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**PLANS AND PROJECTS**
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**ACTIVELY LOOKING**
Features and amenities for the over-50 crowd
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**PATH REPORT**
Design your homes for better IAQ
[ *page 87* ]

## National Housing Quality® Award Winners

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October 2007

VOL. 72 NO. 11

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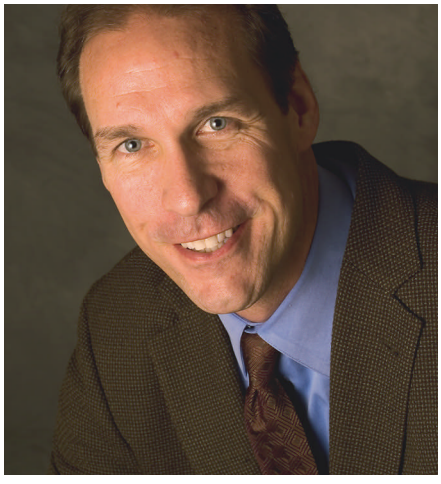
# On Reserve

**The Federal Reserve Board lowered interest rates** this week by half a point and financial markets reacted enthusiastically. I hope this will edge us closer to a complete reversal of fortune.

In a coincidence of timing, Alan Greenspan, retired chairman of the Fed, has been on the promotional tour for his new book. I'm sure there are people out there who are confused by these two coinciding events and must believe Greenspan is responsible for lowering the interest rates.

What is interesting is the message Greenspan is spreading. To paraphrase, he said that all of the economic modeling he has done over the decades has not increased or decreased his ability to predict economic movement. If he could model people's attitudes, he would much more easily be able to predict the economic climate.



we can't pull the levers that create large-scale shifts in economic policy. We can hope the Fed lowers interest rates, and we can lobby for credit relief, but we can't enact them. The good news is we can influence our prospects' attitude by sending the right message.

> "The new reality is based on the perception that this is a good time to buy, people have recognized it is a good time to buy, and people are buying homes."

In other words, "it's not the economy, stupid." It's the people. Take for example the reaction on Wall Street to the half-point drop. If the financial markets had been expecting a full-point drop, there would have been a nearly opposite reaction. But, because they were expecting less than a half, there was robust approval. In a computer-based model, that half-point reduction should have had the same effect whether it was anticipated or not.

What does all this mean for home builders? Peoples' attitudes toward purchasing a new home have less to do with interest rates or lowering prices than they do with how confident they feel about this purchase.

This is good and bad news. The bad news is, as individual business owners,

And what should that message be? I believe success breeds success. If people know you are selling homes, their confidence will increase. Your community needs to see and hear about the traffic you're getting. It is time for builders to create a new reality about home buying. And the new reality is based on the perception that this is a good time to buy, people have recognized it is a good time to buy, and — contrary to press depictions — people are buying homes. **PB**

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# SKYLIGHTS SHED A NEW LIGHT ON BEING GREEN

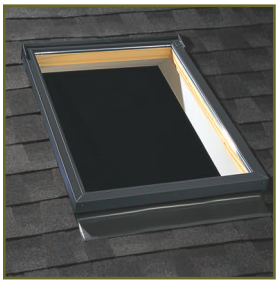
With climate change high on the nation's environmental agenda, homeowners have brought the "green" debate inside their homes, demanding products that can reduce energy costs and improve indoor air quality. This movement toward a comprehensive approach to green homes has led to growing recognition that skylights offer numerous environmental benefits.

"The green debate is sometimes murky in terms of definition," said Stephen Selkowitz, director of building technologies at the National Laboratory, a government-sponsored products research center. "In the broadest sense, being green means enhancing a home's energy efficiency, and skylights today are the model of energy efficiency."

"If you pick a skylight with high performance glass, it will make a tremendous impact on energy consumption," Selkowitz said. "Today's skylights are not your father's skylights. As a result, architects and engineers are re-thinking the role of skylights, leading me to think we are in a watershed moment for the product."

Selkowitz' career at the National Laboratory, which is overseen by the U.S. Department of Energy, focuses on research, development and implementation of energy efficient technologies and design practices. He directs research into windows, daylighting and lighting systems.

North America's leading skylight manufacturer, VELUX®, which produces skylights in the U.S., attributes the changing perceptions of skylights to several key product features that contribute to their status as a green product:



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Thermal Performance – Manufacturers have introduced argon gas to skylights, which reduces the transfer of heat, helping insulate against heat loss in the winter months and heat gain in the summer. Accessories such as blinds, shades or awnings, also help to control the transfer of heat regardless of the season.

NATURAL VENTILATION – Venting skylights can provide passive air flow within a home that does not require electrical power and they also improve air quality by removing volatile organic compounds (VOCs) emitted as gases from certain solids or liquids.

Selkowitz, whose career has focused on energy efficient building products, was an advocate of green practices long before green became a mainstream topic. He installed skylights in his 90-year-old home in Berkeley more than a decade ago, partially to enhance the livability of his home, but also as part of a personal commitment to energy-efficiency. He predicts more homeowners will follow suit in the foreseeable future.

Venting skylights can improve indoor air quality via the chimney effect they create.

"Without question, there is a growing recognition among homebuilders and consumers for skylights as a green product," Selkowitz said. "People should be aware that skylights offer excellent energy performance, along with natural ventilation and daylighting. All of these features translate into long-term energy conservation, which is a fundamental goal of the green movement."

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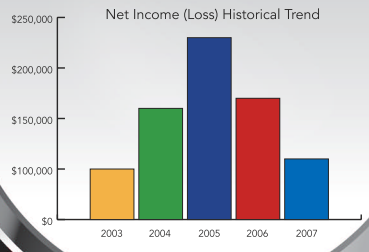


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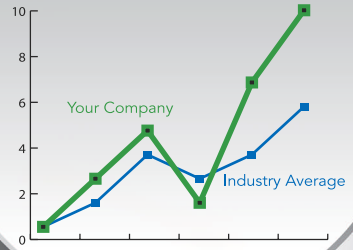


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>> BY **PAUL CARDIS,** *AVID RATINGS CO.*

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

# Loyalty Builds Trust

Home builders have to earn referrals, and being trustworthy is a way to get them.

**Given the declining number** of new home buyers, it is now more important to have loyal customers singing your praises and referring potential clients to you. Customers, however, will only send business your way if you have developed a close and meaningful relationship with them.

The foundation of any successful relationship is trust, which is becoming more difficult to achieve in today's economic climate. Home buyers are more skeptical of what builders tell them, in part because of the high number of foreclosures and the urgency with which some sales associates are trying to close deals in a soft market. Salespeople appear less trustworthy when they push hard and fast to close deals to shore up shrinking revenues.

Trustworthiness is a by-product of one's reputation and past experiences. Accordingly, home builders should maintain the highest levels of customer satisfaction during tough times so their reputation can be used as a competitive advantage when new home buyers are harder to come by.

Indeed, a major source of trust comes from demonstrated competence. We examine the plaques on the physician's wall, the badge on the police officer's uniform or the tenor in the pilot's voice during in-flight turbulence to gain clues into matters of competence. As a home builder, competence can be demonstrated with high customer satisfaction ratings and through the eagerness of loyal home buyers to refer potential clients to you.

"Competence should be constantly in the demonstrator mode," says Chip Bell, a business consultant and author of "Customer Loyalty Guaranteed! Create, Lead, and Sustain Remarkable Service," which he co-wrote with John R. Patterson. Proving your proficiency is not about boasting; it is reminding the customer he or she made a smart decision in coming to you. "It is important the service provider know how to show off without being a show-off," Bell says.

There are a lot of ways to communicate confidence, says Bell, who offers the following suggestions:

- Tell a story about another customer that uses your expertise as the backdrop, not the subject.
- Sprinkle conversations with tidbits from your resume: "More than 80 percent of our customers have referred potential home buyers to us; I'm glad you're one of them."
- Point out special achievements with an obvious mixture of humility and pride.
- When a vendor raves about your work on a particular house, ask him or her to repeat the compliment to the home buyer.

Note, however, that the quickest way to destroy trust is to not deliver on a basic expectation. Failure to deliver any of these basic expectations will destroy trust in that business. Home buyers rightfully assume the home they are purchasing will be delivered as promised, the price fair and the experience relatively pleasant.

The best home builders in customer satisfaction do a lot to make the service experience memorable. However, they also know that wow factors do nothing to ensure a great service reputation unless the basics are always done perfectly.

Customer loyalty research repeatedly shows that customers are forever on the lookout for signs they have made the right decision. Bell says customers who are confident they are getting the best value for their money are more forgiving when errors are made — and are more likely to become loyal advocates for your business. That's when you really know you've earned their trust. **PB**

*Paul Cardis is CEO of Avid Ratings Co., formerly known as NRS Corp. Avid Ratings is a research and consulting firm specializing in customer satisfaction for the home-building industry. He can be reached at paul.cardis@avidratings.com.*

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

H.R. DEPT.

# Almost Displaced?

If you're about to be unemployed, it pays to consider all your options.

**The stream of calls we receive** from unemployed home building industry workers portend a weak employment market for the foreseeable future. Certainly, there are far more candidates than available jobs. So, what do you do if you are one of the about-to-be displaced workers?

Here are a few suggestions to consider:

## Look at Similar Industries

For example, if your experience is in sales management, approach the top real-estate brokerage firms in your area about sales training or running a new-home sales division for smaller builders.

If your experience is in purchasing or construction management, the knowledge and efficiencies you learned in home building could be of substantial benefit to a less sophisticated general contractor or a commercial construction firm.

Case in point: I have a friend who owns a growing GC business that specializes in apartment renovations. The systems and processes he uses, although not unsophisticated, pale in comparison to what home builders use.

A talented home building professional could be an asset to someone like that short- and long-term.

## Offer the "Warm Puppy" Close

The salespeople reading this will know that phrase. The idea: If you have puppies to sell, let buyers take them home to see if they want to keep them. Purpose: Once people get a chance to try something at home, they tend to keep it.

Use your availability to a similar advantage: offer to work on a short-term basis at a rate that is hard to refuse, so both sides can get better acquainted.

Odds are most companies can find a way to leverage your skills to their advantage for a week or so. No forward obligations or expectations.

For example, a talented — and unemployed — purchasing manager told me he was interviewing with a highly regarded apartment developer in his local market. The developer was considering a move into attached for-sale product and pondering the need to establish a stand-alone purchasing department. I suggested he offer them a week of his time to help them sort through their options, gratis. In the event they decided to move forward, he would have the inside track during the interview process. Worst-case scenario, it would keep him busy and mentally stimulated — and it beats sitting at home.

**RODNEY'S TIPS FOR SECURING YOUR NEXT JOB**

**Take your skills to similar industries.**

**Offer to do a test run with short-term work.**

**Volunteer to be a part of a project you always wanted to do but never had the time for.**

## Support Something Bigger Than Yourself

Remember how you always wanted to volunteer for good causes but never had the time? Well, now you will. Consider investing one day a week working for a non-profit foundation or charity. If you don't have one, call your local HBA and see who it supports. This will probably not help you find a new position, but the rewards will come back in other ways. Do it while you can.

Have better ideas? Consider this an open invitation to share your job search experiences with others. Let me know what you are doing to weather the storm and I'll try to incorporate it into a future column. **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. He can be reached at rodney@thetalongroup.com.

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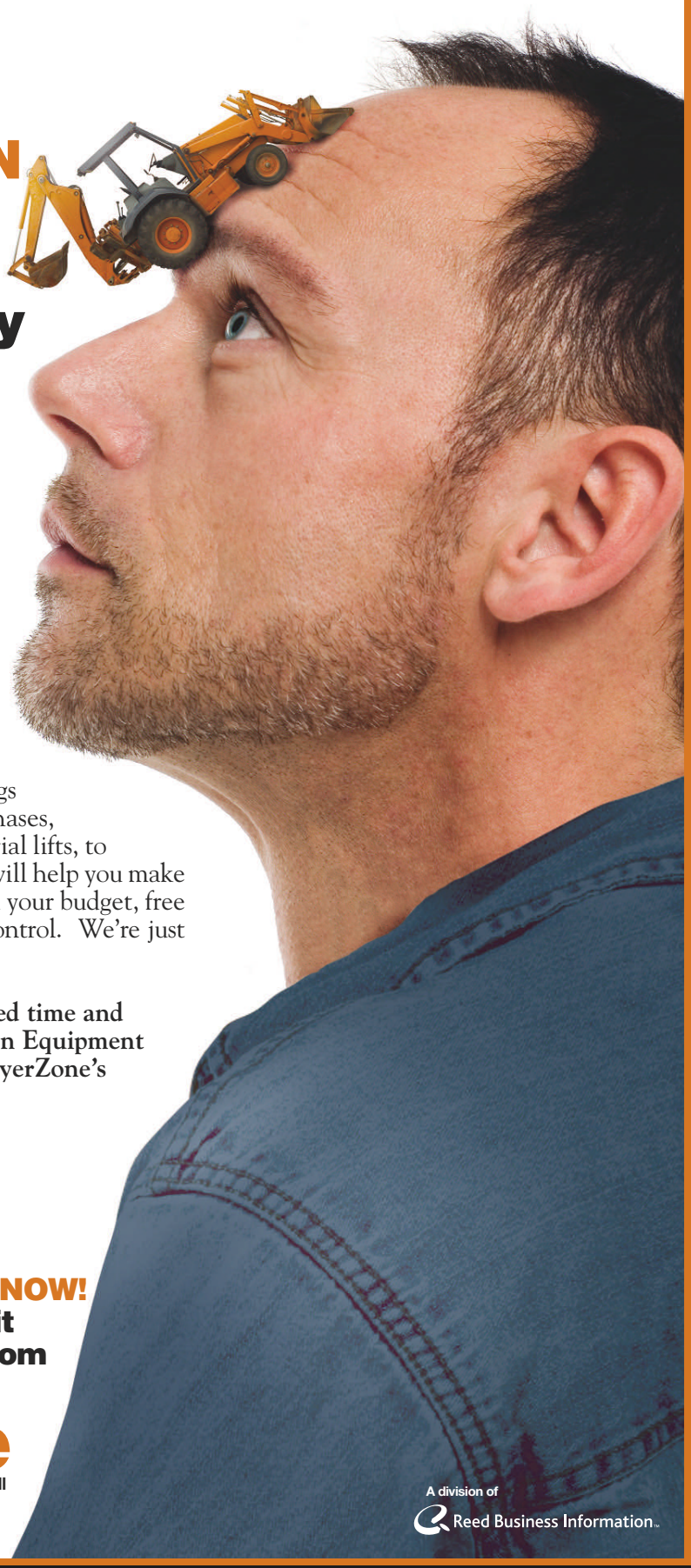

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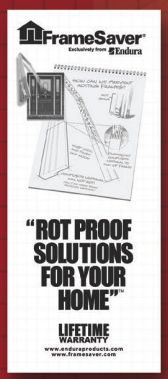


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>> BY **JOHN RYMER,** *NEW HOME KNOWLEDGE*

NEW HOME KNOWLEDGE

# Sell Your House and Theirs

The second in a two-part series offering tips on closing a contract with house-to-sell customers.

**Last month** I discussed how to deal with customers who have an existing home to sell and gave you reasons why it's a great time to sell.

That was Part I. Part II of our discussion focuses on how and why every new home sales professional needs to become an expert who can accelerate existing-home sales at a fair price.

If you think this should be outside the role of a new home sales professional, think again. Consider the following:

- More than $^{2}/_{3}$ of customers report never having to sell an existing home in a buyer's market.
- 82 percent of homeowners select the listing agent for their existing home based on a personal relationship rather than their professional accomplishments.

That's right, four out of five customers found their real-estate agent likely because "his wife works with my husband and he's a really nice guy."

It's easy to see why most customers with a home to sell are scared and receive bad advice on how to sell their home.

So let's draw a road map on how to maximize the sales price and accelerate the sale of a customer's existing home in a buyer's market.

## Here are the steps:

**Step No. 1:** Demonstrate homes are selling in their neighborhood. Use MLS information to get an analysis on the average number of days on the market and a listing of homes recently sold in the home buyer's neighborhood. If you don't have access to MLS, partner with a real-estate agent who will do the legwork in return for potential referrals.

It takes time and the data may be disappointing, but better to begin with the facts so you can plan.

**Step No. 2:** Help home buyers find the right real-estate agent. Try first to refer a trusted top performer. If home buyers are reluctant to use your referral, make sure the real-estate agent they select is a top performer and tell them why it's important: they will never take a listing unless they feel confident it will sell within a reasonable amount of time. That's not so true among part-time and newbie agents.

**Step No. 3:** Give them a checklist to complete prior to listing their home. Shrubs overgrown? Too much furniture? Need paint? It's an easy list to provide.

**ROAD MAP TO ACCELERATING SALES**

**Demonstrate homes are selling in the neighborhood.**

**Help home buyers find the right real-estate agent.**

**Give them a checklist to complete prior to listing their home.**

**Make sure you and the customer receive agent feedback on every showing of their home.**

**Discuss three-day pricing versus six-month pricing.**

**Step No. 4:** Make sure you and the customer receive agent feedback on every showing of their home. Positive and negative comments prepare you for the next showing.

**Step No. 5:** Discuss three-day pricing versus six-month pricing. Don't be shy. Customers need to understand the correlations between price and number of days to sell. A good rule to follow is that for every 5 percent you reduce the home's price, you cut in half the number of days it will be on the market.

Providing these useful tools will allow you to gain the customer's trust to take action now and move forward on the home they really want. **PB**

*John Rymer is the founder of New Home Knowledge, which offers sales training for new home builders and real-estate professionals. He can be reached at john@newhomeknowledge.com.*

**LOG ON** To read **'When and why homebuilders should help sell existing homes'** online visit **www.probuilder.com/bestpractices**

**WALKING TRAILS** have overtaken golf as the top-rated amenity, one community architect reports.
PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE HINDS

ACTIVE ADULT

# What Do Active Adults Want?

Who are active adults? And what are they looking for? Home builders are defining more than one niche as boomers enter the active adult market.

**Baby boomers and active adults** are probably the most talked-about demographic groups in America when it comes to forecasting new-home trends. In fact, the term baby boomer is often used as a synonym for active adult. Defining the active-adult segment isn't so easy, though; it spans two generations and a diversity of values and preferences.

According to some experts, baby boomers aren't officially part of the market just yet. "The first [boomers] just turned 60 last year, and the typical active-adult buyer is somewhere between 62 and 64, if not a little older," says Mike Kephart, founder of Kephart Community Planning Architecture in Denver. "We'll see baby boomers begin to enter this market in the next five years."

Likewise, Andy Detterline, a marketing consultant based in Rose Valley, Pa., says most of the people who are moving into 55-plus communities are in their mid-60s. "They're generally not making that move at the point where their kids are first out of the house," says Detterline. But when boomers do begin to surge into the market, big changes are likely to ensue, says Kephart principal Doug Van Lerberghe.

>> BY **SUSAN BADY,** *SENIOR EDITOR, DESIGN*

**67** The number, in millions, of Americans **over the age of 55** in 2005

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau*

## Misunderstood Boomers

"There are several misconceptions about baby boomers as they're aging," says Van Lerberghe. "One is that they're wealthy, and I don't believe that's true. They've made a lot of money and live quite well as a group, but they haven't been the greatest savers, so retirement may come a lot later for them. We may not be looking at [the baby boomer] active-adult market all that strongly for five or more years."

Bob Eck, principal of Plus One Communities in Denver, says it's easy to be misled by financial projections for boomers. "They'll be wealthier and less frugal [than their parents], but you'll also have the strata of buyers who can afford a $250,000 home as well as those who can afford a $450,000 home."

Another misconception is that older boomers won't behave any differently than their parents, who are often referred to as the Eisenhower generation and often gravitate toward a large retirement community in Sunbelt locations. "Historically, only about 10 percent of those over 55 have chosen that as a lifestyle, and yet it's one that is personified as the active-adult lifestyle," says Eck.

The Residences at Bulle Rock in Havre de Grace, Md., became an age-targeted community after market research showed that not all prospective buyers were on board with the 55-and-over limitation. Homes are required by zoning to have either first-floor master suites or elevators for access to the second floor.

"Most people are choosing where they want to live based on location, and they don't necessarily want to move full-time to destination communities," says Brenda Desjardins, principal of New Home Marketing Services in Annapolis, Md., who conducted the original market study for Bulle Rock. "They want to be near their family and their resources."

To tempt active adults out of their current abodes, big national builders such as Del Webb and Levitt and Sons are focusing on so-called intergenerational communities that have a mix of age groups as well as working people and retirees.

### 10 MUST-HAVE HOME FEATURES

Trends among active adults include:

- Low-maintenance exteriors
- Big kitchens
- Outdoor rooms such as courtyards, kitchens and patios
- Fewer, larger rooms within same square footage as previous home
- Flex spaces, such as a den that converts to a formal dining room
- Main-floor living
- Private, sanctuary-like areas such as a sunroom or screened porch
- Plenty of storage options such as kitchen cabinets with rollout trays, bookcases and built-ins for electronics
- Tub and shower in master bathroom
- Bathtubs pre-fitted for grab bars

### AMENITIES THAT SELL

Active adults gravitate toward the following perks:

- Close to an urban center
- Close to a university
- Near golf course, ski resort or other recreational amenity
- Parks within community
- Walking trails within community
- Exterior maintenance included

## Beyond Golf

Many of the active-adult communities Kephart's firm designs don't have golf courses, partly because the communities are smaller and also because the United States is somewhat overbuilt in golf courses. The No. 1 amenity is walking trails, not golf, and home buyers like a mix of soft and hard surfaces.

"If golf is important, most of the smaller builders are looking for land that's fairly close to an existing golf course," says Van Lerberghe. "Then they can share in those amenities and maybe make a deal with the country club to provide discount memberships or something like that."

Seth Wise, president of Levitt and

Millions of Americans **over the age of 55** there will be **by 2014**

*Source: NAHB*

**85.6**

**90** Percentage of people age **50 and older** who want to continue living at their **current address** indefinitely.
*Source: AARP*

Sons in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., thinks the "active adult" moniker may be too broad. "Demographically, the older buyer still may be looking for the large clubhouse and card rooms and some of the other things associated with an older group," says Wise. "But younger buyers are very focused on yoga, walking trails and fitness centers. There's a broader cross-section of amenities going in."

Plus One's Eck says his company is developing a handful of active-adult projects in Colorado and Texas. None are more than 1,200 units.

"The Eisenhower generation was synonymous with retirement, and resort-style communities succeeded very well with those buyers," says Eck. "Boomers don't associate those kinds of communities with retirement; they see them as a lifestyle choice. Continuing to work is one of those lifestyle choices, too."

Today's active-adult buyer is less about being a number and more about being an individual, Eck says. They want a little more intimacy, which translates to smaller but still highly amenitized communities.

The boomer's strong interest in education is fostering some relationships between builders and universities. Levitt, for instance, has an agreement with a local college to offer programs tailored to residents of the Seasons at Laurel Canyon in Canton, Ga.

## About the House

Though universal design will be a consideration for older boomers as they move into the active-adult market, builders can accommodate their future needs without necessarily offering a full menu of accessible features. In the back of their minds, boomers think an aging parent will move in with them one day, but it's not a strong driver in their decision to buy, says Eck. And it's crucial to recognize differences in household structure; for example, some boomers may be raising a young grandchild rather than caring for an elderly relative.

"People will put things like grab bars [in bathtubs] on a list of things they want," says Detterline. "You can put on your [collateral] material that the house is prefitted for grab bars, though you don't necessarily install them. But you absolutely do not want to discuss that you can run a wheelchair through the home."

Although active adults have traditionally avoided two-story homes because of the stairs, Kephart is trying to make such plans more attractive to buyers by adding elevators.

"I've talked to a number of builders about it, and they all agree that by building a two-story versus a one-story house — same square footage — they can save enough on hard construction costs to install the elevator," says Kephart. "It's a luxury item right now and could be marketed as such."

While housing is almost secondary to the active adult's buying decision, they're looking for plenty of storage without excess square footage. This is true regardless of the buyer's age.

One thing is for certain: builders will need to woo active adults in increasingly compelling ways, because their biggest competition is the customer's existing home, says Detterline. "Having to get their house ready [to sell] is an overwhelming task," she says. "They have to be pulled, not pushed, into a better life." **PB**

**AFTER AN INTENSIVE MARKET STUDY**, developers of The Residences at Bulle Rock in Havre de Grace, Md., quadrupled the size of the fitness center and hired a third party to manage it.
PHOTOGRAPHY: CHARLIE PRUETT

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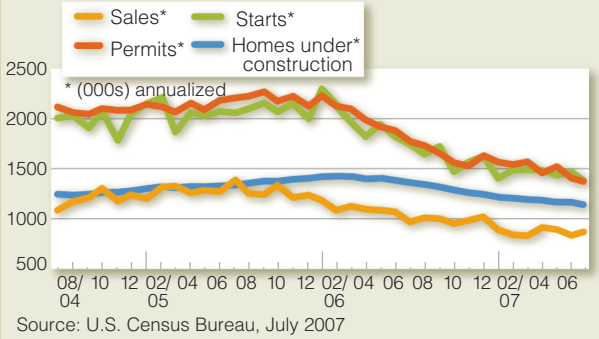
# Industry Analysis

>> **BY JAMES HAUGHEY, REED CONSTRUCTION DATA**

## Subprime Collapse Delaying Housing Recovery

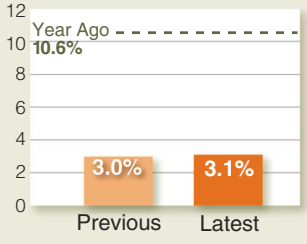
Cancelled or postponed mortgage closings because of lenders' inability to obtain funding has cut home sales below builders' expectations and prompted buyers to wait for more price cuts.

### New-home construction



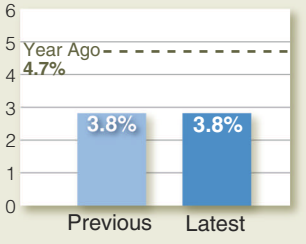

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, July 2007

**Residential materials cost**
(change from 12 months ago)




Source: U.S. Department of Labor, July 2007

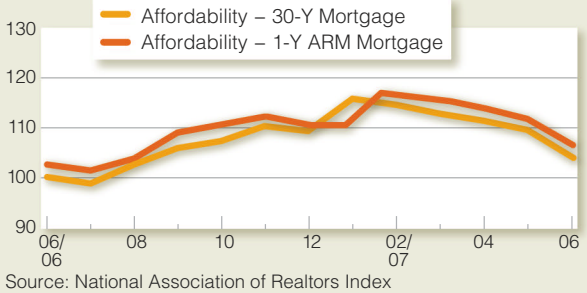
**Residential contractor wage**
(change from 12 months ago)



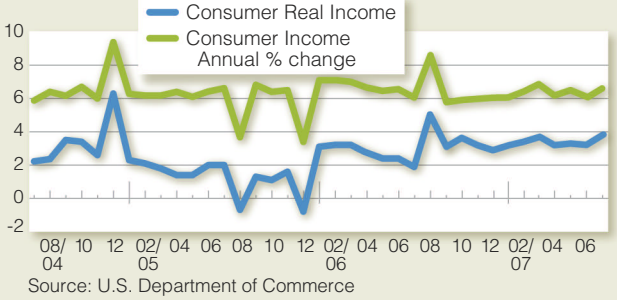

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, June 2007

| | | | Latest | Previous | Year Ago |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total new-home inventory (month supply) | U.S. Census Bureau | July | 7.5 | 7.7 | 7.4 |
| Speculative new-home inventory | U.S. Census Bureau | July | 533,000 | 538,000 | 568,000 |
| Home price (median) | U.S. Census Bureau | July | $239,500 | $230,600 | $238,100 |
| Housing market index | NAHB | Aug | 22 | 24 | 33 |

### Consumer buying power




Source: National Association of Realtors Index



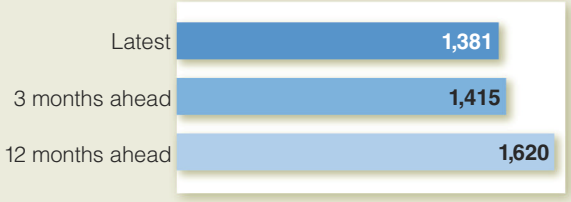

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce

| | | | Latest | Previous | Year Ago |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Employment (000s jobs per month) | U.S. Department of Labor | July | 92 | 126 | 222 |
| Household net worth growth (annual) | Federal Reserve Board | 1st Q | 4.3% | 10.0% | 12.0% |
| 30-Y fixed mortgage rate | Freddie Mac | Aug | 6.55 | 6.70 | 6.52 |
| 1-Y ARM | Freddie Mac | Aug | 5.61 | 5.71 | 5.64 |
| Consumer Confidence Index | Conference Board | Aug | 105.0 | 111.9 | 100.2 |

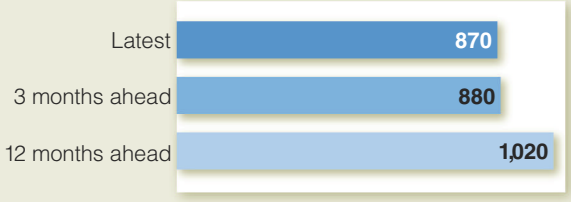
# Industry Analysis

## New-housing outlook

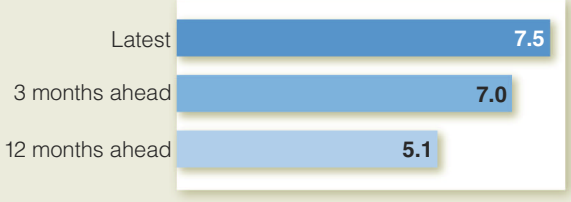
**Starts** (000s, annualized)



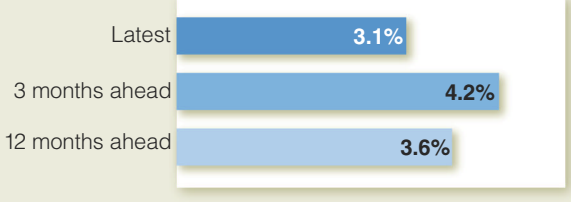

**Sales** (000s, annualized)



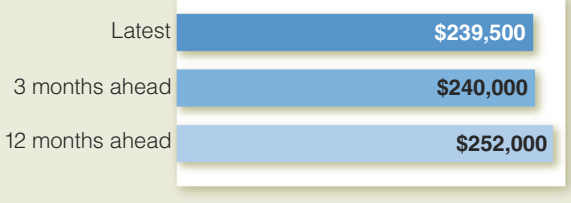

**Inventory** (months supply)




**Residential materials cost** (change from 12 months ago)




**Home Price**




## Existing-home competition

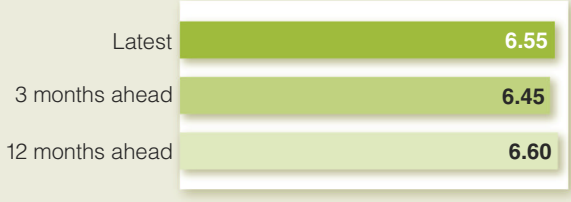
| | | Latest | Previous | Year Ago |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Home inventory (months supply) | July | 9.6 | 9.1 | 7.3 |
| Home sales (000s annualized) | July | 5,750 | 5,760 | 6,320 |
| Home prices | July | $228,600 | $219,000 | $230,200 |

Source: National Association of Realtors

## Economic outlook

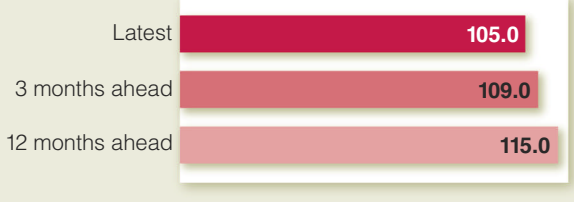
**Affordability Index** (fixed)

**30-Y fixed-rate mortgage**




**Consumer income growth**

**Consumer confidence Index** (Conference Board)

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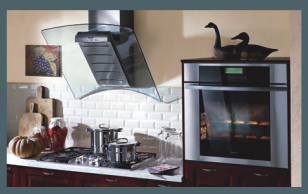

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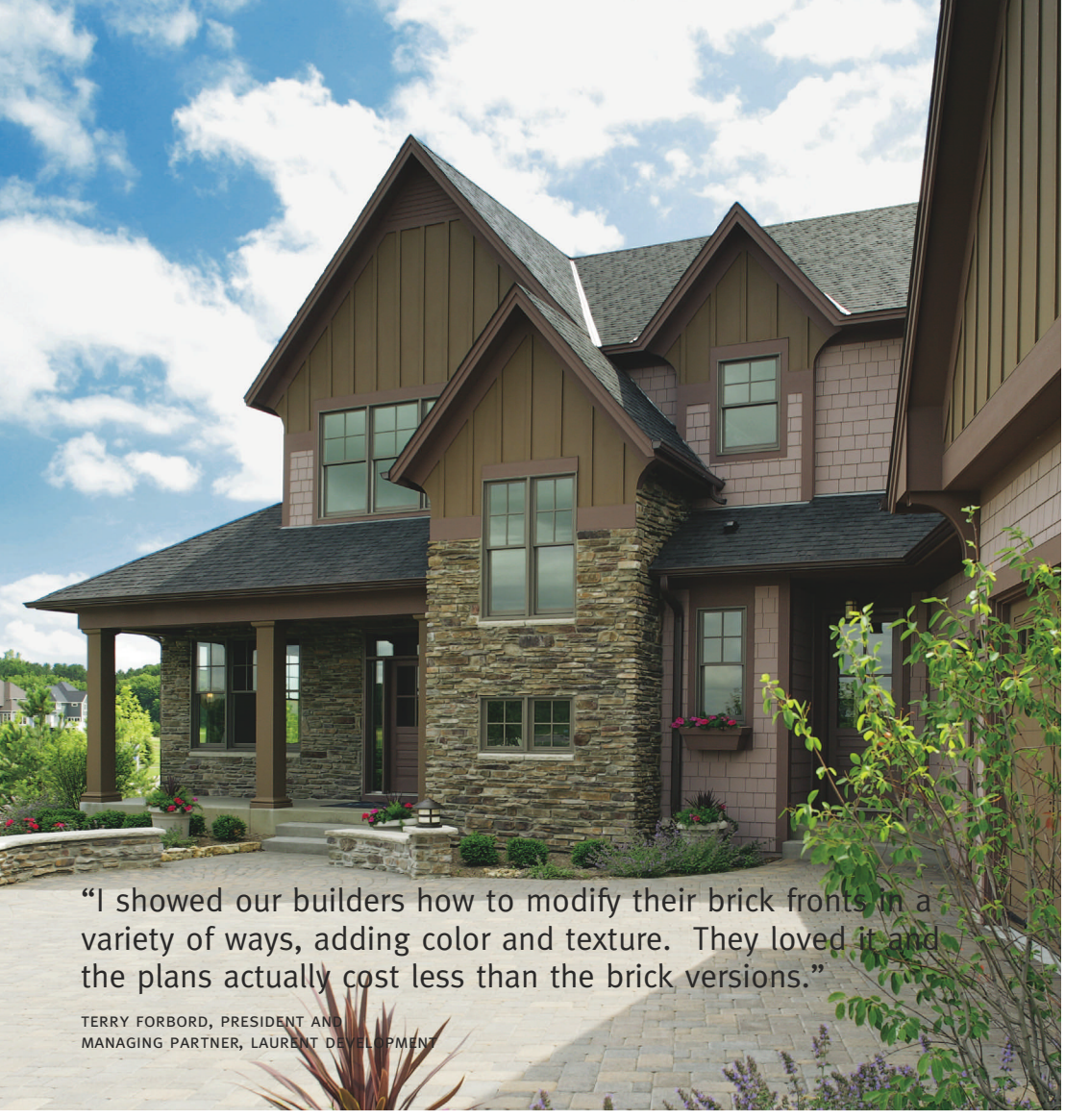

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Left: Dancing Waters by Laurent Development
Below: Liberty on the Lake by CPDC
Bottom: Cobblestone Lake by Tradition

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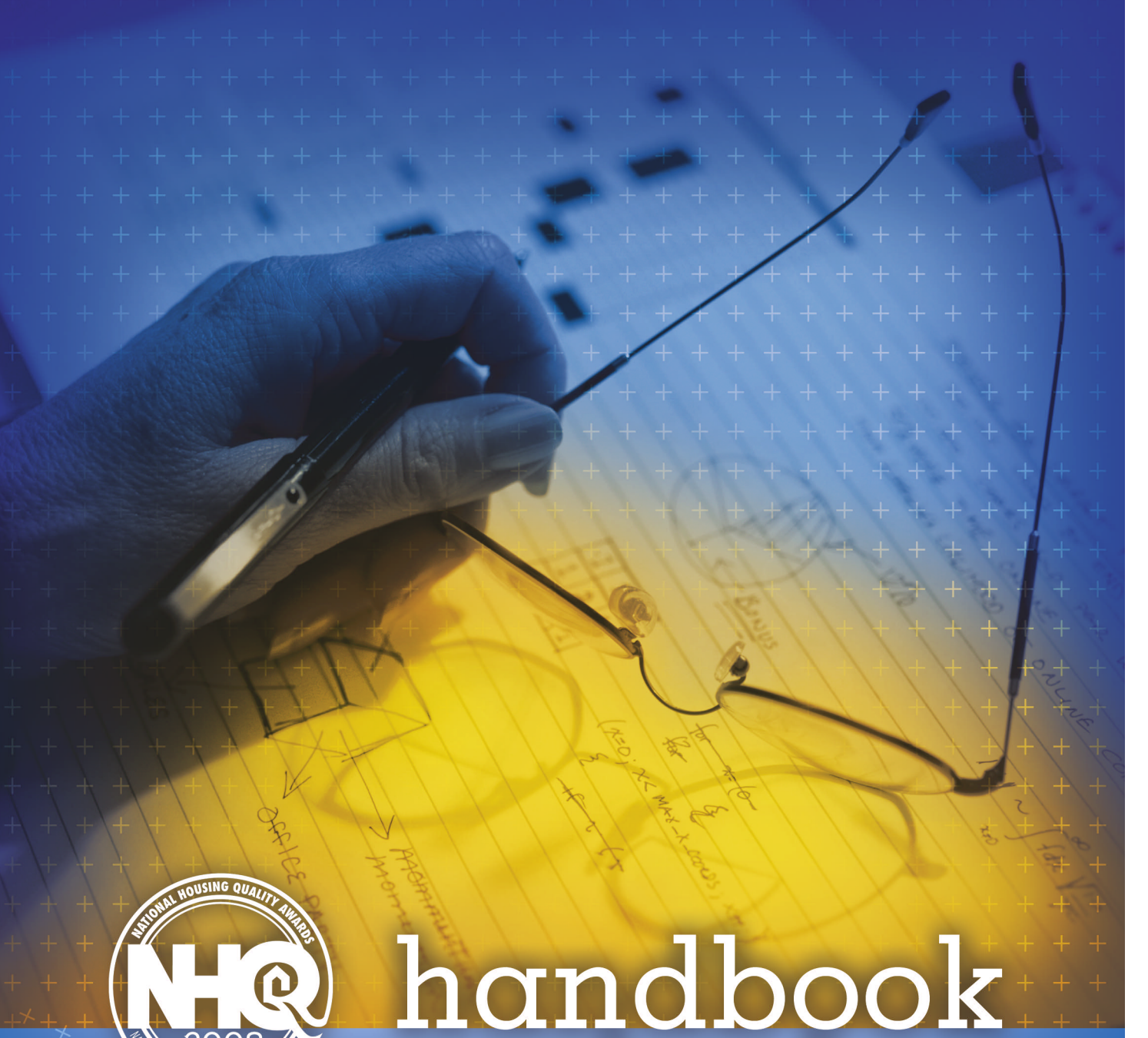

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# The Goal: Constant Innovation

## Fireside Hearth & Home creates a corporate culture where leadership and communication combine for success.

*By Mark Jarasek, Senior Editor, Electronic Media*

Fireside Hearth & Home — a home building industry trade contractor specializing in the design and installation of fireplaces — excels when it comes to leadership, communication, product quality and service.

Any organization could benefit from getting a look into Fireside's corporate culture and the processes in place to ensure employees have a voice — and a direct impact on the company's success.

Central to mobilizing employees at every level is an incentive-based structure where all employees own stock. They also participate in cash profit sharing that rewards performance. In addition, all employees are referred to as members rather than employees to emphasize their ownership.

This incentive structure works to align goals and supports a "Rapid Continuous Improvement" philosophy that Fireside Hearth & Home has in place: every employee is focused on enhancing their personal performance and that of the company every day. Their Rapid Continuous Improvement program is rooted in a corporate belief in what's called "constructive discontent," where all members are urged to constantly look for better ways of doing their job.

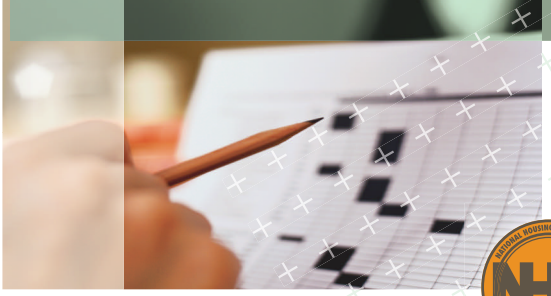
Members are constantly reminded that when they do come up with innovative ideas for process or product improvement, it serves to benefit the bottom line of the entire company, which can translate into more substantial profit-sharing.

Key values, processes, procedures and any changes are communicated directly to all company members via several channels. It begins with new employee orientation and extends throughout the employee's tenure with events that include annual kick-off meetings, quarterly update meetings, and communication tools such as newsletters and business performance reports, all geared toward keeping everyone focused on the company's vision, mission and goals.

A prime example of what consistent processes and clear communication can do is Fireside Hearth & Homes' "Signature Installation," which dictates procedures above and beyond manufacturers' requirements and local and national codes. The company views construction quality as the single most important facet of business. It's what the team is judged on, what the homeowners enjoy as the focal point of their home, and a pivotal opportunity for diminishing incident liability and any injuries within the company.

Standards for the Signature Installation process are well documented, and members who are involved in installation are specially trained via hands-on instruction and written examinations. In addition, constant reminders emphasizing safety and quality installation are ever present in both regular communications vehicles as well as visual support tools, like posters and wallet cards.

As one Fireside Hearth & Home field manager expressed during an NHQ judges' site visit: "We're putting fire into people's homes, and we take that very seriously" — a direct reflection of the exact mindset for quality and safety that the company's leaders expect of — and get from — their members.



award winners 08

# Mercedes' Big 3: Measurement, Culture, Training

## Satisfied employees and customers lead the company to productivity and profitability.

*By Bill Lurz, Senior Editor, Business*

Production home building is a complex, multi-disciplinary business. Nothing about it is simple or easy. But Mercedes Homes founder Howard Buescher has always kept his Melbourne, Fla.-based company focused on two objectives: happy employees and satisfied customers. One leads to the other, he says, and together, they drive growth and profitability.

And you have to believe Buescher is onto something, given that Mercedes now ranks No. 28 in *Professional Builder's* Giant 400. Twelve divisions in four states closed 4,264 homes in 2006, for $1.23 billion in revenue. Not bad for a company started as a retirement gig.

Buescher had a long management career in the Midwest with Ryan Homes, then founded Mercedes Homes in 1983. Five Buescher children now work in the business, diligently maintaining a corporate culture that still stresses employee and customer satisfaction. When we asked son and COO Scott Buescher how Mercedes won its second National Housing Quality award, he listed three key contributors:

**1. Measurement.** "If you want to improve anything, you have to measure it," Scott Buescher says, "so the first thing I'd suggest to any builder is to track both customer satisfaction and employee satisfaction constantly. We have bi-annual employee surveys and third-party customer satisfaction surveys conducted by Eliant at 30 days, five months and one year after closing."

**2. Culture.** "People want to be part of a team that has larger goals than just making money," Scott Buescher says. "Probably the most important document in our company is a single page we call 'Our House.'" That document includes a statement of values most employees have committed to memory: "Do It RITE," with the acronym standing for respect, integrity, trust and ethics. But it also includes statements of purpose, vision, mission and focus, along with lists of the Mercedes fundamentals for operational excellence (such as concentrate on core products and centralized operations), and core competencies (such as product development and customer service). It also includes goals for the current year and five-year period in revenues, return on assets and "would recommend" customer satisfaction percentages.

**3. Training.** "We really believe the key to satisfied customers is happy and motivated employees," Scott Buescher says. "That's why we emphasize career path development for all our employees." Mercedes provides a litany of study opportunities, including Disney Institute training in customer service at all levels of the organization. The firm also has a well-honed mentoring and leadership development program for rising managers. "Training is the key to showing your employees that your vision and values are not hollow," Scott Buescher says. "That's where they see that we really care about them as people, and want them to grow and improve their lives."

handbook for **winning**

# A Solid Identity and Quest to Improve

## A non-complacent culture nets Mungo Homes' NHQ silver recognition

*By Felicia Oliver, Senior Editor*

**08** award winners

Irmo, S.C.-based Mungo Homes scored an NHQ award on its very first try, which almost never happens. The leadership team, including principals Stewart and Steven Mungo, Columbia Division Manager Chris Conlon, and Charleston, S.C., Division Manager Lee McLoud, have much to be proud of.

Conlon points to three things that have played a big role in Mungo Homes' quality success story.

### Adhere to a clear vision

Mungo Homes employees know exactly who they are as a home building company: they build production homes with standard features and options. Conlon says they used to try to accommodate special customer requests but eventually recognized that when they did so, customer satisfaction and profitability dropped dramatically.

"We are not a custom home builder," says Conlon. "We don't want every customer out there; we want the ones that will be happy in our system. And there are plenty of them."

Their vision also includes what Condon calls "an absolute total commitment to overall quality."

"We only hire people with the commitment to get better everyday," says Conlon. "Even though we just won the [NHQ] Silver Award, there's not a single person who is satisfied with what we're doing here today."

### Hire the right people

Multiple interviews and personality appraisals ensure only skilled individuals who fit Mungo's corporate culture are hired. For key management decisions, several staff members review the candidate.

"Everybody convenes afterward and trades notes," Conlon. "Some people see one thing, other people see another. It helps us get a real good read on them."

Though the position's manager makes the ultimate decision, it's based on feedback received from colleagues who have interviewed the candidate. When there isn't a consensus and the individual is hired anyway, it turns out to not be such a great move.

"I think we've all got a pretty good comfort level with one another now," says Steven Mungo, "where if somebody has an objection, we'll just keep looking until we find the right person."

### Have well-vetted processes

Most business activities have processes that have been carefully crafted and refined as needed. Employee stakeholders have the opportunity to provide input and feedback so that no critical element is overlooked.

"By the time we implement a process, everybody has had a part in creating it," says Conlon. "For that reason, we don't have too many people trying to get around the rules."

Mungo's even-flow process came out of this methodology. When a home is sold it is slotted for ground-breaking and final close on specific days. These predictions are on target 99.5 percent of the time; when they aren't, they vary by no more than a day, Conlon says. "Our ability to do that is extremely reassuring to a customer."

The closing process was tossed back and forth between sales, construction and estimating numerous times so that every glitch got fixed. "By the time we rolled it out, it was perfect," says Conlon. "And it has not changed one bit since."

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**08** award winners

# Well-Connected

## Communication is a key component to Pringle Development's processes.

*By Erin Hallstrom-Erickson, Group Managing Editor*

One thing is certain about Eustis, Fla.-based Pringle Development: the company believes in the power of communication.

This year's judges praised Pringle's effective use of communication and also found Pringle excelled at several of the NHQ Award-related criteria, chief among them technology, workforce development and leadership.

Operating under the core value to "always do the right thing," Pringle has developed several best practices relating to communication. Three of their most notable include:

### Technology

Pringle Development uses Integrated Homebuilder Management System, a Web-based system that monitors job progress and allows its trades to access information to raise their quality of service, improve cost control and increase profitability.

Steve Hogaboom, quality and safety manager, says Pringle needed to upgrade the program and had its IT department overwrite it with a 'Builder Dashboard' that allows its superintendents — whom they call builders — to update, accelerate or delay their homes' schedules efficiently.

Pringle's trades monitor an electronic schedule that is updated daily at 3:30 p.m. The builders have easy access to all of their home schedules and can even e-mail customers and trade partners. Builders can also access this system through computer tablets that are set up with wireless service for connectivity in the field.

### Leadership

Pringle's upper management meets monthly as a group in what it calls an Inter Departmental Communications Committee. At the meetings, members might review strategic actions; review company performance; discuss critical company issues; form Tiger Teams for problem solving; and assign action items.

Corresponding meetings include department meetings on the first week of the month, department head meetings with executives occur week two, and executives meet with the CEO during week four.

Supervisors use these meetings to communicate their employees' concerns. Pringle's Performance Measurement System measures the performance of each department monthly.

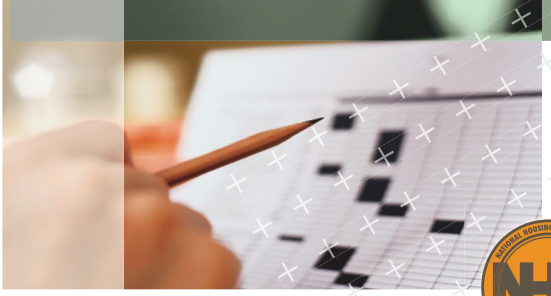
### Workforce Development

Pringle's managers are trained to focus on past performance when it comes to hiring. "This allows us to hire employees that are productive performers from the start," says Hogaboom.

Pringle also creates an extensive Individual Development Plan for each employee. The plan focuses on individual strengths and weaknesses that are then translated into more intensive training for that individual. The plan is used as a tie-in to Pringle's succession planning strategy.

Training is a high priority at Pringle, says Hogaboom, with a goal of 4.7 hours per person per month. Construction skills training is available on-site and electronically through Pringle University to all employees — not just the field employees.

Pringle University is an electronic training system that has modules covering many topics like estimating, accounting, computer skills, management skills and construction skills.



award winners 08

# Change of Attitude

## Barratt American improves its quality by changing its outlook.

*By Paul Deffenbaugh, Editorial Director*

Many home builders take specific actions that lead to improved performance: implement customer satisfaction measuring, document best practices, refine sales processes. All of those are valuable and helpful in making home builders more consistent and better performers.

At Barratt American, they did all of that, but the Carlsbad, Calif.-based company achieved the greatest performance improvements from something different. The company changed its attitude.

Quality Manager Jim Moss attributes the company's performance improvement to these three attitude changes:

1. Five years ago, Barratt American developed and implemented a clear message for its homeowners. In short, it set a company-wide goal of excellence.

2. The company improved internal communications so the message of excellence would resound throughout the company.

3. It pursued the NAHB Research Center's National Quality Certification, which demonstrated to employees and customers that the company was indeed devoted to excellence.

"One of the first ingredients," says Moss, "has to be management buy-in and dedication to the program. That sets the stage for the rest to happen." Moss adds that management has to "stick to their guns. They have to set the foundation for the entire program to work."

Implementing a clear message of excellence requires more than just straight talk, of course. It involves ensuring you have quality contractors executing smart design. It means the marketing message has to be succinct and direct. And it also means you need to prove your ability. To that end, Barratt American employs Eliant to measure customer satisfaction. The company posts the results internally and discusses them extensively in all meetings. That measurement provides the benchmarks for improvement the company needs to make its message clear and keep its employees focused.

"Eliant is tailored to get information on short-term and long-term satisfaction. It allows us to tell the customer we weren't going away," Moss says.

The meetings and bulletin boards the company uses to communicate customer satisfaction are only a part of the internal communication a multi-divisional company such as Barratt American needs. They also hired a seasoned management consultant, Chris Alexander of Synergy Executive Education, who helped direct the company communication improvements. Using Alexander allowed management to step back from the direction and induce change through a third party.

The same effect is achieved by going for a third-party certification program such as NAHB Research Center National Quality Certification. The common goal, communicated to all employees, makes it simpler to enact the quality improvements necessary. "You set the goal and make sure it happens," Moss says. "Once people are tuned into that discipline they will want to make it happen. The attitude though has been one of transforming from a fractional type group to one of a cohesive type."

The work toward certification began last year. That exercise in teamwork helped finalize the attitudinal change begun five years ago when Barratt American established improved communication processes with customers. The certification program "set the platform and tone for what we are and what we do for everyone," says Moss. "We stand up as a quality company. Everything we do shows we're wearing that badge."

# 93-07

# Previous Recipients of the National Housing Quality Award

## 2007
Estes Builders — Gold
Floor Art — Silver
Schuck and Sons — Silver
Keystone Custom Homes — Honorable Mention
Atlantic Builders — Honorable Mention

## 2006
Shea Homes San Diego — Gold
Veridian Homes — Gold
Ideal Homes — Gold
CP Morgan — Silver
Pringle Development Inc. — Silver
KB Home Las Vegas — Silver

## 2005
Grayson Homes — Gold
Pulte Homes (National) — Gold
Ideal Homes — Silver
Estes Builders — Silver
Veridian Homes — Silver
Pringle Development Inc. — Honorable Mention

## 2004
Grayson Homes — Silver
Boardwalk Builders — Silver
Schuck and Sons — Silver

## 2003
History Maker Homes — Gold
Pulte Homes Minnesota — Silver
Fairmont Homes — Silver
Neumann Homes — Silver
ALL-Tech — Silver
Tappe Construction — Silver
Grayson Homes — Honorable Mention

## 2002
Don Simon Homes — Gold
Shea Homes Colorado — Gold

## 2001
Palm Harbor Homes, Florida Division — Gold
Simonini Builders — Gold
Don Simon Homes — Silver
Winans Construction Inc. — Gold
Stebnitz Builders — Silver
Cupertino Kitchens — Honorable Mention

## 1999/2000
Shea Homes Arizona — Gold
Sunrise Colony Companies — Silver
The Green Companies — Silver
Traditional Concepts Inc. — Gold
Legacy Custom Builders Inc. — Gold
Deck America Inc. — Gold
Lasley Construction Inc. — Silver
Bell's Remodeling — Honorable Mention

## 1998
Neumann Homes — Gold
The Estridge Co. — Gold
T.W. Lewis — Silver
Fairway Construction — Gold
Remodeling Designs Inc. — Gold
Kendale Inc. — Gold

## 1997
K. Hovnanian Enterprises — Gold
Kennedy Community Development LP — Gold
U.S. Home Corp. Houston — Silver
Coventry Construction Inc. — Gold
Eren Design & Construction — Gold
Asdal Builders LLC — Silver
Fairway Construction — Silver
Mitchell, Best & Goldsborough Inc. — Silver

## 1996
Mercedes Homes Inc. — Gold
Rayco — Gold
Shea Homes San Diego — Gold
Triple Crown Corp. — Gold
Neil Kelly Co. — Large Remodeler Division
J.J. Swartz Co. — Large Remodeler Division
Criner Construction — Small Remodeler Division
Kleinco Construction Services — Large Remodeler Division
Crown Construction — Honorable Mention

## 1995
Doyle Wilson Homebuilder Inc. — Gold
John Wieland Homes Inc. — Gold
Oakwood Homes — Gold
Pulte Homes Illinois — Gold
Toll Brothers — Gold

## 1994
The Drees Co. — Gold
Kennedy Home Builders — Gold
Village Builders — Gold

## 1993
Cannon Development — Gold
Carmichael & Dame Builders — Gold
Fieldstone Communities Inc. — Gold
Town & Country Homes — Gold
David Weekley Homes — Gold
Winchester Homes — Gold

# Want to apply? FAQs about the NHQ

Thinking of applying for a National Housing Quality Award? Here are a few things you should know before putting ink to paper.

### Q. What is the NHQ Award?

**A.** The NHQ Awards give the highest recognition in the housing industry for quality achievement. Applicants are evaluated on the role that customer-focused quality plays in all aspects of their company.

### Q. How do I win?

**A.** You don't win so much as you can earn enough points during a site visit to be considered for a Gold or Silver Award. If selected for a site visit, the NHQ Awards judges panel will score your company in eight categories: leadership, strategic planning process, performance management, customer satisfaction, human resources, construction quality, trade relationships and business results. The total number of points an applicant can get is 100. The first eight categories represent an equal number of points. The final category, business results, accounts for 30 points.

### Q. If I am selected, what can I expect to receive?

**A.** After your site visit, you can expect to receive feedback from your panel of judges; the feedback can be instrumental in helping your company with its process improvement initiatives. In addition to feedback, you can expect to receive press coverage in the form of an appearance in at least one issue of *Professional Builder*. You will also be invited to appear at *PB's* annual Benchmark conference to not only accept your award, but to also serve on a best practices panel.

### Ready to Apply?

Think your company is ready to apply for the NHQ Awards? The following categories give you some idea of what the judges are looking for:

**1. Leadership** – How do senior leaders guide the organization toward a common purpose with shared values and priorities?

**2. Strategic Planning Process** – How do you create and carry out a strategic plan to achieve a future vision, enhance competitive position and improve overall performance?

**3. Performance Management** – How are business processes developed, managed and improved to achieve performance excellence?

**4. Customer Satisfaction** – How do you manage the design and delivery of products and services that lead to high levels of customer satisfaction?

**5. Human Resources** – How do human resource practices contribute to the growth of the organization? This component is evaluated by looking at employee selection and development as well as staff performance management, well-being, motivation, satisfaction and compensation.

**6. Construction Quality** – How do you ensure high-performing, trouble-free products and services? The purpose of this section is to check the key drivers of quality in the home construction process.

**7. Trade Relationships** – This section explores how trade contractors are integrated into the quality objectives of the company, how feedback is obtained, and the process for determining and evaluating your trades.

**8. Business Results** – High performance business practices are effective only if they result in business benefits as defined by tangible financial, operation, customer satisfaction and product/service quality measures.

If you wish to apply, please contact Rita Knab at the NAHB Research Center at 301/430-6225 or rknab@nahbrc.org for a free application kit. The kit contains application forms and helpful reference materials, including fee information and deadlines.

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*Out of the Box Homes*
*Longwood, Florida*

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*David Bauer, Gurnee Enterprises, Inc.*
*Ft. Pierce, Florida*

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*Lloyd Dilday, Chesapeake Homes*
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# National Housing Quality Award Winners

## Five great companies earn industry's toughest award.

The NHQ Awards are sponsored by the NAHB Research Center and *Professional Builder*. Winners were recognized in a gala award ceremony at the 2007 *Professional Builder* Benchmark Conference Sept. 26 at the Chateau Elan Winery and Resort in Braselton, Ga.

**Every year,** the National Housing Quality Award judges apply a rigid yardstick against the best companies in the country. This year, five companies measured up and received National Housing Quality Silver Awards:

**Pringle Development**, Eustis, Fla.
**Mungo Homes**, Irmo, S.C.
**Barratt American**, Carlsbad, Calif.
**Fireside Hearth & Home**, Lakeville, Minn.
**Mercedes Homes**, Melbourne, Fla.

The last three in that list are national companies, and this award was earned for the entire company, not just a division. That is an achievement that has been reached only once in the 15 year history of the NHQ Awards.

Companies were considered against a refined set of criteria divided into eight categories: quality management, leadership, strategic planning, performance management, customer satisfaction, human resources, construction quality, trade relationships and business results.

The judging process involves two steps, including an initial evaluation by the judging panel based on the company's application. Companies that rate high enough then receive site visits from three to four judges who confirm the claims made in the application. Every category has specific areas the judges look for and each category has an assigned point total. To win an award, a company must meet minimum point levels.

## THE JUDGES

**NHQ Award judges** are past NHQ Gold Award winners, quality management experts or representatives of the NAHB Research Center or *Professional Builder.* All of them have donated time, effort and travel expenses to participate and give back to an award program that has helped them improve their own businesses.

**Todd Booze**, Ideal Homes, Norman, Okla.
**Tom Gillespie**, Kennedy Homes, South Barrington, Ill.
**Dan Gorski**, Veridian Homes, Madison, Wis.
**Denis Leonard**, Veridian Homes, Madison, Wis.
**Ron Swecker**, Grayson Homes, Ellicott City, Md.
**Serge Ogranovitch**, The Potomack Group, Locust Grove, Va.
**Chip Pennington**, Shea Homes, Highlands Ranch, Colo.
**Dean Potter**, K. Hovnanian, Red Bank, N.J.
**Bill Saint**, Simonini Builders, Charlotte, N.C.
**Kevin Estes**, Estes Builders, Sequim, Wash.
**Dennis Schroeder**, Shea Homes, San Diego
**Charlie Scott**, Woodland O'Brien Associates, Carmel, Ind.
**Frank Alexander**, NAHB Research Center, Upper Marlboro, Md.

Customer satisfaction measurements provided by Avid Ratings Co., Madison, Wis.

>> BY **SUSAN BADY,** *SENIOR EDITOR, DESIGN*

# Pride of Ownership

Employee-owned Pringle Development continues to form powerful customer relationships, reduce cycle times and hone construction quality to a fine edge.

**PRINGLE DEVELOPMENT'S PRESIDENT AND CEO**, Alan Parrow, says the company's drive to put the customer first is one reason for its healthy share of an intensely competitive market.

Research has shown that employee-owned companies are more productive, and Pringle Development is a classic example. The Eustis, Fla.-based company has posted some impressive numbers lately, including a 22 percent market share among the top eight active-adult home builders in central Florida. That's no small feat considering the intense competition for active-adult buyers in the region and the presence of large national builders like Del Webb and Lennar.

Pringle Development was founded in 1981 and so far has developed eight communities for the 55-and-over market. The company closed 569 homes in the fiscal year ending May 2007, for an average price of $246,055, excluding lot. In 2004, Pringle converted to an employee stock ownership plan (ESOP). Since then, the company's revenues have doubled, says President and CEO Alan Parrow.

"Every employee who works with customers does so as an owner," Parrow says. "This results in a totally different dynamic that not only helps us generate more referral business, but also goes a long way toward enabling us to deliver superior customer service."

NHQ judges named leadership, human resources and construction quality as Pringle's greatest strengths.

"We have a very strong culture driven by the company's founders

PHOTOGRAPH: EVERETT & SOULE

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and organized around a central unifying principle of 'Always do the right thing,'" he says. "We provide greater value than our competitors in three major ways: more choices in design and materials; superior quality of the final product; and outstanding, straightforward communications from the time buyers first visit our communities."

In addition to selling off-the-shelf plans, Pringle can create a set of plans from a buyer's rough sketches. Another unique selling proposition is its two-year deferral program. Parrow says many of the company's customers are moving from the Northeast and Midwest and need to sell an existing home and get their lives in order up north. Pringle allows them to defer construction on their new house for two years and limits their exposure to a 4 percent variance on the sale price.

## Cycle Times Drop; Trades Rewarded

Parrow says Pringle's most visible achievements since winning the NHQ Silver Award in 2005 fall in the areas of construction and quality-control processes. In fiscal year 2007, the builder reduced cycle times by 42 percent while simultaneously improving quality, as measured by the number of items unfinished at closing and customer satisfaction scores measured by a third-party source.

"We did these things while delivering more homes than ever before during that period — actually 22 percent more than the previous year," he says.

Joe Ziler, executive director of operations, says that since the end of its fiscal year, Pringle has reduced cycle times by an additional 15 percent: "We've become a very disciplined, even-flow production company." Average cycle time is now 117 days compared with 125 days in fiscal year 2007 and 217 days in fiscal year 2006.

Pringle's field superintendents (referred to internally as "builders") use a 330-point checklist to evaluate construction processes, beginning with pre-slab prep and continuing through closing.

The company's quality assurance team examines the checklists for recurring problems. "This allows us to continuously improve processes and quality controls," Ziler says.

"It's also about getting the performance that you measure," adds Parrow. "We started posting the trade contractors' relative performance and letting them all look at it to see where they stood. It seemed to really spur them on to greater things."

These performance measurements come in the form of a monthly Builder Assessment Report (BAR). Trade partners with the best BAR scores for warranty service, inspections and work-crew attendance receive quarterly recognition.

Pringle is working on a way to tie the trade partners' contracts to a monetary incentive "so that there's a base price for a service or a product installation," says Parrow. "But that price can vary depending upon their performance in four key areas: job-site readiness, cleanliness, on-time performance and zero defects."

Ziler points out that the rate of failed inspections is down to less than 2 percent — no mean achievement in the state of Florida, where home inspections are particularly rigorous.

## No Micromanaging

Pringle's corporate culture, says Ziler, is open and relaxed with a high level of accountability, but employees are not micromanaged. Each employee has access to internal software training and external training classes, including quality and safety system training, construction task training and customer satisfaction training.

Senior managers continuously reinforce Pringle's vision, mission and values with such tools as PringleNet, the company intranet. The company is transitioning to Microsoft SharePoint, which will provide a central repository for all documents. Employees can access key measurements, which are posted monthly. Suggestion boxes are always bulging with ideas, and every suggestion gets a response via e-mail.

> "EVERY EMPLOYEE WHO WORKS WITH CUSTOMERS DOES SO AS AN OWNER. THIS RESULTS IN A TOTALLY DIFFERENT DYNAMIC."

Like other builders, Pringle is facing significant challenges, including a housing backlog and demand that's drying up. "It went from a fire hydrant to a drip," says Ziler. But they're staying on track by keeping the right employees, managing costs while improving profitability and maintaining good land positions. And geographic expansion is on the horizon; the company is actively looking for sites in Georgia.

"Our strategic plan will guide the way to our future success," Parrow says.

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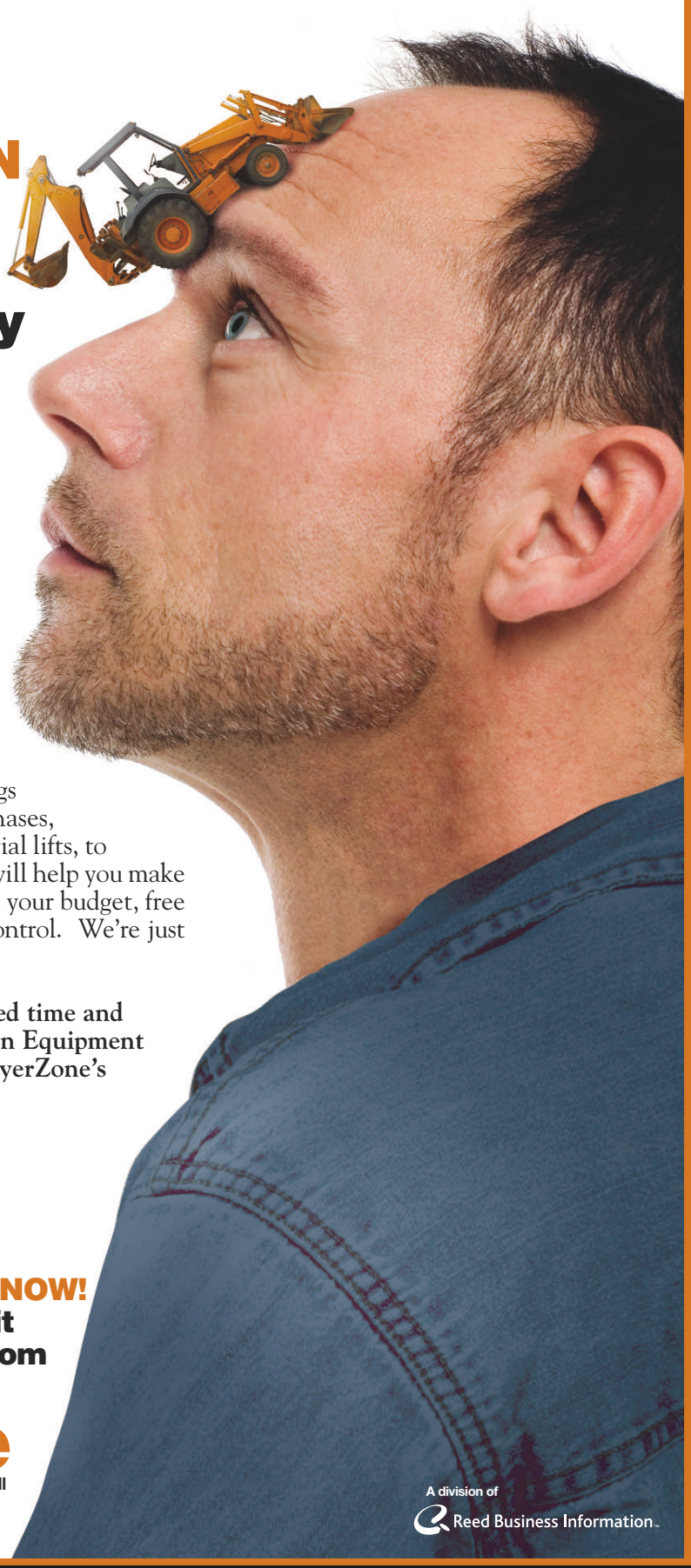

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>> BY **FELICIA OLIVER,** *SENIOR EDITOR*

# The Mungo Family

This South Carolina builder has refined its niche and grown without losing sight of its enthusiasm and culture.

**STEVEN, LEFT, AND STEWART MUNGO** are co-owners of Mungo Homes. They took over the business from their father, Michael Mungo, whose portrait is in the background.

PHOTOGRAPH: JEFF AMBERG

Mungo Homes has historically led the Columbia, S.C., market, but being the biggest builder in town is not the goal.

"Our business plan is to grow as opportunities arise, without sacrificing our core values or performance," says Chris Condon, division president of Mungo's corporate office, in Irmo, S.C., near Columbia.

Those values include working hard while putting family first; having high professional, ethical and personal standards; and practicing teamwork and unselfish dedication.

"It all boils down to being the kind of person that your mama raised you to be," says Lee McLoud, division president of Harbor Homes, Mungo's Charleston, S.C. office. "That's very much the culture around here."

Founded by Michael J. Mungo in 1954, the company has built more than 9,000 homes and 20,000 home sites. Sons Stewart and Steven Mungo are current principals of the company. In addition to heading up the corporate office, Condon oversees Mungo Construction, the general contracting arm that does business with government agencies and private developers around the state.

Mungo has enjoyed impressive growth over the last few years. Company closings increased 77.5 percent between 2003 and 2006 — helped by the opening of Harbor Homes in 2005. And in 2006 when

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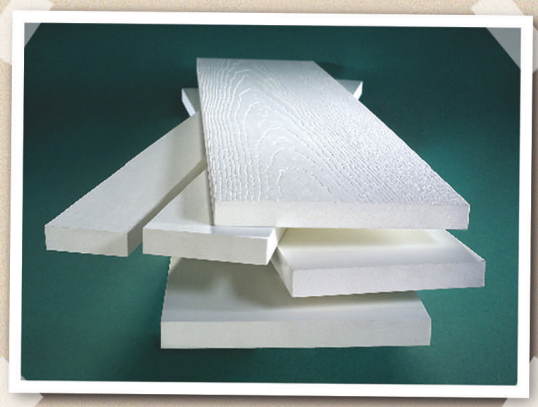

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most of the housing industry was suffering through a significant sales slump, Mungo had its best year in company history.

"Our market diversity, sound fiscal practices and steady government work have kept a softening market from adversely affecting our bottom line," says Condon.

And Mungo tops off this year with winning an NHQ Silver Award on its very first try — a rare achievement.

## Comfortable in its own skin

Mungo's staff knows what their capabilities are as builders, and they stick to what they do best. The company tried to accommodate special customer requests but recognized customer satisfaction and profitability dropped dramatically. They are better at building standard plans with standard options.

"If someone wants to buy a home from Mungo or Harbor, we have a very wide variety of options, and you can make a very customized home within the predetermined, pre-priced, pre-drawn, pre-estimated, pre-contracted list," Condon says.

"We are not a custom home builder," he adds. "We don't want every customer out there; we want the ones that will be happy in our system. And there are plenty of them."

## Hiring for cultural fit

The informal motto around the office at Mungo Homes is, "We don't hire you; we adopt you."

Condon says satisfaction and well-being at work are much more easily achieved in a family-type environment and adds that Mungo's turnover rate — at .44 percent a month — is an eighth of the industry standard of 4.9.

"We don't lose people to the competition," says Condon.

People are valued, but prima donnas are frowned upon. McCloud says his employees have seen him dig ditches, sweep houses and clean bathrooms, and that Steven Mungo has "done things you wouldn't think a typical company owner would do." The hiring process is designed to weed out people who don't share this team-oriented, "we're in this together" attitude.

> "IT ALL BOILS DOWN TO BEING THE KIND OF PERSON THAT YOUR MAMA RAISED YOU TO BE."

Multiple interviews and personality appraisals ensure only skilled people who fit Mungo's corporate culture get hired. For key management decisions, several staff members review the candidate.

"Everybody convenes afterward and trades notes," Condon. "Some people see one thing, other people see another. It helps us get a real good read on them."

The company recognizes and rewards excellent performance. Recognitions given at quarterly company breakfast meetings provide an opportunity to publicly acknowledge good work. The company liberally doles out to employees free trips and tickets to South Carolina sports team events. For working tirelessly to finish a job on time, the entire government division got rewarded with a trip to Costa Rica.

"And we basically gave all the field guys a month off when they were through," says Steven Mungo. "I told them, 'Go away for a month. You'll get your paycheck. Just cool your jets and go do something fun.'"

## Efficiencies of scale

The Columbia office is where most business functions — estimating, marketing, accounting, human resources, purchasing, etc. — are centralized. The divisions share resources. "That allows us to move assets around as needed and prioritize them where we need to bring forces to bear at a particular moment for maximum impact," says Condon.

The Charleston office had 184 closings and turned a profit in 2005 — its first full year of operation. "That's when we started getting excited and thought that maybe we've got something here," Condon says.

At the Charleston office, there are four employees who work with estimating, accounting, permits and closings.

"Otherwise, everybody else is out in the field building houses," says McLoud. "You could do up to 300 closings with that same nucleus."

Most business activities at the company have processes that have been carefully crafted and refined as needed. Employee stakeholders have the opportunity to provide input and feedback so that no critical element is overlooked.

"By the time we implement a process, everybody has had a part in creating it," says Condon. "For that reason, we don't have too many people trying to get around the rules."

Mungo's overall vision includes what Condon calls "an absolute, total commitment to overall quality."

"We only hire people with the commitment to get better everyday," says Condon. "Even though we just won the [NHQ] Silver Award, there's not a single person who is satisfied with what we're doing here today."

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>> BY **PAUL DEFFENBAUGH,** *EDITORIAL DIRECTOR*

# Tight Control

Because of devoted employees and tight controls, Barratt American weathers the roughest seas in housing and takes home a National Housing Quality Silver Award.

**QUALITY DRIVERS.** (left to right) Larry Liepel, vice president of construction; Jim Moss, quality and maintenance manager, and Michael D. "Mick" Pattinson, CEO and principal

It should tell you a lot about Barratt American that it builds in two of the toughest markets in the country — San Diego and the Inland Empire — but has not had to lay off a single employee. That can only be accomplished through a combination of tight cost control and empathy. It also reveals a lot about the kind of company Barratt American is.

Starting at the top with CEO and Principal Michael D. "Mick" Pattinson there is an attitude that suffuses the mentality of every employee at Barratt American. It is a sense of ability to accomplish tasks in an environment with strong support for both company and individual goals.

Such a transcending attitude did not arrive overnight. It was part of a defined quality improvement process. It is this devotion to both excellence and the pursuit of excellence that has garnered the Carlsbad, Calif.-based company the National Housing Quality Silver Award. The achievement recognizes the entire corporation, not just an individual division, which in itself is a significant accomplishment.

As many home builders know, getting multiple divisions to work together on the same page can be a tiresome task. Barratt American's clear goals and its encouragement, development and recognition of quality employees has allowed it to create a company culture that

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extends beyond the corporate halls to each of the divisions.

Begun as a division of one of the largest home building companies in England, Barratt American formed in 1980. In 2004, it underwent a management buyout and is now completely controlled by the American management group. The company operates three divisions: San Diego, Inland Empire and an Urban Division.

## Human Resources

Lots of business people point to their employees and say, "They're the reason for our success." At Barratt American, it is more than just lip service. In fact, the NHQ judges recognized Barratt American's human resources processes as among the finest in the country. In particular, they identified a strong devotion to career development that includes regular workshops, classes and seminars.

During meetings with employees, the judges heard one story after another of employees who had been trying to work at Barratt for years, and once finally in the door, threw themselves into their jobs, taking advantage of opportunities for personal and career development.

The cultural goals, which are written and distributed to all employees, reflect many of the attributes that attract such highly motivated people.

- "We operate as an entrepreneurial organization"
- "We treat everyone with respect"
- "We act with integrity"
- "We will always be a benefit to our community"

It is no wonder why such an environment would foster people willing to make hard decisions to protect the health of the company. And that is why no one has been laid off. Quality and Maintenance Manager Jim Moss says the company has pushed employees to find ways to cut and control costs and advocated new ideas for improving efficiencies. There has been attrition, of course, with those positions not replaced, but there have been no reductions in force, which very few home builders nationally — and even fewer in the tough Southern California market — have been able to achieve.

One example of a reward that provides clear benefit to the company was the establishment of the President's Club in 2004. This is an incentive program that rewards employees who exceed customer satisfaction expectations. In 2005, members of the President's Club received a trip to Las Vegas, and in 2006, employees received a trip to Maui. Such a result not only rewards superior service and continuous improvement, it provides clear goals for the organization.

EVEN WORKING IN THE TOUGHEST MARKETS IN THE COUNTRY, BARRATT AMERICAN HAS NOT HAD TO REDUCE WORKFORCE.

## Leadership

What is remarkable about such an employee-focused company is how strong and present the senior leadership is in day-to-day operations.

Pattinson and the other officers are actively involved in both the company and the builder community. Pattinson has served as president of the California Building Industry Association and took a very personal and lead role in the fight to pass Senate Bill 800, which provided a way for homeowners and builders to resolve construction disputes.

That kind of leadership has brought the devotion of trade contractors, who often were the group most readily punished by out-of-control construction defect litigation.

Even more than those high-profile roles, though, the board of directors at Barratt American has done a surpassing job of establishing clear goals for continuous improvement and providing the means and methods to measuring the progress. The goal, of course, is to deliver the highest quality home to a satisfied customer.

Construction quality does not just happen, even among companies with great employees. Every job has a completion checklist managed by the site managers. Handoffs from trade to trade are done formally. Job sites at Barratt American are clean and uncluttered where materials move in and out smoothly and on time.

One method Barratt employs that ensures quality construction is to use third-party inspectors in addition to municipally required inspections. The added benefit of such a best practice is there is less litigation caused by lower quality construction.

All of this works because the employees have access to clear communication systems, defined processes, and established metrics. All of that placed in a structure of succinct goals. In a quality-based company, such as Barratt American, the business benefits from greater profitability, consistent performance and improved employee retention.

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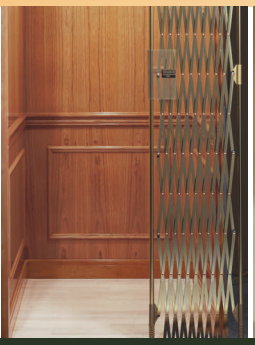

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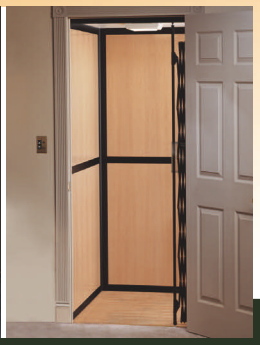

From ornate elegance to this simple design.

>> BY **MARK JARASEK,** *SENIOR EDITOR, ELECTRONIC MEDIA*

# Trade Contractors to Model

Judges praise Fireside Hearth & Home for consistency, communication and customer care.

**FIRESIDE HEARTH & HOME** Jim Plazak, national field operations manager, left, and Roger Oxford, senior vice president, guided NHQ Judges during site visits.

PHOTOGRAPH: STEVE WOIT

"I wish I had a team of trade contractors like Fireside." That comment, coming from an NHQ judge who also happened to be a home builder, would sound like sweet music to anyone in the home building trades. But for Fireside Hearth & Home, it represented the essence of what boosted the firm to achieve a Silver Award for the 2008 NHQ Awards — a solid ability to impress their customers, even when their customers happen to be the NHQ Award judging panel.

Certainly, it takes much more than customer satisfaction to achieve any level of NHQ Award recognition. NHQ judges are methodical in their evaluation and very discerning when it comes to doling out awards. So Fireside had to make an impression and show positive results when it came to areas including leadership, strategic planning, performance management, human resources, and construction quality as well.

Fireside Hearth & Home formed in 2000 when two of the nation's largest fireplace distributors were acquired by Hearth & Home Technologies. Since then, through expansion and acquisition, Fireside amassed builder distribution facilities in 34 cities across the U.S. In addition to the builder distribution facilities, they also have dozens of owned and independent direct retail showroom stores.

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Hearth & Home Technologies is also manufacturer of the Heatilator and Heat & Glo fireplace brands. These businesses all operate under the umbrella of the HNI Corp.

The corporate structure forms a unique integrated supply chain where all levels benefit from established processes, clear channels of communication and a corporate mindset focused on uncompromising quality and constant innovation. Valuable feedback gained at the distribution, service and retail levels can be channeled back to the design, engineering and manufacturing levels to facilitate product and service advancements and improvements.

However, the focus of the NHQ judge's visit was only on Fireside Hearth & Home. Here's what they found to be working in Fireside's favor.

## Strategies for Planning: Communication is Key

Business strategies at Fireside are driven by a rolling three-year strategic plan that is revisited and updated annually. This gives the firm an opportunity to assess current market conditions and make adjustments. Additionally, each region as well as each division within those regions operates under its own formal business plan that works directly into overall strategic planning goals. Regional and divisional groups are directly accountable for achieving goals.

NHQ judges were impressed with the sophisticated computer-driven visual management tools in place at Fireside that work to assist managers in closely monitoring performance progress. These include "dashboard" reports that are updated daily and monthly "scorecards." Scorecards are color coded, allowing managers to be quickly alerted to problem spots so changes can be made to address any deficiencies or variances from the established business plans.

Fireside also tracks outside building permit information in their markets to predict future sales demand. This type of information is shared with the Hearth & Home Technologies' parent to facilitate adjustments to the manufacturing side.

When it comes to performance management, Fireside excels in maintaining established processes and policies throughout the organization by using effective communications tools. In addition, a corporate culture and philosophy that espouses continuous improvement allow every employee to make suggestions for positive or progressive changes to processes and policies.

The firm also works to capitalize on best practices that are developed at the local levels by sharing those practices regionally and nationally. Good ideas that are producing positive results in one region can be implemented company-wide.

FIRESIDE EMPLOYEES ARE WELL AWARE THAT THEIR PRODUCT BRINGS FIRE INTO PEOPLE'S HOMES.

## Happiness is a Warm Hearth

Fireside employees recognize their primary customer is the home builder. They also recognize their secondary customer is the homeowner. If the homeowner is happy with their fireplace, that in turn reflects positively on the home builder.

Fireside employees are well aware their product brings fire into people's homes. This conjures images of couples or families gathered around a cozy hearth enjoying conversation, playing card games or drinking hot cocoa. But there's a not-so-warm-and-fuzzy side. The firm realizes there are serious risks with fireplaces that may not be installed or used properly.

As a result, solid processes have been put in place that guide all fireplace installations. Procedures have been standardized across all regions and divisions to assure consistency, safety and security.

Taking it a step further, Fireside branded its installation process, calling it its "Signature Installation." It dictates installation procedures that go beyond manufacturer's requirements and local and national codes, assuring fireplaces in Minnesota are installed in the exact same manner as those in Maryland. Most importantly, it works from a risk management standpoint to help limit liability. NHQ judges were able to directly observe this consistency of installation techniques and lauded Fireside for being able to maintain that consistency across regions and divisions.

## A Culture of Membership

Interestingly, Fireside does not have "employees," instead referring to workers as "members." Recognizing that people are their greatest asset, Fireside operates under a member-owner culture where everyone is a stock owner and participates in cash profit sharing that rewards performance.

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>> BY **BILL LURZ,** *SENIOR EDITOR, BUSINESS*

# A Winning Culture

Eleven years after its first NHQ award, Florida-based Mercedes Homes rides strengths in leadership, culture, training and technological innovation to its secure its second.

**MEMBERS OF MERCEDES HOMES' SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM INCLUDE,** from left, Stuart McDonald, Scott Buescher, Laura Siwicki and Craig Schmauss.

When NHQ judges dug into Mercedes Homes earlier this summer, they found a clearly marked trail leading to customer satisfaction and superior business results. The source: company leaders at headquarters and in every division nurture a corporate culture that emphasizes career growth and advancement for employees. They also carry a deep commitment to corporate citizenship in the local community and focus on keeping customers satisfied with the homes the firm delivers.

The NHQ judging team — led by Veridian Homes' Denis Leonard and NAHB Research Center's Frank Alexander — spent a week and a half probing into Mercedes headquarters in Melbourne, Fla., and three of the company's divisions.

"The most remarkable thing we found was the depth of the corporate culture," says Leonard. "Even in the Dallas division, far away from the influence of headquarters in Florida, every employee knew about 'Our House' and was able to tell us that the acronym in the company motto — 'Do It RITE' — stands for respect, integrity, trust and ethics. It's obvious those are not just words on the wall; they mean something to Mercedes' employees individually."

That corporate culture still emanates from founder Howard

PHOTOGRAPH: EVERETT & SOULE

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Buescher, 84. The firm has the feel of a small family business — even though it's now No. 28 in *PB*'s Giant 400 rankings, with 12 divisions in four states closing 4,264 homes in 2006, for $1.23 billion in revenue. Five Buescher children — sons Keith, Scott and Jon, and daughters Susan Girard and Linda Swain — work in the company, which helps explain the strength of familial ties.

'Our House' is a single-page statement of values, purpose, vision, mission and focus displayed in every division and discussed regularly. Along with the 'Do It RITE' acronym, 'Our House' includes a statement of purpose: "To improve people's quality of life." The vision statement — "To create a premier, consistent and disciplined, operationally excellent company as measured by our employees, customers, trades, and shareholders" — probably comes closest to defining what this company is really all about. And the Bueschers are still the source of it, which shows the vital role of leadership in fostering such a quality-rich culture.

Of the eight categories in the NHQ judging process, Mercedes graded highest in leadership and not just at the corporate level, where Keith and Scott Buescher provide direction and corporate Director of Quality Laura Siwicki and Vice President of Operations Stuart McDonald exert their influence on quality processes. The other judging criterion where Mercedes excelled was human resources, where corporate scored a 97, and all three visited divisions exceeded that score, with the Tampa Bay division hitting a perfect 100, Space Coast 99 and Dallas 98.

All of the divisions showed exceptional depth in training programs, with some 5,555 hours of training that had already been logged this year among nearly 1,200 employees at the time of the site visits. The use of CDs to train employees and trades and introduce customers to Mercedes' approach to quality was cited as an industry best practice.

What shines through in all of this is the wisdom Howard Buescher transmitted to his kids: "The secret to growth is happy employees," COO Scott Buescher says today. "Happy employees with a clear mission, vision and values deliver quality products that keep customers happy.

"Culture is the core of it," he adds. "People want to be part of a team that accomplishes great things. Building homes for people is a noble endeavor, but every one of our divisions is also involved in a long list of charitable activities in their community. And training is also a key component. When employees are growing, bettering their own careers, it shows in the quality of their work and the way they relate to customers."

NHQ judges also cited Mercedes' mentoring and leadership development programs as industry best practices. Space Coast Division President David Barin says, "It's part of our job as division presidents to develop the future stars of the company. It's rare that you find a young executive that's good at all four areas — construction, sales, land and purchasing. We push them to advance their strengths, but to also fill in the gaps in their skill sets. We match vice presidents and division presidents with different strengths, so the division benefits today from skills that mesh, and the young execs also continue to develop."

The judges' report on Mercedes also identifies technological innovation as a key strength, which should come as no surprise since this magazine in October 2005 reported on the firm's pioneering development of homes with cast-in-place solid concrete walls that withstand hurricane winds of 200 mph.

Solid-pour homes are now 65 percent of the production in the Space Coast division. Mercedes spent eight years collaborating with University of Florida building scientists and engineers, HUD's Partnership for Advancing Technology in Housing (PATH) and the Federal Emergency Management Administration to develop the solid-pour system. It can use the forms to build every product in its portfolio.

> "PEOPLE WANT TO BE PART OF A TEAM THAT ACCOMPLISHES GREAT THINGS."

The housing recession in Florida crimped Mercedes' plans to move this technology beyond the Space Coast and Central Florida. Solid-pour homes carry a $3,000 to $5,000 premium in price, and the market now resists any upward movement. "But the superior strength and storm resistance of this technology has appeal to customers," says Space Coast President David Barin. "And we like that it offers more control of labor costs and less waste on the job site. We will eventually go to all solid-pour product in this division." **PB**

**LOG ON** You can read **"Professional Builder celebrates NHQ Awards"** online at **www.ProBuilder.com/emergingissues**

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

# Mayberry 2.0

The Rivendell model at Towne Mill combines a quaint suburban feel with updated, urban features.

**Picture this:** Aunt Bee is sitting on the front porch, listening to hymns on her iPod. She waves to Andy as he pulls his hybrid car into the garage. Emerging from the garage and into the house, Andy hangs up his coat and shakes his head as he stops to pick up Opie's Wii controller, which has mysteriously made its way from the media center to the drop zone. Andy walks over to the net nook to check in on Opie, who's playing a multiplayer online role-playing game on the computer. Andy puts the Wii stick down and turns on his high-definition TV, waiting for Barney and Gomer, who are coming over to watch NASCAR.

This scene mimics the feel developers Old Mill Realty and Wynne Jackson Towne Mill wanted to create at Towne Mill, the 431-acre master-planned community they've positioned as "Mayberry with a twist," blending the home town neighborliness of a bygone era with the updated features of today.

Homeowners can find Towne Mill in Canton, Ga., a town just outside of Atlanta known for its beautiful parks, historic architecture and rich cultural activities. It has experienced recent retail and commercial growth and is home to The Bluffs of Technology Park, an emerging employment center.

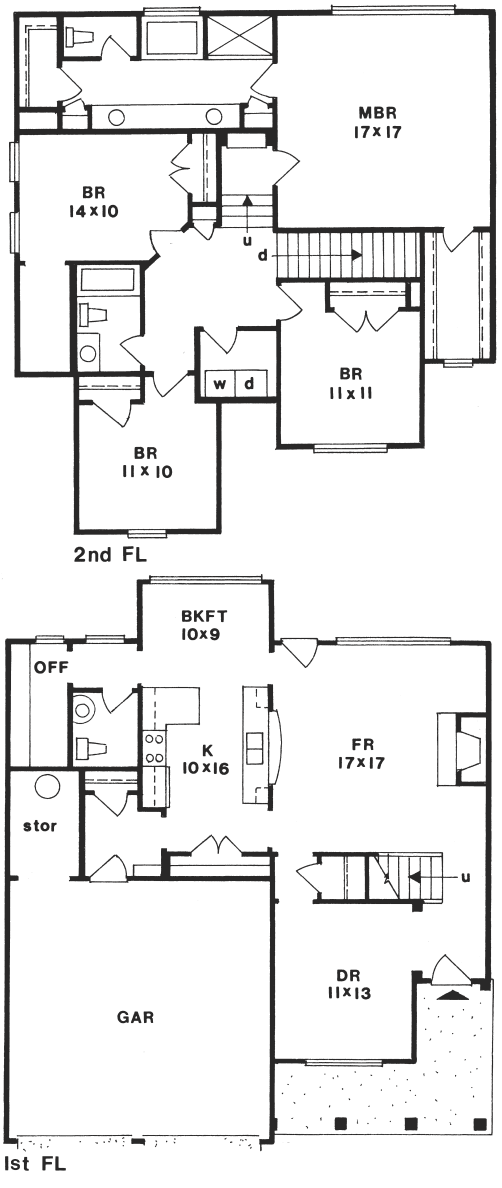
When complete, the community will include 758 homes in a variety of architectural styles ranging in price from the $190,000s to the $500,000s.

## VITAL STATS
### Rivendell model

**Location:** Towne Mill in Canton, Ga.
**Builder:** Raines Residential, Marietta, Ga.
**Architect:** Caldwell-Cline Architects and Designers, Marietta, Ga.
**Interior designer:** DMD Design Group
**Developer:** Old Mill Realty and Wynne/Jackson
**Model opened:** June 2006
**Home type:** Traditional Shingle Style
**Sales to date:** 9
**Community size:** 758 homes
**Square footage:** 2,261
**Price:** $242,900
**Hard cost:** $204,000
**Buyer profile:** Varies: first-time home buyers, young families, empty nesters

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CREATIVE SOURCES PHOTOGRAPHY

**THE TRADITIONAL, SHINGLE-STYLE**
Rivendell model at Towne Mill evokes quaint images of a bygone era, with updated features to suit today's buyers.




**A CHILD'S PLAY AREA WAS CREATED IN A FLEX SPACE** where there would normally be additional attic storage. Builder Ronnie Raines calls it a "Smurf Room," a place for tea parties or kids' games — whatever a child's imagination dictates.

## Opportunities

"We knew that we wanted the homes to be charming," says Ronnie Raines, president of Raines Residential, one of the builders in Towne Mill.

More than 35 percent of the community's acreage is being preserved as natural green space, enabling residents to enjoy heavily wooded, rolling topography with meandering creeks and Blue Ridge Mountain views. There's even a waterfall behind Raines' Rivendell model.

"It looks like it's coming out of the side of the mountain, which is really soothing for customers," he says.

Raines wanted to build homes that were charming but with features rare in this market, particularly at this square footage (2,261) and price point (low- to mid-200,000s).

"We actually went into charette mode," he says. "From scratch, we sat down [and considered] the features that we wanted in the house, including some high ceilings, net nooks, drop zones and a private retreat space."

His market research revealed that his target buyers — a combination of first timers, young families and empty nesters — were more sophisticated and had an appreciation for design.

"They appreciated this house versus ... I hate to use the word cookie cutter, but I guess that's an appropriate name for it," says Raines. "This is more of a custom feeling home."

## Obstacles

Finding the right architect for what eventually became the Rivendell model was crucial, but Raines knew just whom to call.

"Caldwell-Cline," says Raines. "They actually designed my personal home. I sought out the best architects that I could find in Atlanta, and that's who I think they are. ... We were able to talk to each other and get on the same page."

"Instead of excluding a group in a certain price point, Ronnie's objective was to still give them the

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**THERE'S PLENTY OF ROOM TO MANEUVER IN THE RIVENDELL'S KITCHEN** and breakfast nook. An adjacent command center is easy to reach but out of the way of cooking space. The other side of the kitchen opens to the family room (above). The model is designed for family functionality.

amenities and the type of features you would find in a much larger home," says Calvin R. Cline, partner with Caldwell-Cline Architects and Designers in Marietta, Ga.

"We do a lot of custom homes in addition to spec homes for builders," says Roger L. Caldwell, also partner at Caldwell-Cline. "The biggest thing when I'm looking at a house like this is to be conservative on the square footage, but at the same time incorporate as many elements into the design that you would see in a larger custom home."

The floor plan was prototyped and revised several times to include everything they wanted. Raines says good communication between him and the design team made it possible to make refinements in the field.

"Niches were added," says Raines. "We ended up changing our window transoms in the family room to let in more light. We refined our drop zone and our net nook to be able to accommodate more of a place to come into. We had a storage bench there with a coat rack and an additional coat closet, cubby holes where you can put your laptop, your briefcase, and kids' backpacks. And it didn't interfere with the laundry room. You actually entered into that drop zone out of the garage."

The refinements also brought about an interesting flex space that was staged as a playroom for kids.

"It's what I refer to as a 'Smurf house' — what traditionally would have been an attic storage area," says Raines.

This shingle-style home has a custom feel inside. Split walk-in closets and a vaulted ceiling grace the master bedroom while a family room directly below has an 11 foot high, non-vaulted ceiling. The higher-than-normal family room ceiling offers a dramatic approach for the master bedroom above: you have to climb a couple of additional steps to get above the family room to the master.

"It gives me a little drama in the family room," says Caldwell, "but it also separates the master bedroom a little bit from the other bedrooms."

Noise abatement measures have also been built into the master suite; it doesn't share a wall with other bedrooms, which enhances privacy.

Additional features in the home include a small butler's pantry between the kitchen and dining area as well as unexpected features that come standard, plus an upgraded trim package has been popular with buyers.

## Outcome

The Rivendell is in two of the three pods Raines has at Towne Mill. And it is the best selling model, having sold 9 homes to date.

"[Raines] always tells us it's just a home run," says Cline. "He's had nothing but positive feedback on it."

The home also won a gold Professionalism Award from the Greater Atlanta Home Builders Association Sales and Marketing Council in 2006 for Best Single Family Detached home priced $199,000–$299,000 for a builder of one to 30 homes a year.

Wouldn't Andy and Aunt Bee be proud? **PB**

**LOG ON** To read **'The Rivendell model at Towne Mill offers updated Mayberry charm'** online, visit **www.ProBuilder.com/plansandprojects**

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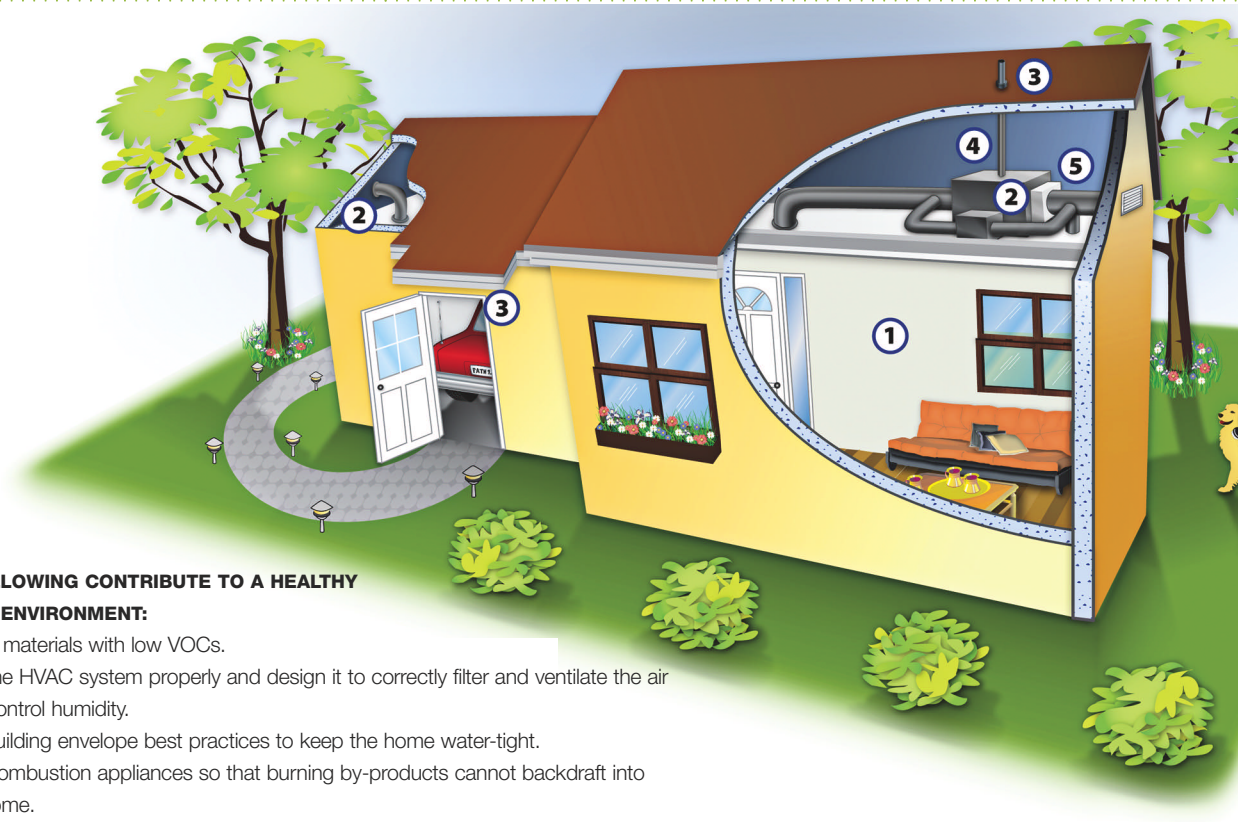
>> BY **GLEN SALAS,** *FOR PATH PARTNERS*




**THE FOLLOWING CONTRIBUTE TO A HEALTHY INDOOR ENVIRONMENT:**

1. Select materials with low VOCs.
2. Size the HVAC system properly and design it to correctly filter and ventilate the air and control humidity.
3. Use building envelope best practices to keep the home water-tight.
4. Seal combustion appliances so that burning by-products cannot backdraft into the home.
5. Instruct owners on maintaining quality air after your job's done.

PATH REPORT

# Fresh Air Design

How builders can improve the indoor air quality of the homes they build

**New home. Fresh start. Clean living — right?** Not necessarily, if you heed the Environmental Protection Agency's warning that the air inside homes can be more polluted than the air outside — even in the largest and most industrialized cities.

But your new homes can offer cleaner living with proper design, material specification, construction and maintenance. PATH offers its Indoor Air Quality Tech Set as a how-to guide for designing, controlling and maintaining proper IAQ.

## The Problem

Too much air sealing and not enough controlled ventilation can cause contaminants to build up.

Water condensation on the interior of windows, musty odors, stuffy air, dirty registers, return air grills, mold, mildew and homeowner discomfort are all signs of a possible IAQ problem. But by the time those signs appear, the problem is already there.

It's much less expensive in the long run — and better for your firm's reputation — if those problems never develop.

## The Lowdown on VOCs

VOCs include a wide range of compounds that contain carbon and other elements, such as hydrogen, oxygen, fluorine, chlorine, bromine, sulfur or nitrogen. They evaporate easily at room temperature, often have a sharp smell and may be detrimental to your health.

Plywood, most OSB sheathing and many carpets, conventional paints, finishes, glues, stains, sealers and plastic-based products contain high levels of VOCs that produce potentially harmful gasses when applied.

Today, low- and no-VOC products are available almost anywhere. Also, low- and no-VOC latex paints use water as their solvent and carrier, which eases cleanup and is generally less toxic. Note, however, that not every latex-based paint is low in VOCs.

## Custom HVAC

To control indoor air effectively, the HVAC system should be custom-designed for each home you build.

Don't rely on rule-of-thumb sizing, which often results in a costly and drafty system that delivers too much air conditioning and uncertain humidity control. Look to ACCA's Manual J to get the right size system.

Ventilation may be as simple as installing well-placed spot ventilation fans that augment the space heating system or control bathroom moisture.

Or you may need to integrate whole-house ventilators and humidity control to provide a measured amount of outdoor air for conditioning at regular intervals. Don't rely on air leaks to deliver outdoor air.

All HVAC systems contain some method for filtering the room air that is returned to the unit for re-conditioning. The sizes of particulates that filters can trap varies, as does their ability to filter moisture and sterilize micro-organisms. Generally, the better the filter, the more expensive it is, although even a high-quality filter won't cost much at your local home improvement store.

Some filtration methods can be implemented by switching to a different filter medium, while others require special housing. If you use a special filtration system, verify with your HVAC designer and supplier that it is compatible with the furnace, air conditioner and air handling units. Otherwise, system performance will be compromised.

Since HVAC system maintenance and filter replacement should be performed at regular intervals, make these areas easily accessible.

All outdoor air intakes should be at least 10 feet away from exhaust outlets and areas where vehicles idle.

Test for radon. If you find it, there are simple construction techniques that will mitigate this dangerous gas. Find a local radon remediation subcontractor to conduct this work.

## Build to Last

A well-built home repels moisture and air with good design features like covered entries, redundant weather barriers and grading that moves water away from the structure. Follow the steps outlined in PATH's Tech Set 2, Durable Building Envelope, to eliminate water leaks, which can lead to mold and damage structural integrity.

In homes with attached garages, completely seal the boundary between the home and garage. Connecting doors between the garage and living space should be gasketed and weatherstripped. Attached garages should have a 100 cfm exhaust fan continuously venting outdoors.

Heating equipment that burns any fuel that relies on an open flame inside the home should be vented outdoors. Seal the vent per manufacturer recommendations so that burning by-products, such as carbon monoxide, cannot come back into the home through wind currents or unbalanced ventilation.

Install a kitchen exhaust fan over the stove and oven — and especially over a gas-fired grill — to vent cooking odors, moisture and combustion by-products.

## Now It's Theirs

While quality building practices make a huge difference, the occupants of the home control the quality of their indoor air long after the builder is gone. Remind your buyers to close the windows while mowing the lawn; wash and brush pets regularly and do so outdoors; control insects and pests indoors; wipe or remove shoes worn outdoors upon entering the home; and regularly dust, damp mop and vacuum. Now you can breathe easy, knowing you've done all you can to help your customers breathe easy too. **PB**

*Glen Salas writes about better building practices on behalf of the Partnership for Advancing Technology in Housing which is administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Learn more at www.pathnet.org.*

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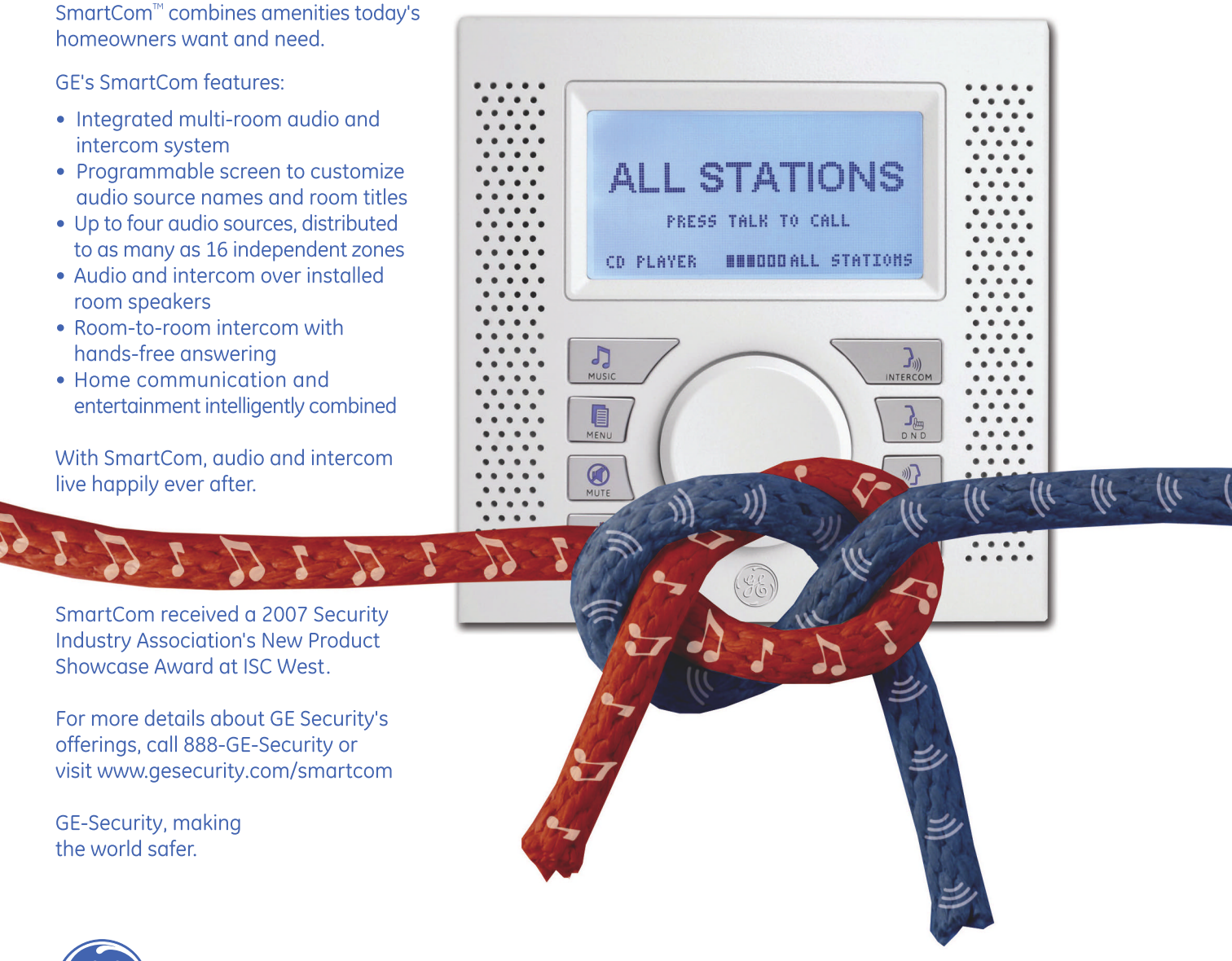


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The Santa Fe is one of the latest additions to Jeld-Wen's interior door line. The paneled doors emulate solid wood-planked doors and come in a range of wood grain and smooth finishes. The company's ProCore Quiet Door for sound reduction is an option.
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### In My Own Words

*"In our company, we have created a community and product design known as the 'Cottage Collection.' This door in a beaded, solid, MDF product really creates interest among our clients and fits our cottage theme perfectly."*

## Halquist Stone

Thin veneer natural stone from Halquist Stone is quarried from the Midwest and Arizona, and most lines are available nationwide. The company also carries both Boulder Creek Stone Products and Cultured Stone, a division of Owens Corning. Both product lines include hundreds of precast stone veneers that replicate the variety of textures, sizes, shapes and colors of natural stone.
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### In My Own Words

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>> BY **NICK BAJZEK,** *BUILDINGPRODUCTS@REEDBUSINESS.COM*

# ProBuilder Product Report: **New Products**

### MiTek

A new introduction to MiTek's Stabilizer line is a 16-inch (on center) truss brace designed to support heavier rooftop conditions, such as a hefty snow load. Builders will save time because it becomes a part of the permanent bracing of the roof rather than traditional lumber bracing, which needs to be removed prior to the attachment of the roof sheathing. ***For FREE information, visit http://pb.ims.ca/5338-128***

### Moen

Sporting a high-arc spout and matching accessories, the Brantford Collection by Moen uses the company's time-saving Pro+Fit locking installation system. Faucet options include a two-handle center set, two-handle wide, two-handle garden tub and three or four-hole Roman tub configuration. Finishes include brushed nickel, oil-rubbed bronze and chrome. ***For FREE information, visit http://pb.ims.ca/5338-130***

### Bruce Hardwood Floors

The new Turlington Lock and Fold floor boards from Bruce Hardwood Floors combine the market's most popular hardwood species and colors with the company's installation technology. The boards are genuine hardwood with cross-ply engineered construction, providing a floor that can be installed in any level of the home. ***For FREE information, visit http://pb.ims.ca/5338-129***

### Woodfold

Making the most out of available space, the Bookcase Door System from Woodfold is both attractive and functional with a unique low-profile hardware system for a flush look. The bookcases are made from the company's ApplePly veneer face in oak, cherry or maple. The doors cover most common openings and ship fully assembled. ***For FREE information, visit http://pb.ims.ca/5338-131***

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>> BY **NICK BAJZEK,** *BUILDINGPRODUCTS@REEDBUSINESS.COM*

# ProBuilder Product Report: Exterior Doors

### Andersen Windows & Doors

With the look of a traditional French door and a tall bottom rail, the 200 Series Hinged Inswing patio door from Andersen Windows & Doors also features innovative sill channels to keep water out. The doors come in single- and two-panel configurations with Low-E or dual pane insulating tempered glass. ***For FREE information, visit http://pb.ims.ca/5338-133***

### Marvin Windows and Doors

For homeowners who want a grand entrance, Marvin Windows and Doors' 2¼-inch French Doors come in 8-foot or 10-foot sizes to accommodate growing ceiling heights. The doors can be configured for in-swing or out-swing and can be clad in one of 19 colors. The doors use standard insulated or the company's Low-E2 glass. ***For FREE information, visit http://pb.ims.ca/5338-132***

### Kolbe

Made with an aluminum interior and exterior or optional wood interior, Kolbe's Lift and Slide Door Systems feature panels that can nest behind one another or recess into pocket opening. Also available is the company's Folding Door System, which features models with panels that fold back against each other for a clear opening. ***For FREE information, visit http://pb.ims.ca/5338-134***

### Weather Shield Windows & Doors

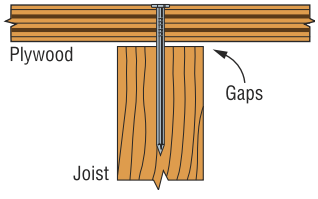
Harkening back to the Prohibition era, the Speakeasy door from Weather Shield Windows & Doors is part of the company's Collections series. The doors are built with 2¼-inch-thick panels in five wood species with a distressed look. The viewport is fitted with insulated glass and kept closed by a bronze clasp. ***For FREE information, visit http://pb.ims.ca/5338-135***

# The Holding Power of Screws

Nothing is more noticeable or annoying than a squeaky floor. Homeowners perceive these squeaks as a quality issue, which casts a negative light on the builder. It's no surprise that floor squeaks rank among the top reasons for a callback or warranty claim.

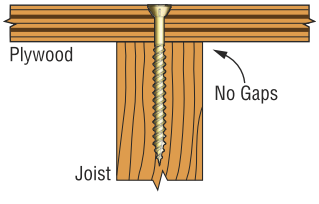
## Problem

When used to install sub-flooring, nails do not have enough hold to create a tight fit between the sheathing and the joist. When gaps are present, sub-flooring may shift under the weight of foot traffic resulting in a squeak.




## Solution

Fastening sub-flooring with screws rather than nails provides the power necessary to pull together the sheathing and the joist, eliminating any gaps and holding the materials firm. Callbacks for squeaks on floors installed with screws are rare.

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### ▲ Mirage Screen Systems

Keeping bugs and sun out of outdoor living areas is the Mirage Solar Screen Solution from Mirage Screen Systems. The Mirage features a unique sun-sensing automated control that activates the screens to keep UV rays out. Made of woven fiberglass, the screens can be programmed via timer controls that network with the home's thermostats. ***For FREE information, visit http://pb.ims.ca/5338-136***

### ▶ Simpson Door Co.

Eight new French door designs from Simpson Door Co. range from simple configurations for clean lines to multiple glass lites for a more dramatic look. Simpson Prairie French doors are available in 1⅜- and 1¾-inch thicknesses and can be specified in widths ranging from 2'6" to 3'6" and in heights of 6'8", 7 feet and 8 feet. ***For FREE information, visit http://pb.ims.ca/5338-137***

### ▼ PGT

The WinGuard Sliding Glass Door Series 730 comes standard with PGT's impact-resistant laminated glass, which uses a special PVB layer heat-pressed between two pieces of glass to keep the pane from shattering if debris hits it. The doors feature corrosion-resistant hardware and can be manufactured in 4-foot by 10-foot panels. ***For FREE information, visit http://pb.ims.ca/5338-138***

### ▲ Jeld-Wen

More flair is key to the Exterior Folding Door System, according to Jeld-Wen. The latest option offers a true 90-degree corner that can be completely opened to the outdoors. This is achieved with two folding door units that meet at the corner where two walls would ordinarily join. Beveled door edges and double weatherstrips ensure the doors are sealed against the elements. ***For FREE information, visit http://pb.ims.ca/5338-139***

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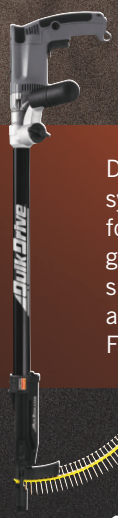


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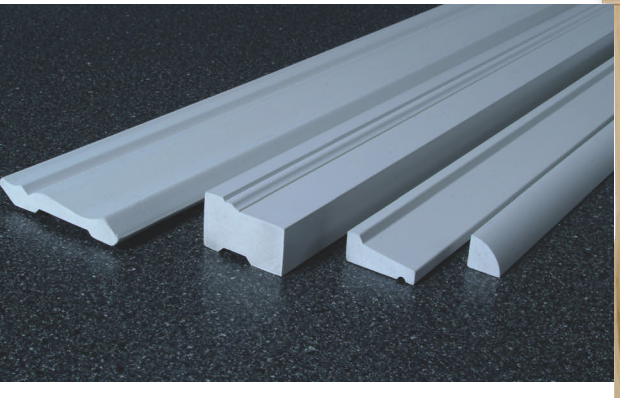
# ProBuilder Product Report: **Millwork & Molding**



### Azek

Trimboard introductions from Azek feature 15 profiles replicating traditional molding styles. According to the company, the demand for low-maintenance exterior building products is increasing the use of trim, including more ornate trim and elaborate moldings. The products have excellent paint adhesion and can be milled, routed, turned on a lathe or heat-formed. ***For FREE information, visit http://pb.ims.ca/5338-140***

### Architectural Products by Outwater Plastics Industries

Made from the company's lightweight, dimensionally stable molded polymer compound that is impervious to the elements, the Orac Decor Flexible Mouldings from Architectural Products by Outwater Plastics Industries offer extremely consistent quality in highly flexible 6'6" lengths. The moldings allow installers to easily create custom radii to accommodate the curvature of almost any radius. ***For FREE information, visit http://pb.ims.ca/5338-141***

### Art for Everyday Living

Art for Everyday Living's Modern Classic Collection includes decorative moldings, columns, corbels, rosettes and other fixtures for the kitchen and other interior spaces. The line was designed by interior architect Bijan Zamani. The company calls the collection "a combination of old world beauty and current woodcarving design trends." ***For FREE information, visit http://pb.ims.ca/5338-142***

### Royal Mouldings

The Royal Decorative Mouldings line from Royal Mouldings are made of cPVC and carry a lifetime no-rot warranty. The moldings ship with the company's factory-applied Readi-Finish and can be painted with oil- or latex-based paint. The product can be installed below grade or direct to masonry. ***For FREE information, visit http://pb.ims.ca/5338-143***

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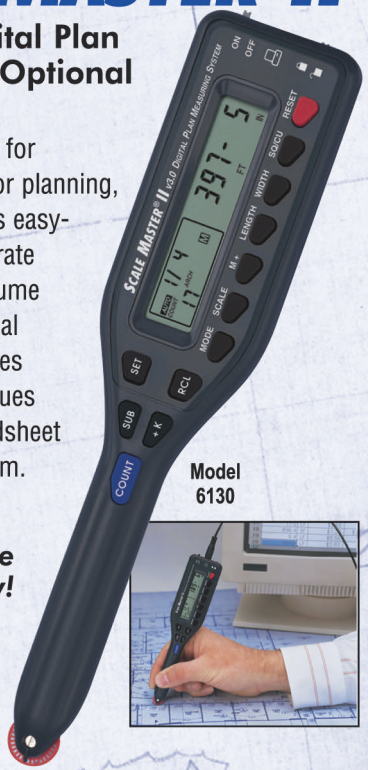


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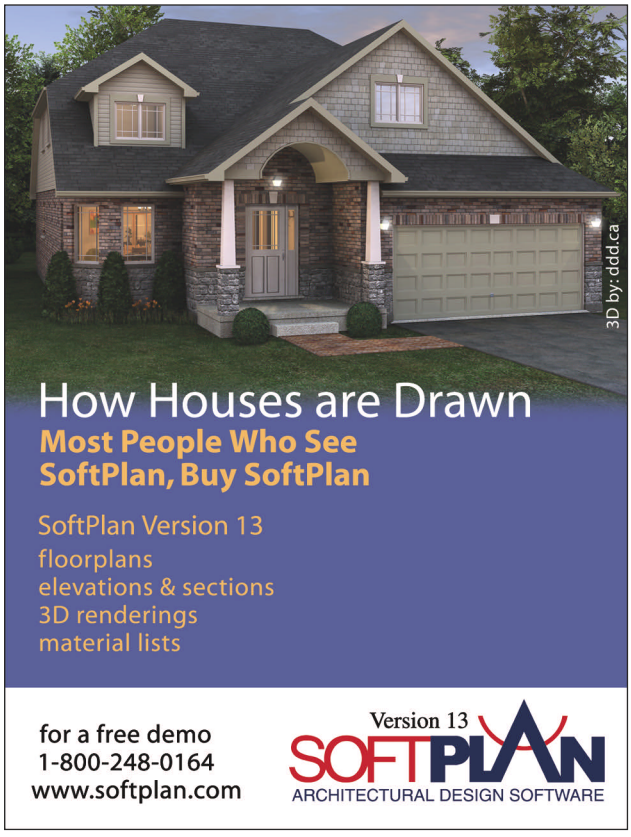


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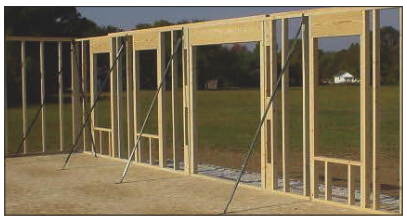

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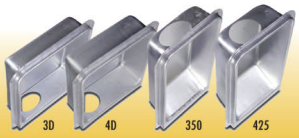


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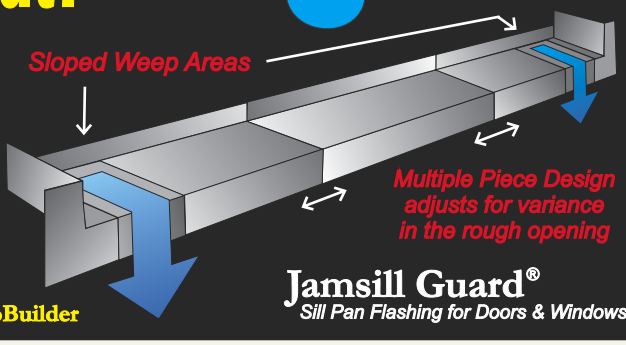


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# Paradise Lost

Don't fall victim to the demise of builder/supplier/trade relationships.

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

**I saw some disturbing statistics** recently regarding relationships between builders, suppliers and trades. Although they are from an individual home builder in its particular market, I can guarantee they apply in your city as well.

TrueNorth runs a survey called TradeCOMM that provides direct feedback from suppliers and trades on the builder's product, processes, leadership and training. The results that disturbed me come from one of the 50 builders using the survey that had previously scored near the top of the ratings.

Can you imagine the shock I felt when I viewed the graphs and saw not just low scores, but the absolute lowest scores overall in the history of the TradeCOMM survey? What went wrong?

The numbers show a trend that my colleagues have observed during the past year. Assuming you have your land positions and staff levels straightened out by now, these numbers speak to an issue that will have more impact on your ability to survive the downturn and perform well after the recovery than any other.

I have preached about the critical importance of strong builder/supplier/trade relationships for nearly 20 years. No one paid much attention until things got really hot in the early part of the 2000s. With trades in short supply, materials on allocation and J.D. Power and Associates' raising the quality bar, many builders made an effort to improve their relationships with suppliers and trades, leveraging them to make significant improvement in product, process and customer satisfaction. But things have changed, and many of these same builders have dropped these relationships as quickly as consumers abandoned their products.

A year ago, you had been on top, and now, according to your formerly-trusted vendors, you have not just fallen off the wagon, you have fallen off the planet. And be careful about rationalizing that in this market "that's just the way it has to be." There are a few exceptional builders out there beating this rap.

If these builders in your market are the ones earning loyalty and respect while you continue to run roughshod over your suppliers and trades, imagine the impact when things turn around. You kick your trades' butts now? They'll kick yours later. It's a classic case of what comes around, goes around.

Thousands of them are just waiting for the chance to get even, and you are building a case. It's already too late for many builders who have used the iron fist in trying to resolve the current crisis. I hope it's not too late for you. **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*

**LOG ON** To read **"Hang on to good relationships between homebuilders, suppliers and tradespeople"** on our Web site, visit us at **www.ProBuilder.com/bestpractices**

"If these builders **in your market** are the ones earning loyalty and respect while you **continue to run roughshod** over your suppliers and trades, imagine the impact when things turn around. You **kick your trades' butts** now? They'll kick yours later. **It's a classic case** of what goes around comes around."

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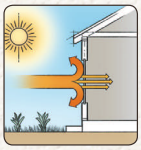

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