



Are You Different?

And how do you get home buyers to see those differences?

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When we read a book, watch a movie, or see a play, we form opinions about the characters based on several sources of information:

- What the narrator tells us
- What others in the story say about the characters
- What characters say about themselves
- Appearance and body language
- What the characters do

At the end of a book, movie, or play, none of these details matter as much as what the characters do. We recognize that *what we do* is the most powerful from among these sources of information: values are communicated by action.

Home buyers will take note of what your marketing materials say (your narrator). They will listen to others (real estate agents, other buyers, and so on). What sales says about design and what construction says about warranty will certainly count for something. Appearances, offices, and job-site conditions add more information: a non-verbal communication of your values.

Still, your actions have the greatest impact. Actions can easily override the message of your marketing materials, what others say about you, and what you say about yourself. Therefore, what you (and others) say about your company and products must be consistently and reliably borne out by your actions.

Merely being different is insufficient. You must be different in ways that home buyers care about. Meeting the differentiation challenge requires that you—

- Identify which things clients would like to have done differently from the way other builders do them (this would likely involve details to include as well as details to avoid).
- Commit to doing those things differently and decide what those differences will be.
- Communicate to each other (across departmental lines) about what things you've identified and how you're doing those things differently. Firsthand knowledge and understanding are essential to being enthusiastic and genuine when personnel talk about these differences with customers.
- Create potential descriptions of those differences so you can each talk about them with home buyers. By rehearsing such conversations, you educate your team, truly focusing on the details of the home buying experience that matter to buyers and forming the habit of calling attention to the good work of colleagues.

To help identify areas where being different would matter to buyers and decide what those differences are or should be, let's begin with the concept presented in **CLUED IN** by Lewis Carbone. He convincingly suggests that customers gather three types of clues from your actions:

- **Functional clues**—things work as they should.

All builders promise quality. How can your actions *prove it*? How can you talk about it? For instance, sales might say “Jim is passionate about building homes. He is on-site, walking the homes, following up with trades on the tiniest details. I’ve been impressed with his detailed knowledge of the building process and our quality standards. It is a pleasure for me as a sales person to work with someone so obviously committed to the job he does.”

Do staff members have quality confirmation lists they can show to customers? Are quality checks done with a real commitment to finding and correcting errors? This requires knowledge—to judge a thing you must know the standard—a commitment to walk homes, the time to do so, and equally important, to confirm that requested corrections have been performed.

Establish guidelines for company paperwork—use of your logo, font style, size, and treatments. Run spell check and then proof read—spell check does not catch everything. When every document a customer receives from you is professional in appearance and content, the quality message is reinforced. Pay attention to the smallest of details—names spelled correctly, numbers added accurately, and so on. Make precision in all aspects of the new home experience a hallmark of the company.

- **Mechanical clues**—the environment within which we work should demonstrate respect for yourself, your customers, and your work in a tangible way. What kinds of things would the buyer need to *see* to believe what you say? For example—

- Show homes that are meticulously maintained, inside and out.
- A design center that is attractive and well-organized. Think sights, sounds, smells, tastes (fabulous refreshments served in memorable cups and glasses instead of plastic and Styrofoam), and touch.
- Clean orderly offices and job sites: material delivery that is organized, with materials protected—the home respected every step of the way. (We know how buyers hate to visit their under-construction home and find lunch wrappers laying around.)
- How about uniform shirts for field staff? Highly visible personnel make it easier to find someone when questions arise.
- Warranty staff with professional paperwork, neat appearances, and great habits for protecting the home while performing first class repairs. A good repair is not enough; the experience that surrounds the repair must also be good.

- **Human clues**—the tone and quality of our communications; the nature and amount of attention paid to customers, your grasp and management of the emotional component of the new home experience.

Demonstrate empathy for the buyer combined with effective communication skills and habits of follow through, seamless service (customers do not have to “tell their story” over and over as they progress through the process) and perhaps most importantly, a friendly welcoming atmosphere—everywhere, all the time. Here’s a simple one: personnel should stand and smile when a customer enters the sales office, design studio, construction office, and so on.

These ideas are just to get you started. Each function can consider its part of the process with the goal of identifying what actions or clues are in place and what can be added or changed: functional, mechanical, and human. To differentiate your company, the company must begin by being different in ways that matter to customers.