules developed by 3M, offers five shingle products with reflectances of 25-27 percent in popular colors like slate and grey. Chino, Calif.-based Custom-Bilt Metals has also begun using all cool-color coatings on shingles.

"They don't have any other kind," says Scruton. "They don't have two kinds of brown — hot brown and cool brown. They just use cool brown, and that's what we'd like to see others do."

Scruton says the cost differential in cool roofs versus standard roofs is minimal because the coatings are relatively thin.

"Even though some of these pigments might be somewhat expensive, there're not a lot of them in the roofing material," says Scruton, "so it really doesn't add anything to the cost." **PB**

New roofing tiles made with cool pigments



TILES WITH COATINGS made from cool-colored pigments (in the top row) look similar to conventional tiles (in the bottom row), but they offer improved solar reflectance (R) values.

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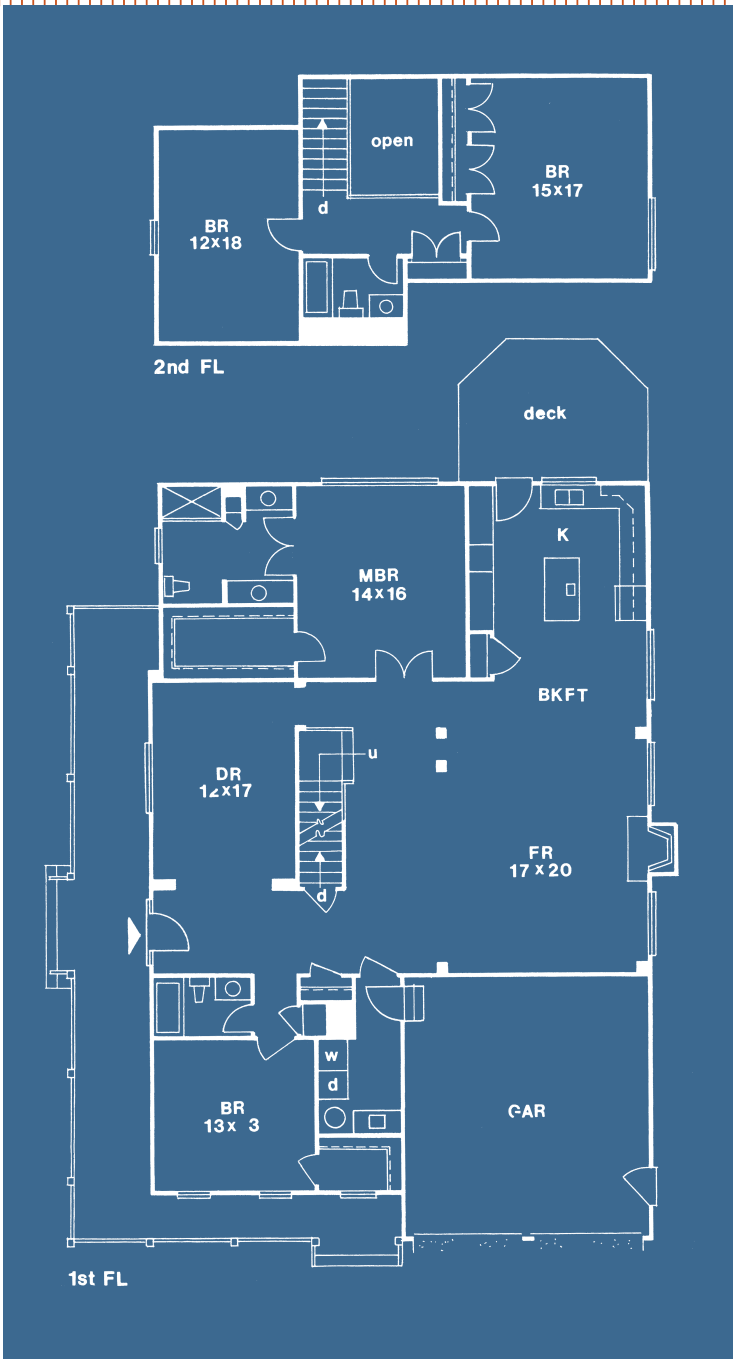
HOW I SOLVED

More access

This plan is offered in an age-restricted community in Winchester, Va., but the builder has encountered a few problems providing wheelchair accessibility.



The problems with the plan

The Brighton is selling for $454,900 in Winchester, Va., and although the plan sells well, the builder says, there are a few accessibility problems. Principle architect Doug Van Lerberghe provides this builder with solutions to make The Brighton's plan more wheelchair-accessible. The builder noted five problems:

1. A side entry makes the plan lot-restricted.
2. A wheelchair cannot fit inside the second full bathroom.
3. As is, it's impossible to add a ramp from the garage to the house.
4. The dining room is too far from the kitchen.
5. Changing the house while keeping striking features like volume spaces and attractive exteriors, as well as the upgraded standard features, is a must.

Solutions

Van Lerberghe came up with the following solutions.

1. The second bedroom's closet on the first floor moved to the front of the house because the front porch wrap-around is no longer needed; the laundry room moved behind the garage, which is more convenient to the kitchen; and the front entry is now street-side.

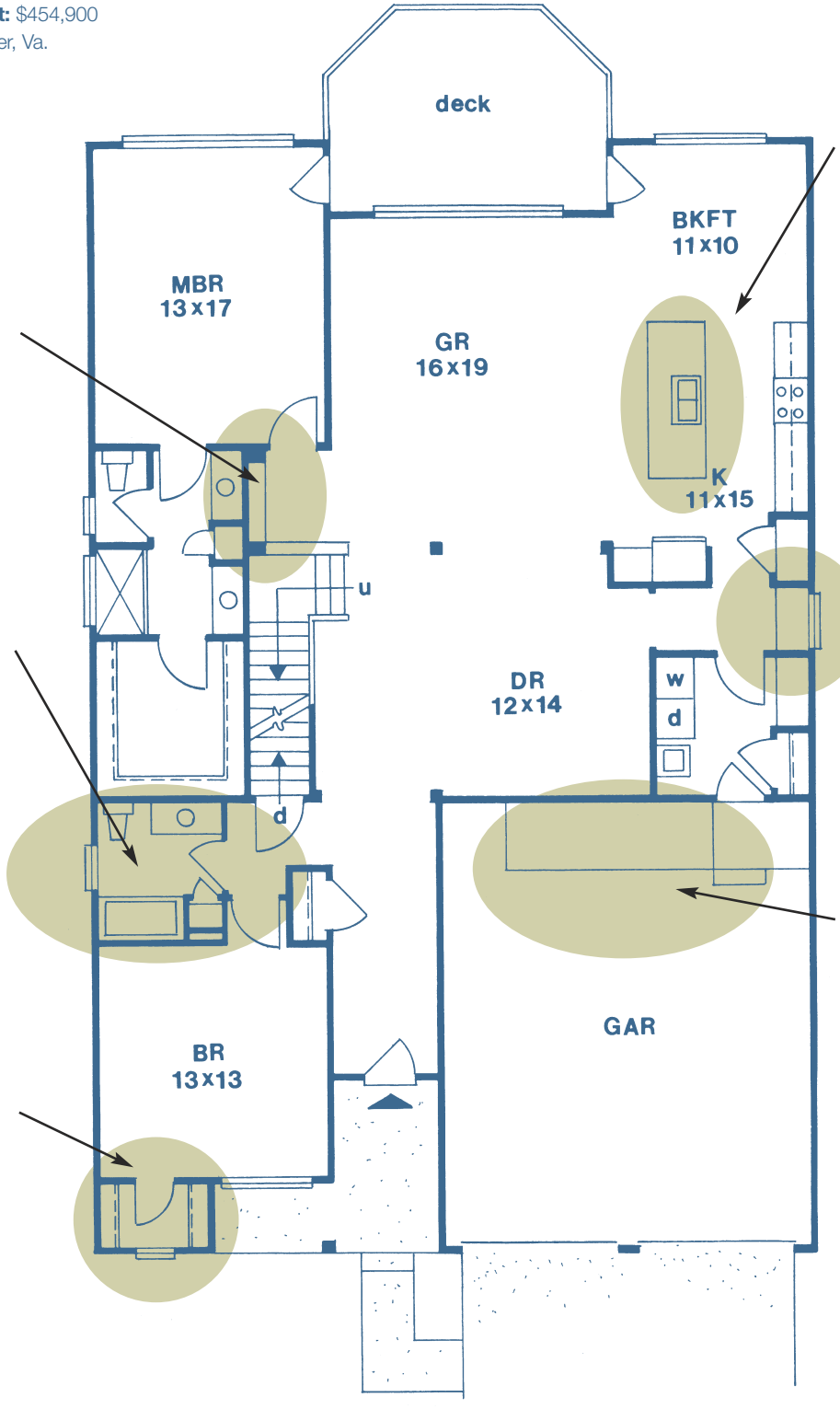
2. The first floor's second bedroom lies in the same place and is a bit larger, and it could get larger if the master bedroom closet shrank. The second full bathroom is larger as well. By moving the tub to the opposite wall of the sink and toilet, fixtures have full parallel access. There could be a five-degree turning radius if the master closet became smaller. (Also, all the major doors throughout the home should be a minimum of 2 ft., 10 in. to accommodate access.)

3. By making the garage about 25 ft. deep, a ramp could be added for access to the laundry room. Making the garage deeper offsets the cost by the loss of finished square footage. Another option: placing a reverse brick ledge around the house, allowing the finish floor to be close to grade.

4. Moving the dining room closer to the kitchen allowed the back half of the home to be reconfigured. The formal dining room moved behind the garage, and the kitchen and breakfast nook flipped from front to back. A butler's pantry with a window above it was added. With the dining room relocated, Van Lerberghe rotated the master suite, shifting the master bedroom to the corner and the master bathroom and closet to the former dining location.

5. The striking features of the stairway's relationship to the volume ceiling were maintained. Several potential-buyer memory points were added: the library alcove off the master bedroom; the butler's pantry and passage between the kitchen and dining room; the oversized kitchen island with seating (kept at 1 level), which helps transform the kitchen into a gathering place; and the walk-in closet in the master bedroom. **PB**

Architect: Doug Van Lerberghe, Senior Project Manager, KEPHART, Denver
House Plan: The Brighton
Target Market: Age-restricted community
Current Price Point: $454,900
Location: Winchester, Va.



A LIBRARY ALCOVE now sits outside the master bedroom.

RECONFIGURED fixtures provide wheelchair access for homeowners.

THIS BEDROOM'S closet moved to the front of the house. The room could be larger if the master bedroom's closet shrinks.

SEATING AT THE island is now lower and easier for disabled residents to use.

A BUTLER'S PANTRY adds a memory point for potential buyers.

A DEEPER GARAGE not only allows space for a ramp, but it gives access to the laundry room, too.

Florida Luxury Living

This Naples, Fla., model exceeded buyers' expectations by offering Florida luxury living with entertainment benefits.

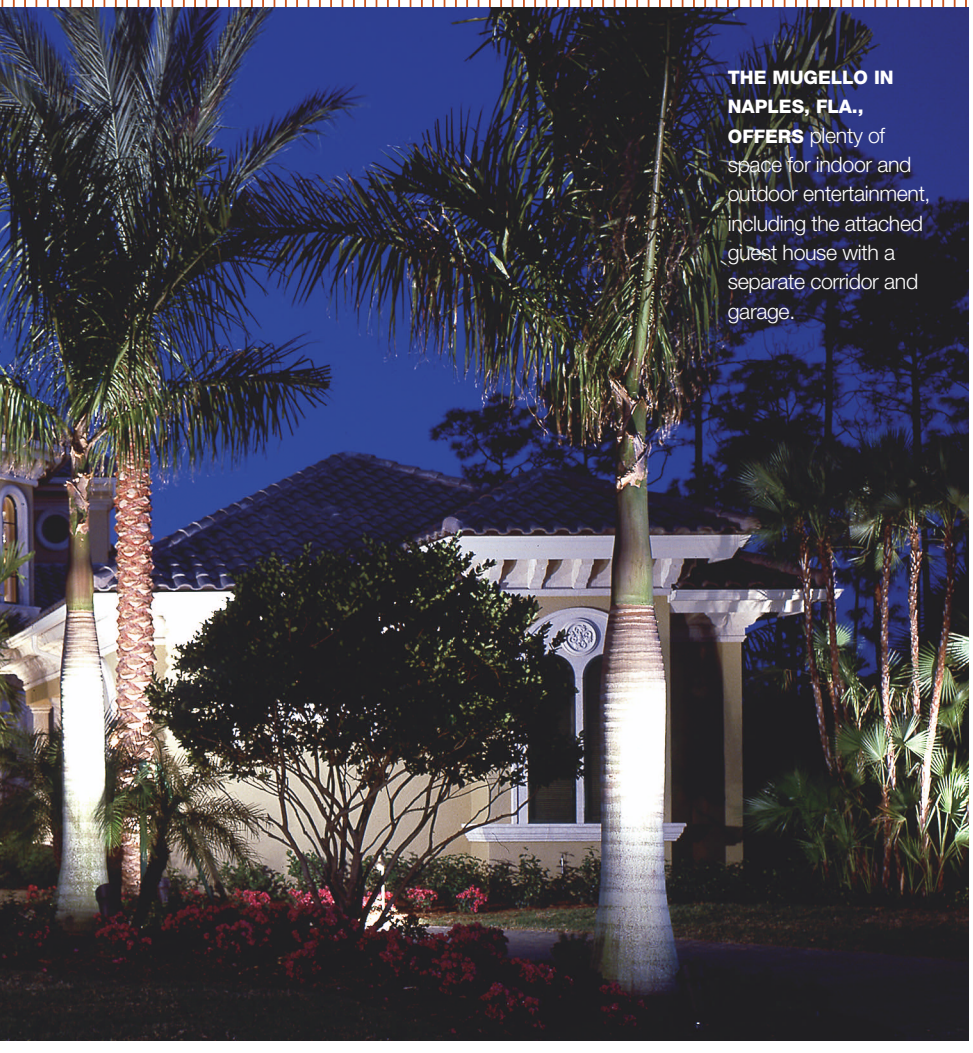
Empty nesters, retirees and affluent couples with expensive taste are Harwick Homes' target market for its newest model – The Mugello. "They expect their new home to meet and exceed their expectations," says Kathy Harwick, director of sales and marketing of Harwick Homes in Naples, Fla. "It must have exceptional finishes and interiors and be built to the highest standards available."

Opportunity

The Mugello model is part of Bonita Bay Group's master planned community Mediterra. Harwick Homes wanted to demonstrate a gracious home with five bedrooms, an elevator and a home theater with less than 6,500 sq. ft. "That's what the attempt was, but it turned out to be 6,725 sq. ft.," says Rick Harwick, president of Harwick Homes. "Because of the sizes we use for the hallways and corridors and what people perceive to be the proper size rooms at our price point, it's really tough to get it in that square footage."

Harwick wanted The Mugello to remain within the general area of 6,500 sq. ft. to be marketable. "Any time you do a model, the important thing is to try to get it where you think the market's going to be, and have it marketable so it moves fast," Rick Harwick says. "If you move fast, then you've hit some part of the market accordingly."

>> BY **LAURA BUTALLA,** *SENIOR EDITOR*



THE MUGELLO IN NAPLES, FLA., OFFERS plenty of space for indoor and outdoor entertainment, including the attached guest house with a separate corridor and garage.

TAYLOR ARCHITECT PHOTOGRAPHY

VITAL STATS
The Mugello

Location: Naples, Fla.
Neighborhood: Mediterra
Builder: Harwick Homes, Naples, Fla.
Architect: Eric Brown Design Group, Bonita Springs, Fla.
Interior Designer: Collins + DuPont, Bonita Springs, Fla.
Developer: Bonita Bay Group, Bonita Springs, Fla.
Model opened: Jan. 15, 2005
Home type: Mediterranean Style, single family
Sales to date: Model sold, plus four homes in process of being built
Community size: 1,700 acres
Square footage: 6,725 sq. ft.
Price: $5.4 million
Hard cost: $425.00 per sq. ft.
Buyer profile: Empty nesters, retirees and very affluent couples

That's Entertainment

Harwick Homes' target buyers crave entertainment space. To attract those buyers and make it even more marketable, The Mugello sports an oversized family room of 24 ft. x 28 ft. that connects to the kitchen and theater. Off the family room, an outdoor space includes a kitchen that features a gas grill, a refrigerator, stucco cabinets and granite countertops.

The indoor kitchen works well for entertaining, too. "The lifestyle of the kitchen was important," says Sherri DuPont, president of Bonita Springs, Fla.-based Collins + DuPont, the interior design firm. "Everyone who tours the home comments on how much they would enjoy working in this kitchen and how well the spaces work for both meal making and entertaining."

Little details in the kitchen enhance its look yet allow it to remain functional. "We began by designing a groin vault for the kitchen area," says DuPont. "In each of the four corners below the vault, we placed 27- by 27-inch cabinets. These were designed to be low enough to see over but high enough to separate the kitchen properly from the breakfast and bar area." The cabinet size and position allows guests sitting in the breakfast and bar area to be part of the kitchen activities.

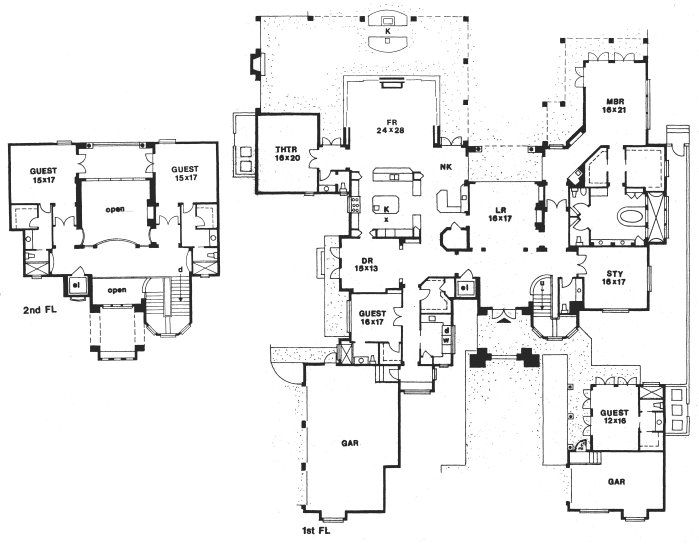
Many other functional features — such as refrigerated drawers, a built-in Miele coffee system, two stainless steel dishwashers and a paneled side-by-side refrigerator and freezer — enhance the kitchen. A tumbled-stone hood tops the six-burner Wolf gas stove and shattered-stone backsplash surrounding the window overlooking the formal outdoor garden.

Plenty of outdoor space surrounds The Mugello, breaking the barrier between indoor entertaining and outdoor entertaining. "The true outdoor living area is immediately outside the family room," says Rick Harwick.

In Naples, it's a prerequisite to have an outdoor fireplace with a seating area around it. "It has to flow with the interplay of traffic flow between that area and the pool area," says Rick Harwick.

Harwick Homes also bridges the entertaining areas with the family areas by shifting the pool toward the master suite. "Most of our clients want the spa and pool close to the master bedroom," says Rick Harwick, "When guests aren't visiting, it's more convenient on the master side."

THE KITCHEN IS DESIGNED TO PROVIDE plenty of space for cooking and entertaining. Below: Like the entire house, the kitchen and living room were designed to focus on intimate details.



THE MUGELLO HAS a spacious floor plan and a well-configured layout for entertaining.

Staying consistent with the entertainment theme, The Mugello offers four separate guest suites, all with private bathrooms. One guest suite resides next to the formal dining room, while another attaches to the front of the house with a separate corridor and garage. The two remaining suites are located on the second floor, separate from the rest of the home.

Outcome

The Mugello model home sold for $5.4 million five months after opening on Jan. 15, 2005. Several other Mugello homes with similar yet larger floor plans are currently in contract. A smaller version of The Mugello is also in the process of being built.

Meeting and exceeding the buyer's standards is exactly what The Mugello model did. "This model incorporates expressive finishes, custom cabinetry and architectural elements to create a unique statement, one that emphasizes the Florida lifestyle and the home's setting," says Kathy Harwick. **PB**

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A Zero Energy Home for the Rest of Us

Ideal Homes builds the first affordable zero energy home and stimulates sales in Valencia, its first master planned community.

>> BY **FELICIA OLIVER,** *SENIOR EDITOR*

IDEAL HOMES BUILT THE FIRST ZERO ENERGY HOME in the country priced under $200,000. The modest one-story, three-bedroom, two bathroom home produces as much energy as it consumes in a year, achieving net zero energy consumption.

Ideal Homes of Norman, Okla., winner of the 2006 National Housing Quality Gold Award, prides itself on its commitment to building high-performance homes.

"For years we've done test sites — homes we built to try out the latest in energy-efficient building," said Vernon McKown, co-founder and president of sales for Ideal Homes. "We learned from all of them and incorporated the best practices into every one of the homes we've built since."

Ideal Homes' most recent test home, one of several done in partnership with the U.S. Department of Energy's Building America program, is the first affordable zero energy home (ZEH).

A ZEH is connected to the utility grid, but at off-peak time periods, it generates more power than it uses by combining renewable energy technologies with advanced energy-efficient construction. As a result, a ZEH lowers the power demand on its utility provider. It produces about as much energy as it consumes during a year, so it is considered to achieve "net zero" energy consumption.

Other builders have constructed zero energy homes. AndersonSargent Custom Builder L.P., which won the NAHB Research Center's 2006 Energy Value Housing Award for Builder of the Year, built its first ZEH in Frisco, Texas, just outside of Dallas, in 2004. The home retailed in the $1 million range.

Ideal Homes is the first to build a ZEH under $200,000, making this model home affordable for most home buyers. The house was completed in September 2005.

"What Vern did," says George S. James, Building America project leader for Ideal Homes' affordable ZEH, "with my Building Science Consortium, is build a prototype to see what it would take to really do it at a price, at least in Oklahoma, that was not excessive. His houses normally sell for about $125,000, something like that. With the 5.3 kW photo cells and the ground source heat pump and so on, the selling cost is about $200,000."

"Zero energy homes get a black eye in my mind," says McKown, "Every time they do a demonstration site, they run out and they hire some brilliant architect and they go off and they build this one-off amazing house that sticks out of the neighborhood like a prairie chicken, and it costs a million dollars. Everybody looks at that and says, 'That's interesting. With enough money, you can do anything.'

"We wanted to show that you can take any house out of a builder's product line," McKown continues, "and make it a zero energy house and it would look and feel and be just like a regular house, and it doesn't have to cost a million dollars. We could do it under $200,000."

Ideal Homes' ZEH measures about 1,650 sq. ft. and has three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a two-car garage. It's based on one of the builder's stock floor plans.

"The AndersonSargent house in Dallas was a 3,000-square-foot house that sold for a million dollars," says McKown. It made the front page of 50 newspapers worldwide.

"Our little house was so ordinary that it was not interesting," adds McKown. "I just think the ordinary nature of it was what made it so extraordinary."

VITAL STATS
Ideal Homes' Zero Energy Home

Location: Edmond, Okla.
Neighborhood: Valencia
Builder/Architect: Ideal Homes, Norman, Okla.
Home type: Traditional one-story
Sales: 140 homes between June and December 2005
Community size: 600 acres, 2,100 units
Square footage: The zero energy house is 1,644
Price: The ZEH is just under $200,000

PHOTOVOLTAICS placed on the south-facing roof of Ideal Homes' Zero Energy Home captures energy from the sun to help offset consumption.

McKown is good friends with Jim Sargent, a principle for AndersonSargent, and says Sargent actually helped him work through a lot of the details of his affordable ZEH.

"Jim's claim to fame is building really high-performance little houses," says McKown. "He calls them jewel boxes. He's a lot prouder of his little high-performance houses than his big zero energy house, although his zero energy house was a blast for him."

Opportunities

The ZEH has been a great traffic draw for Ideal Homes' Valencia neighborhood — its first master-planned community located in Edmond, Okla.

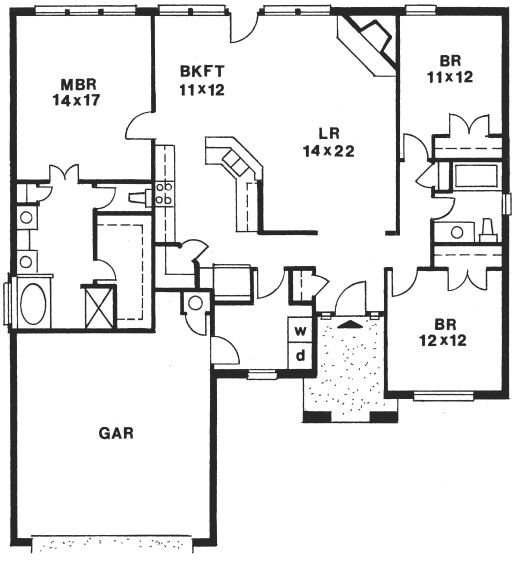
"It's a very green-focused community," says McKown. "It has 40 acres of parks and trails in it. At the design concept, we engineered a process to capture all our drainage water and use it in a series of retention ponds, and then we used those ponds to irrigate the common areas. The irrigation system is solar-powered."

Participating in a demonstration house has advantages of its own.

"We did an American Lung Association Health House back in 1997," says McKown. "We've done I don't know how many Build America houses, but a bunch of them. Every time we build a new demonstration house, we learn a tremendous amount in terms of new technologies that we end up mainstreaming in our everyday product.

"For instance," says McKown, "when we did our American Lung Association Health House, we piloted several different ventilation strategies. And then all of a sudden, we made a fresh-air ventilation strategy part of a standard feature in our houses.

"We knew that if we built this zero energy house," adds McKown, "there might be some low-hanging fruit that could come out of it that you could see Ideal Homes introduce in the next 18 months in our everyday production houses. That's why it was important to us."



Challenges

Ideal Homes normally incorporates energy-efficient construction methods like fresh-air indoor HVAC systems; low-e vinyl windows; and insulation systems in walls, ceilings and around foundations. In addition, for the ZEH, it placed photovoltaics on the south-facing roof to capture energy from the sun and help offset consumption; used ground source heat pumps buried underground to harness the earth's constant temperature to heat in winter and cool in summer; installed tankless hot water systems that heat water instantly when the tap is turned on, conserving energy by not maintaining heated water 24 hours a day; and added energy recovery ventilation to maximize operating efficiency.

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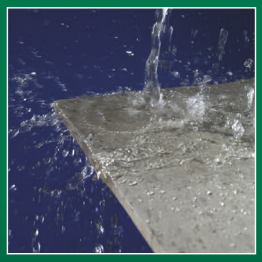

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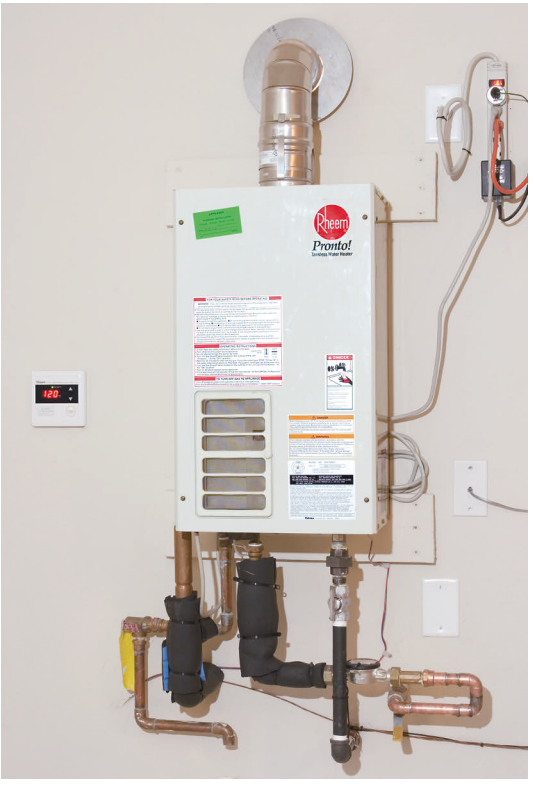

IDEAL HOMES' ZERO ENERGY HOME TECHNOLOGY: An inverter (top left) converts DC current from the solar cells on the roof to usable AC current. A Rheem tankless hot water system (upper right) provides hot water instantly when the tap is turned on, conserving energy by eliminating the need for a heated reservoir 24 hours a day. A tankless system remote control (lower left) with digital display.

The use of these renewable energy technologies can be pricey, but costs remain similar regardless of the price of the home.

"We looked at what would be the most cost-effective way to get it done," says McKown. "We tried to keep it as standard as possible, so that was our first piece of it. The second one was just being very sensitive to the cost of things. For instance, we could have done the ground source heat pump and integrated the hot water tank system, but we could install a tankless hot water system cheaper and get the same net result. Or we could have gotten the solar hot water tank, but again, it was significantly more than the tankless hot water system, so when it came to hot water, we went with the most economical option.

"Another consideration we looked at was ducts in conditioned space," McKown continues. "[That] was going to cost us more than $500, and in terms of heeding the performance metrics and getting to zero [energy] on our model, it had a very minimal impact on the performance. Five-hundred dollars is so trivial, but when you're trying to do affordability, you've just got to make those $100 decisions at every 'Y' in the crossroads or you'll look up and be $50,000 or $60,000 into the system with marginal return."

Success

The ZEH model is a test house and is not an available plan for purchase, but it has created so much interest and traffic at Valencia that sales in the community are brisk — they've averaged 20 homes per month since June of 2005. Ideal Homes has had an increase in requests for tankless water heaters, ground source heat pumps and other elements of the ZEH, but not for a replica of the ZEH.

"We've actually put out an information sheet to give to customers on where to get a tankless hot water heater ... where to get photovoltaics, the brands we used. People wanted to buy it in pieces.

"People were more interested in high-performance houses," McKown adds. "We had a couple thousand people through the model, and a large majority of them wanted to get more information about how they could buy a more super energy-efficient house, not necessarily a zero energy house."

The ZEH will be rented out for one year so that its energy performance can be monitored, and then the house will be sold. Projected proceeds from the sale have already been donated to the Central Oklahoma Habitat for Humanity. **PB**

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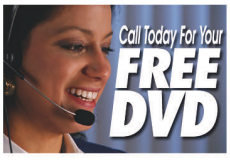

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Keith Harrell

Known for his energetic, innovative presentations, Keith Harrell is a dynamic life coach who specializes in changing behaviors through a positive attitude. While growing up in Seattle, he aspired to become a professional basketball player. Although he never realized that dream, The Wall Street Journal says, "What sets him apart . . . is driving ambition and an attitude that refuses to flag." Through his company, Harrell Performance Systems and his book *Attitude is Everything: Ten Life Changing Steps to Turning Attitude into Action*, Keith specializes in helping companies achieve and maintain their goals. Harrell spent 14 years at IBM, where he was recognized as one of the top sales and training instructors. He is widely regarded as one of the country's best speakers.

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>> BY **FELICIA OLIVER,** *SENIOR EDITOR*

Proactive Solutions

>> **WATERTIGHT FOUNDATIONS**

Concrete solutions for moisture lurking below the surface

By combining a good drainage system and proper grading, you can build foundations that will remain safe and dry for years.

In the past, basements have conjured images of damp, uncomfortable and uninviting dark enclaves. But today's basements can be comfortable, safe, welcoming retreats — replete with recreation rooms, home theaters, wet bars and extra sleeping quarters.

"Most people can be in a basement now and not even know they are underground," says Ed Sauter, executive director of the Concrete Foundations Association.

"People are wanting bigger houses," adds Sauter. "It costs a lot of money to buy big enough sites to build them. So the cheapest way of adding livable building space is to build a basement."

For builders erecting a home that's slab on grade or only has a crawlspace, moisture proofing is important. Builders planning on a finished basement with all the bells and whistles owe it to themselves and their customers to protect the home buyer's investment by using the best waterproofing methods.

Concrete is the most common material for foundation construction. It provides a stable, fairly permanent base for a home, as well as an effective barrier from the elements, rodents, fire, noise and, of course, water.

"It is a relatively impermeable, impervious material," says Dana Bres, research engineer with the Partnership for Advancing Technology in Housing program. "Water doesn't naturally go through concrete. As a result, a poured concrete wall does provide a physical barrier to moisture."

Concrete masonry blocks, once the standard, are still used sometimes, but the block connection joints are vulnerable to leakage.

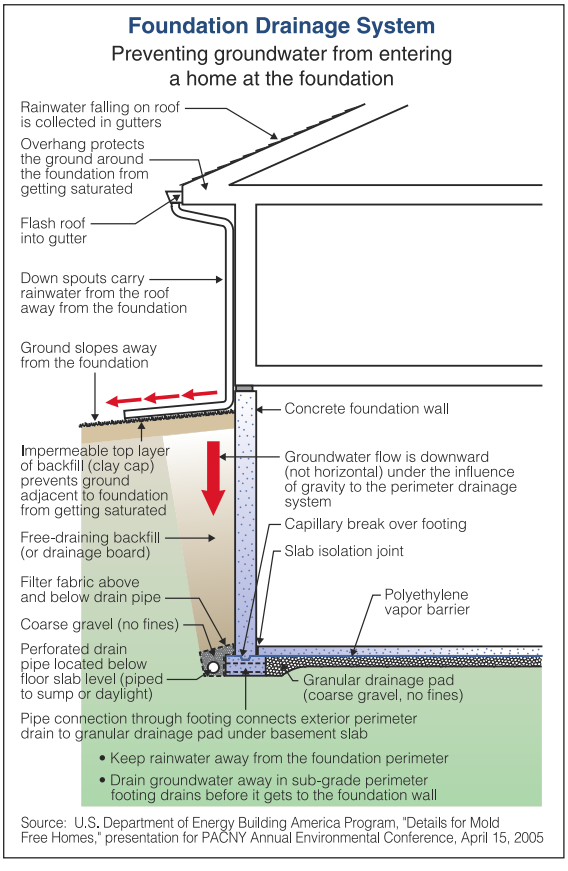
Poured concrete walls are the predominant choice for foundation construction today, but pre-cast cement walls are gaining popularity.

"Because [they are] built in a factory," says Bres, "the concrete is cured in ideal conditions, so it's very impervious, very resistant to moisture. They not only speed construction, but because the concrete is done in the factory under those conditions, the walls are much tighter, and they are able to set the wall panels and then begin construction very quickly."

Using concrete for foundation construction goes a long way toward guarding against dampness and leakage. Builders should investigate the various means of protecting concrete to make sure the foundation wall is as water resistant as possible.

"The foundation waterproofing system is really a system. It's not just a product," says Sauter. "It starts with having proper drainage away from the structure after the backfilling operation is complete. I think [International Residential] Code stipulates an inch per foot for at least 6 feet. That should be the actual slope away from the building after allowance for settlement."

"This is where both the builder and the homeowner both enjoy responsibilities," says Bres. "After you backfill around a home, if you just dump the dirt in, as it settles you will actually create a trench



A THOROUGH FOUNDATION DRAINAGE SYSTEM, with concrete walls as the cornerstone, defends against all entry points for moisture and groundwater.

Proactive Solutions

there down below the surface. Water will have a tendency to pond there. So both the builder and the homeowner need to then help reestablish the grade so that the highest soil is near the house."

Also make sure downspouts are not dumping water right at the foundation. Sauter says it's a good idea to install wider eaves on the house to move the drip line further away from the foundation.

Section R406 of the 2003 International Residential Code states that concrete and masonry foundation walls must be waterproofed or damp roofed, depending on the soil and groundwater.

"This process ranges from use of bituminous coatings, hot mopped felt, 6-millimeter PVC or polyethylene, or other products," says Bres.

"Damp proofing [products are] usually sprayed or brushed on," says Sauter. "The purpose is to slow down movement of water vapor through the wall, which give [basements that] damp feel."

But damp proofing will not prevent standing water from moving through a wall. And if cracks occur in the concrete, damp proofing won't prevent moisture from entering the basement through those cracks.

With a waterproofing agent, "you could have cracks all over that basement, and if the waterproofing is doing its job, the basement will stay dry," says Sauter.

To be effective, waterproofing needs to be seamless, it must be expandable to seal up cracks and it must be able to withstand hydrostatic water pressure.

There are a number of waterproofing products — spray-and brush-on coatings as well as applied sheeting — that are used to waterproof concrete.

There are products that use bentonite, an aluminum silicate clay that expands when it gets wet, thus sealing up any cracks or pores in the concrete. There are also spray-on emulsion products that have an elastic finish. And there are plastic sheeting products to apply against the foundation wall and hold into place during backfill.

In addition, there are products designed to create a drainage plane around the house.

"By creating a drainage plane," says Bres, "you have a spot where there's no soil or anything up against the wall, so there's nothing to impede any bulk amount or droplet of water from running down the drainage plane to a basement, to a footer drain."

Section R405 of the 2003 International Residential Code requires foundation drainage around all concrete or masonry foundations.

"Typically a good drainage system will start with a geotechnical fiber that lines the bottom of the foundation excavation around the outside of that basement wall," says Terry Collins, concrete construction engineer with Portland Concrete Association.

"You set a perforated [drain] pipe on [top of the] geotechnical fiber, with the top of the pipe level with the top of the footing. And you cover that with 12 to 16 inches of a coarse, clean, granular material. You cover the pipe with that and then you fold that geotechnical fiber down over the top of that, so that the pipe in that open chamber of coarse material is encased with the geotechnical fiber. That will prevent soil from being washed into that open chamber system and plugging it.

"You either take a pipe and daylight it out in the landscaping somewhere well away from the structure," Collins continues, "or you take it into a sump, and you put in a pump in that sump to pump the water away."

When all is said and done, good quality construction is key to building a dry, water-resistant wall. **PB**

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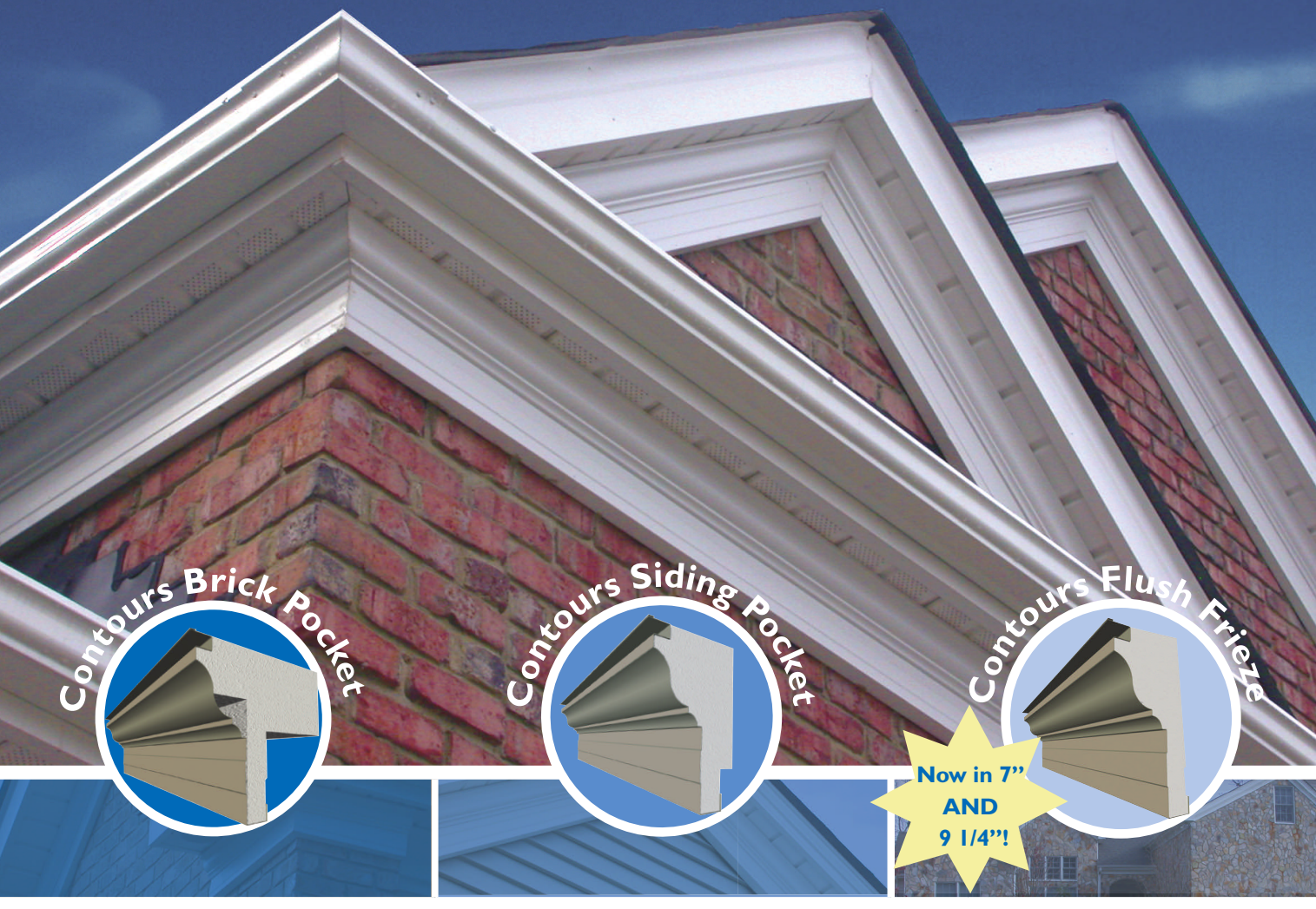

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>> BY **JENNIFER BLOCK MARTIN,** *CONTRIBUTING EDITOR*

APPLICATIONS: MOISTURE PROOFING TILE APPLICATIONS

Just Add Water

Sounds harmless enough, until it comes to waterproofing tile applications.

Good ol' H_2O is a tile setter's nemesis, with damaging results that can include mold, mildew, bacteria and efflorescence, as well as tile and substrate buckling, cupping, rotting or cracking. In today's air-tight construction environments, how do builders keep water, moisture and vapor from jeopardizing plans?

The Tile Council of North America's handbook describes a wet area as "either soaked, saturated or regularly and frequently subjected to moisture or liquids (usually water)."

Wet areas require some type of waterproofing or resistance to protect the structure. If they don't, "water will assuredly migrate through the grout, backer board or concrete substrate into the adjoining framing members," says Dave Gobis, a third-generation tile setter and executive director of the Ceramic Tile Education Foundation.

Unfortunately, there's no one method to controlling moisture, according to Shannon Woodmansee, Tile Council of North America's director of membership and public relations.

"There are so many variables," she says. "It depends on the room you're in, the mud you're using, the backer board, the tile. It's even different by region."

Despite the numerous variables for controlling moisture, tile industry professionals are able to offer universal advice to builders for keeping water from ruining tile applications.

Choose the right membranes

The first tip, says Joe Tarver, a 48-year tile business veteran and executive director emeritus of National Tile Contractors Association, is to understand that "waterproofing is a misnomer."

Anthony Flynn, senior technical services representative of C-Cure, knows there are misconceptions. "When you say 'waterproof membranes,' you're making a statement that water will not pass through this barrier."

According to the tile council, there are two forms of waterproof membranes to use with vertical and horizontal thin- and thick-bed installations of ceramic tile:

- Single- or multicomponent membranes applied in liquid or paste form, which cure into continuous membranes
- Membranes applied in a flexible sheet form.

Some of these membranes have integral reinforcing fabrics for tensile strength and minor crack-bridging properties. Others are designed to be used as both waterproofing and tile-setting material.

In bathrooms, [people put the membrane on] the ceiling, floor and under plywood countertops, especially near the dishwasher, where moisture can get in and cause expansion."

"A single-component liquid application works best for builders," says Leigh Hightower, president of the Materials and Methods Standards Association and Texas Cement Products' director of business development.

The trend now, Flynn says, is to use membranes as cheap insurance. "In bathrooms, [people put the membrane on] the ceiling, floor and under plywood countertops, especially near the dishwasher, where moisture can get in and cause expansion," he says.

Select the right mortar

Choosing the right mortar bed is also important and depends on the product. The tile council notes that manufacturers may require tile products be installed on a reinforced portland cement mortar bed applied over the membrane; applied directly

PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

on the membrane with a thin-set application of dry-set or latex-portland cement mortar; or thin-set to the membrane using a troweled application of the waterproofing membrane product.

Diligently Treat Showers

The shower is the most obvious place builders need to be diligent about their tile applications.

Regarding shower pans, Richard Maurer, Nobles' director of marketing, says, "Not all trades will do a slope and not all codes will require it. So in the shower, a plumber may put the waterproofing on flat and not create a slope with packing mud."

Maurer warns of moisture in walls, especially enough condensation from an outside wall for mold to grow. He advises, "Make sure niches for soap or other uses are encased in extruded polystyrene insulation," which has excellent resistance to moisture absorption.

"Traditionally, a lot of water can create a crack in the grout, and then the mortar gets wet and you have a saturated bed," Maurer says. "It's a good idea to do a thin-bed waterproofing — put the membrane right on top of the slope so it's closer to the tile. In thin-bed installation, tile gets bonded to the membrane."

Use caulk for intersecting planes such as walls and floors, and at tub surrounds. "Due to structural movement with wood construction, you want caulk instead of hard grout in these intersections," Hightower says.

Select backer boards that work

For use on floors, walls and ceilings in wet areas, the handbook recommends cementitious backer board, cementitious coated foam boards, coated glass mat water-resistant gypsum backer board and fiber-cement underlayments. Fiber-reinforced, water-resistant gypsum backer board and underlayment should be used in limited water-exposure areas like foyers, kitchen countertops, bathroom floors and vertical surfaces, including tub surrounds without a shower head. All can be applied directly to wood or metal wall studs or over wood subfloors. Bonding materials vary.

Hightower steers builders toward cementitious board and away from green board (paper-faced, moisture-resistant wallboard) and noncoated or unreinforced gypsum. "Green and gypsum [boards] are not resistant to water," he says. "Even the gypsum associations don't recommend them for wet areas. It's an education process for the contractor and even tile contractors. You want something that won't deteriorate when wet."

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Hightower stresses that builders need to follow the handbook. "Most aren't familiar with the recommendations," he says.

But tile professionals warn builders about closely following manufacturers' instructions. "Today's highly engineered products may offer ease of application," Gobis says. "However, they are unforgiving of failure to follow instructions."

"I highly recommend that builders of multiple homes contact the manufacturers directly to find out what products to use rather than depending on a tile subcontractor who might use the cheapest product for the job," Hightower says.

Gobis offers more advice: "I would also strongly suggest that whenever you do use a manufacturer's waterproofing system, you use the complete system. Mixing installation systems and products is asking for disaster given the highly engineered products used today." **PB**

Jennifer Block Martin is a San Francisco-based writer whose articles have appeared in Custom Builder, Better Homes and Gardens' Special Interest Publications, Sunset and Women's Day Home Remodeling & Makeovers.

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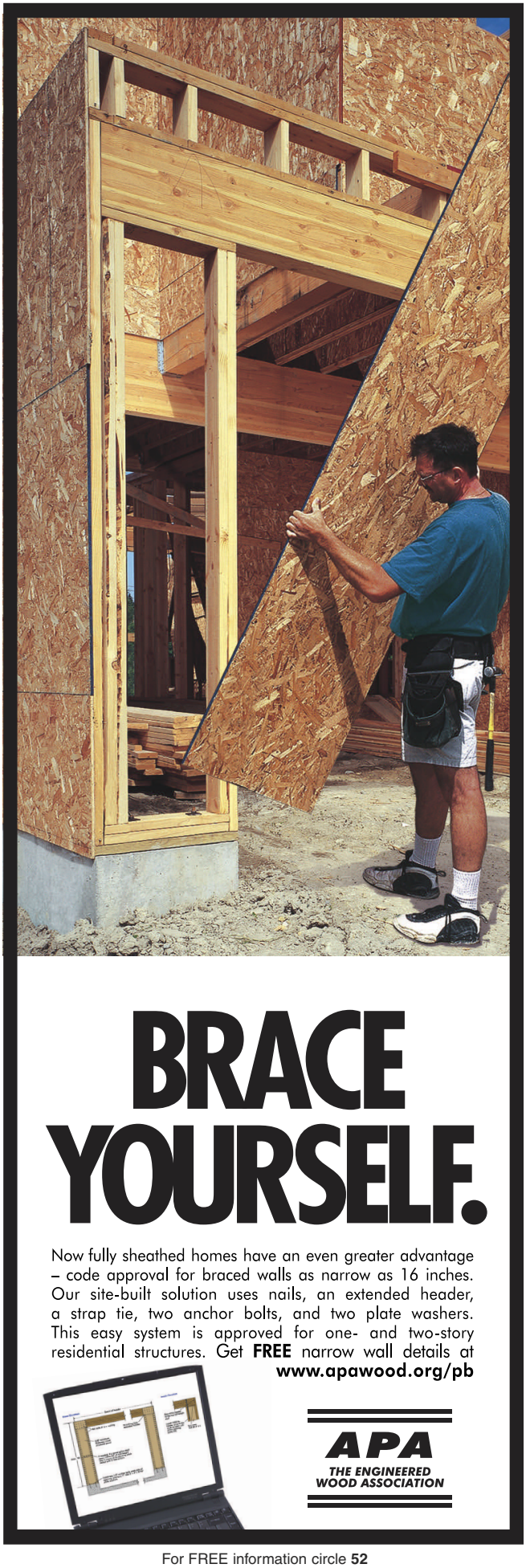

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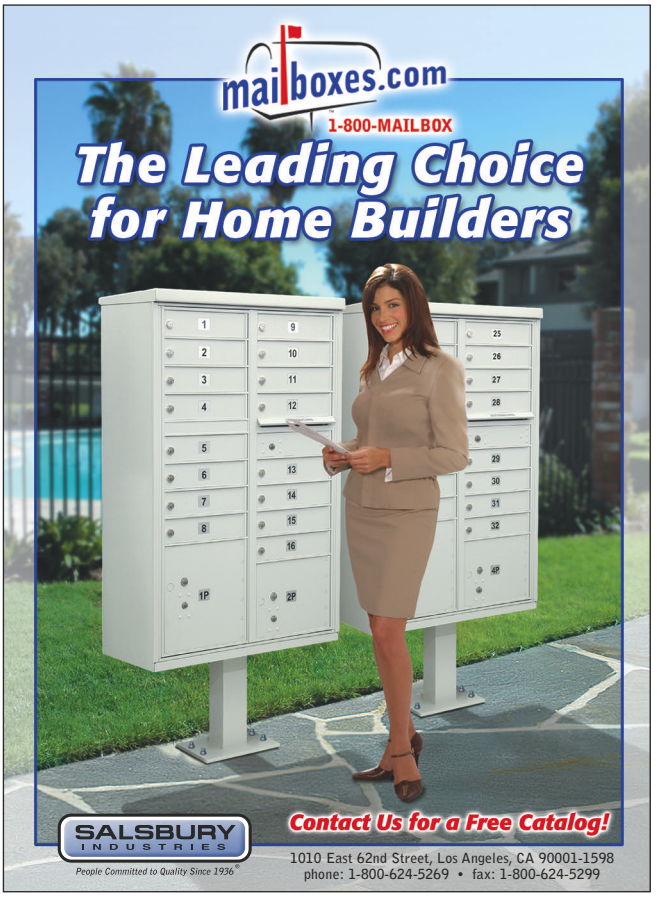

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>> BY **SCOTT T. SHEPHERD,** *PATH PARTNERS*

PATH REPORT

A Home for the Ages

Builders find benefits in aging-in-place design.

According to the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, by 2030, about 20 percent of the U.S. population will be classified as elderly. Over the next 50 years, the percentage of retirees will more than double.

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Many segments of the U.S. market are not prepared for this dramatic demographic change, and the housing market is no exception. The majority of homes under construction are not designed for the homeowner 10 or 20 years from now.

That's where aging-in-place design comes in, helping homeowners to remain in their homes safely, independently and comfortably regardless of age, income or physical ability.

AARP reports 89 percent of the 55-and-older population wants to stay in their homes as long as possible.

And all those baby boomers? Many home buyers 45 years and older will want modifications that ensure they maintain their independence for years to come.

Savvy builders will use this opportunity to improve home quality and home sales.

Life Lessons

Thanks to AARP, more home buyers are beginning to ask builders for aging-in-place designs.

"It was pretty rare, but now it seems like people are actually thinking about things like switch placement and cabinet height," says Michael Kuzenski, a project manager for Dallas production builder Hawkins-Welwood Homes.

Many builders report clients have a limited understanding of aging in place — but when they learn more, they're sold.

"It makes practical sense to most of them, regardless of their age group," says John Overbeck, owner of Turning Leaf Homes Inc., a small custom-home builder in Saranac, Mich.

"People want to be prepared," Overbeck says. "I've done aging-in-place design for families who want their homes to be more accessible for aging relatives."

> **It seems like people are actually thinking about things like switch placement and cabinet height.**

Every Little Thing

The main reason people are sold on aging in place is that it often doesn't cost anything. Many aging-in-place design features don't cost anything *now,* but if overlooked, they'll cost a whole lot later on.

Many measures are small, like adding lever handles on faucets and doors; installing grab bars in baths and showers; lowering light switches and raising outlets; lowering window heights; and even using higher-contrast color schemes to empower people with weakening eyesight. It's also helpful to think long-term about lighting placement, to ensure consistent light through the room.

Another quick and inexpensive feature is widening doorways and hallways — preferably to 36 inches or wider.

"Wider doors and hallways make a home feel much larger and comfortable. It has a much greater impact on the feel of a home than a slightly larger room," says Jim Wurzel, a builder for The Cambridge Company of Vienna, Va.

Which goes to show that many features in aging-in-place design accommodate not just the elderly but improve comfort for the rest of the family as well.

Rooms for the Future

Many measures can be adopted in kitchens and bathrooms.

"Those are the two areas that pose the biggest problems to people who need a little bit of extra help," says Overbeck.

In the bathroom, install a grab bar in the shower or tub, or, at the very least, leave a place for it to be installed in the future. Other options include replacing shower door tracks with a trackless system. In the case of a stand-up shower, builders can consider a curbless entry to allow easier access. An integral or fold-up shower seat will aid someone with less mobility or leg strength. A high-rise toilet will also be helpful to someone in a wheelchair.

In the kitchen, consider modifications to allow under-counter knee space for people in wheelchairs or who need to be seated due to back or leg problems. Similar benefits are obtained with pull-out shelves, which provide accessible work surfaces and storage for all members of a household.

Various appliances, such as side-by-side refrigerators and stoves with front-mounted controls, offer greater accessibility. Place the microwave or wall oven 31 inches off the floor, while the dishwasher and front-loaded clothes washers and dryers can be elevated 6 to 8 inches off the floor. They should be accessible from both the right and left sides.

Better Design, Better Business

AARP helps teach builders through its work with the NAHB Certified Aging in Place Specialist (CAPS) designation program.

NAHB's three-day curriculum has three parts: techniques for working with older adults and marketing to them, specific home modification measures, and business management skills.

"It's very good training. I use it all of the time," Kuzenski says. "We gear a lot of our townhouses to empty nesters, so it has become very useful for me. With the elderly folks who are interested in no maintenance or who do a lot of traveling, this is the perfect opportunity to use these principles."

While the CAPS course does focus on a lot of retrofit and remodeling situations, builders should have no problems culling valuable information from the course. **PB**

Scott T. Shepherd writes about better building practices on behalf of PATH. Scott is an associate with D&R International, an environmental consulting firm with offices in Maryland and California.

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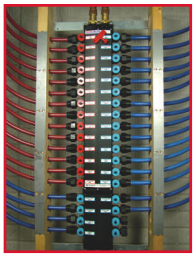

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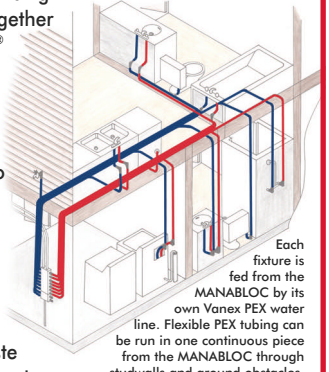

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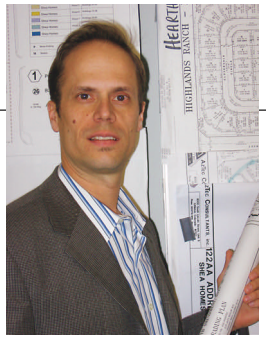
Shea Homes Colorado



Chip Pennington, Community Development Manager
Shea Homes Colorado, Highlands Ranch, Colo.

Trex Accents Decking
www.trex.com

Trex Accents decking combines all the rich textures and colors of nature in a deck material that stands the test of time. Planks feature a natural wood-grain pattern on one side and a smooth, contemporary look on the other. The reversible planks provide unprecedented freedom to create unique and dramatic outdoor spaces for your buyers.

In My Own Words

"Trex decking is easy to use and easy to install. Everything is straight and readily available. Most important of all, we can provide a variety of textures and colors to fit a customer's lifestyle. We switched to Trex from Ipe, a Brazilian hardwood, which initially was very beautiful but aged very poorly. Trex is beautiful from day one."

Boise Engineered Lumber
www.bc.com

Structural beams, joists and rim boards from Boise Engineered Wood Products work as a complete system to deliver a strong, reliable and cost-effective residential framing solution. Boise's new BCI Joists now feature the widest flange in the industry, giving the framer a bigger target area to hit with the nail gun, making these joists even easier and faster to install.

In My Own Words

"I've had a chance to tour this manufacturer's facilities. Boise uses responsible and sustainable forestry practices, and they are very environmentally friendly. That's important to the Shea family. I like the local support they provide through their Boise distribution center. They have the best people in the business there to assist you when you need help."

>> Shea Homes Colorado cont'd

DensShield Tile Backer
www.gp.com

DensShield from Georgia-Pacific is a tile-backer board with glass-mat facings and a unique acrylic coating that blocks moisture from entering the wall cavity. Whether you are looking for moisture protection, strength or ease of installation, DensShield dramatically outperforms heavy, hard-to-install cement board and fiber cement board products.

In My Own Words

"We try to look at the life of our homes well past the warranty period. DensShield provides a superior barrier to moisture penetration in areas such as showers and bathrooms. It is as easy to apply as our previous drywall product, and we have encountered very few problems transitioning to this product, mainly because of the way it is manufactured. It works really well."

James Hardie Siding
www.jameshardie.com

James Hardie fiber-cement siding is noncombustible and resists rotting or cracking, as well as damage from rain, hail and flying debris. Available pre-finished with a 15-year paint warranty, the product also comes with a limited, transferable warranty for up to 50 years.

In My Own Words

"Our vision is to build communities rather than neighborhoods. Hardie helps us meet that vision. I like James Hardie products because of their durability and appearance, as well as the support we get from the company. They have grown into the biggest and best in the industry because they provide a good product with good support. We use a lot of the Hardiplank siding. Being able to deliver a product that we know will look as good 20 years down the line as the day we delivered it makes me feel very good."

Carrier High-Efficiency Furnaces
www.carrier.com

The Infinity gas furnace from Carrier is so advanced, it automatically adjusts to the system's needs for peak efficiency and performance while allowing homeowners to control temperature, humidity, air quality, fan speed and ventilation. It even detects when the air filter needs replacing. If a safety device activates for any reason, the Infinity will stop and alert the homeowner to any potential problems through a status code displayed on its control board. Shown here is the Infinity 96, with maximum energy efficiency up to 96.6 percent annual fuel utilization efficiency.

In My Own Words

"Trying to be responsible and energy-efficient, we've partnered with Carrier's 90-percent efficiency furnaces. Carrier provides a consistent, excellent, low-cost alternative for a superior product. The support staff is willing, ready and able to help out when needed. When we looked to partner with a supplier of energy efficient furnaces, Carrier was clearly our best choice."

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>> BY RHONDA JACKSON, *BUILDINGPRODUCTS@REEDBUSINESS.COM*

Universal Forest Products

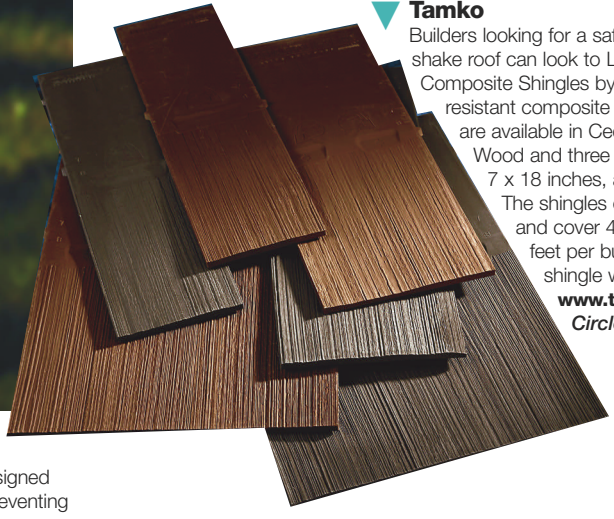
Universal Forest Products has added four new leaded-glass post caps to its Latitudes Ornamental line. These jewel-toned glass post caps are available in garnet and sapphire with two additional designs that are a take-off from Tiffany & Co. The post caps can be combined with UFP's new line of aluminum and glass balusters. **www.ufpi.com**
Circle 125 on inquiry card

Owens Corning

The Monticello Trim Collection from Owens Corning combines custom stone trim with an adhered veneer application. Designed for interior and exterior applications, this trim collection can be applied to walls, windows, doors and entryways. The trim is available in tawny and gray in a variety of trim, molding, sill and keystone offerings. The trim pieces are available in left, right or center pieces and can be used in conjunction with stucco or exterior insulated finish systems. **www.culturedstone.com**.
Circle 127 on inquiry card

Tamko

Builders looking for a safe and low-maintenance shake roof can look to Lamarite Shake Composite Shingles by Tamko. Made of fire-resistant composite materials, the shingles are available in Cedar and Weathered Wood and three sizes: 5 x 18 inches, 7 x 18 inches, and 12 x 18 inches. The shingles come in bundles of 16 and cover 4.44 to 10.67 square feet per bundle, depending on shingle width and exposure. **www.tamko.com**.
Circle 128 on inquiry card



Grace Construction Products

Grace Construction Products' Roof Detail Membrane is designed specifically for waterproofing critical roof detail areas and preventing costly water damage. The membrane conforms tightly to these areas, reducing the risk of water infiltration. The product is applied to the roof deck before applying the finished roof covering, forming a weather-tight barrier against leaks caused by water backup from ice dams or wind-driven rain.
www.graceconstruction.com.
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Fypon

Fypon has added a line of low-maintenance, urethane window shutters for home exteriors. Ten styles in two-panel, three-panel and diagonal V-styles are now available in pre-primed and wood grain stainable versions. Additionally, a section of white louvered solid panel and louvered slatted panel shutters are now offered in 24 different sizes and seven styles.
www.fypon.com.
Circle 129 on inquiry card

GE

GE Plastics, Centerpoint Translucent Systems and Cabot have formed a partnership for the production of a new translucent roofing system. It consist of GE's Lexan resin multiwall sheet, Cabot's Nanogel and Centerpoint's roofing system to form a new translucent roofing system that provides natural light while maintaining energy efficiency and sound insulation. This roofing system can be installed in roof domes, skylights, walkways and conservatories. It can also handle wind loads of up to 140 mph and is UV-resistant. **www.cptsystems.com.**
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Royal Mouldings

Royal Trim Board has released a premium, 100 percent cellular vinyl PVC trim product. This trim board is manufactured to create a colorfast, two-sided finish. Boards are delivered unfinished and ready to paint. **www.royalmouldings.com.**
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And...

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With your written nomination, please send on your letterhead:

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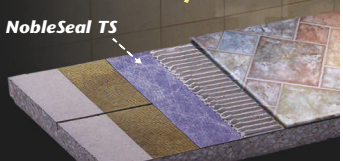

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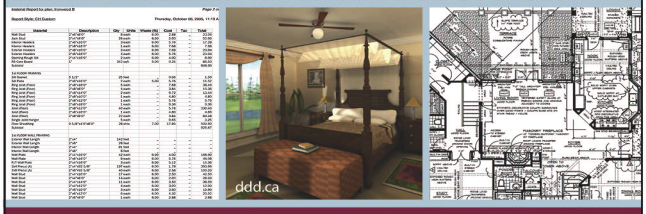

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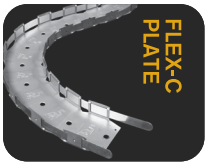

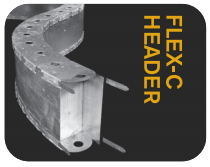

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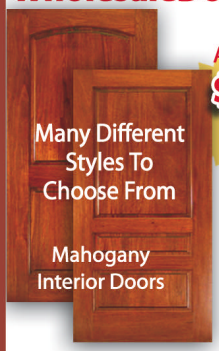

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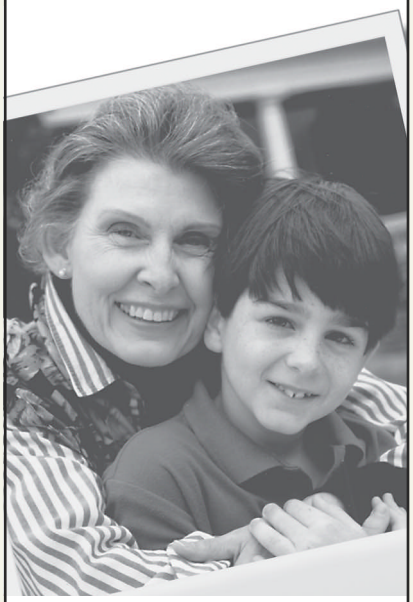

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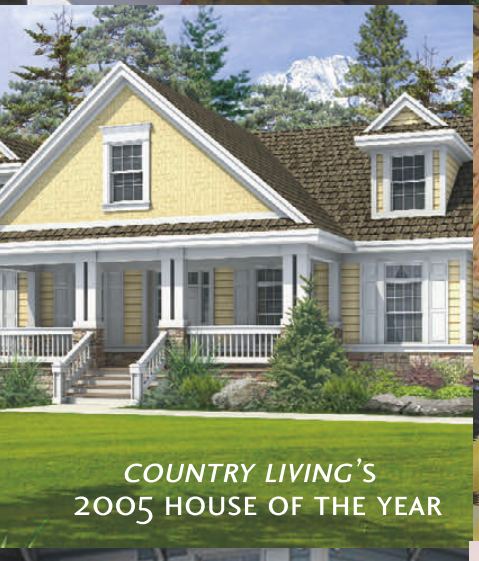

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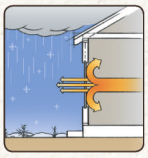

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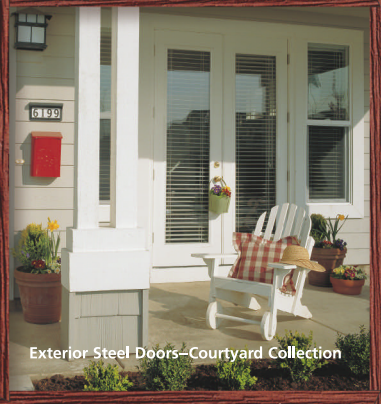

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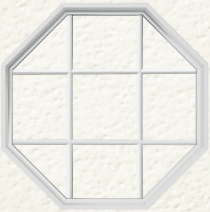

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