

The Home Front

LEBLANC & ASSOCIATES

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The Front Porch

EXCUSES tend to creep into our lives at all levels. I guess it starts at pre-school, gets a good footing in lower grades, nears perfection in high school and as life progresses, we become masters at the excuse game. Sometimes our excuses come back to haunt us. We can all fill in the blanks with our own personal and professional bank of excuses. Of course, if you would like to pass along your personal favorites, I could use some new ones!

For those of you in sales management, you have probably heard your fair share of excuses from sales agents. If you have been in management for any length of time, you probably have some good ones. My valued colleague Dave Harding has provided some of his collection of sales agent ingenuity in the excuse game.

Weather. Agents are really good at blaming the weather. Agents will often state that no one looks, tours or buys if it is raining, etc. Dave likes this one as he hails from the Seattle market and to quote him, "Thank God no one told Seattle." Yep. If the weather excuse held any validity in Washington or Oregon, people would be living in tents, I guess. For our mid-west accounts, I guess they didn't get the weather memo either. If you happen to get a visitor to your sales center during inclement weather, do you suppose they might be beyond the "looky-loo" stage? It is amazing but I have listened to audio tapes where our field person is one of the few bodies to tour the homes during less than desirable weather conditions and the agent doesn't even take the time to determine why they might be there! I guess those agents assume people like to get decorating ideas during bad weather.

Holidays. Agents claim that nobody buys on Memorial Day, Mother's Day, Columbus Day, etc. I guess the agents don't want to be in the sales office on holidays so they assume nobody else wants to be there either! Of course, we could extend this excuse to St. Patrick's Day (parades to attend), Monday (hangover day), Friday (getting ready for the



Mary LeBlanc, President
LEBLANC & ASSOCIATES

weekend), etc. Retailers understand that not everyone celebrates the same holidays. Except for Christmas and New Years, not everyone has much free time to shop for a major purchase other than holidays.

Absent spouse. One of my personal favorites is that only the wife was present. Of course, any agent worth their salt knows that in today's world the little woman is there only to gather information and bring it on home for the real decision maker. This is the main excuse why agents do not utilize sufficient discovery or qualification questions to determine such things as how long the couple has been looking, what have they seen that has not met their needs and is the wife in a position to make a purchase decision. There is no reason why the solo mate can't commit to a lot reservation or similar type of purchase commitment!

Too Busy. Before agents start making voodoo dolls in my image, let me state that I perfectly understand how hectic a sales office can be. It is not easy. However, if a prospective buyer takes the time to wait out all the interruptions to seek information, then the agent must take a couple of minutes to address that prospective buyer and determine if a return appointment is warranted. If the agent ignores that visitor and counts on them to return on their own, they are selling their community and builder short. The negative

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Generating Traffic

By Manny Schatz, MIRM

Home Front: *Many people attracted to new home sales like the concept of not having to "farm" a territory or prospect leads. What are your thoughts on who is responsible for generating traffic?*

Manny Schatz: This question often arises during discussion on increasing qualified traffic. While it is the marketing department's responsibility to generate qualified prospects to the community, numerous opportunities exist for the sales professional to generate additional qualified leads.

HF: For some agents who have been around a while or those who came from the re-sale market, those skills are somewhat in place. But many agents only know the demand driven market. What do you advise for these agents?

MS: When the market softens, self-prospecting skills become ever more critical. We have recommended that sales professional self generate at least 5-10% of qualified traffic.

HF: That can sound intimidating to agents. How can they generate those types of numbers?

MS: Sales professionals should regularly visit and maintain effective, ongoing relationships with brokers to achieve the number of co-broker sales specified for the community.

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Model Merchandising 101

by Dave Harding

Like so much of our business, merchandising is as much science as art. It is far too important to leave only to artists or scientists. The goal of merchandising should never be to win MAME, ELAN or other design awards. Those rewards must be the result, and not the focus of a superb model presentation.

The very use of models is to help sell homes...earlier, easier and more efficiently. The merchandised models paint some pictures of what customers can expect once their own home is delivered. Models can point out efficient uses of space so that consumers can justify buying less square feet than they may have had in mind.

Models should be merchandised to show off the home (i.e. NOT the colors, the décor or the furniture) and how the home may be suitable for different buyers...different in demographics or psychographics. A consistently bad practice is to overpower rooms with furniture – or plants – thus shrinking the room.

True merchandisers are a critical part of the marketing team and will blend the art of design with the science of furthering the sale. I mentioned earlier this year at the Chicago Title/Wells Fargo symposium in Washington, that merchandising is simply too important to leave to amateurs, including our own family members. To have our spouse or children purport to mer-

chandise models "because she has a real flair for color" is as clever as leaving the design and installation of plumbing systems to the pool boy "because he has a real flair for water!"

Consider these ideas as you professionalize merchandising of models.

1. Merchandisers need to be retained and involved from the time product is under development. Discovery at a frame walk that there is no logical area for informal dining in an obviously-family home is much too late

2. To the greatest extent possible, options and upgrades should reflect what consumers can expect to see...and to buy...in our Design Centers. Thus, the Design Studio team also needs to be a proactive part of the merchandising process.

3. If "decorator items" are seen to be critical to homebuyers, add them to the selections available at your (inside or contracted) Design Center. This allows your merchandiser to negotiate better pricing, on the assumption that the respective subcontractors will be getting new/extra/homeowner-driven work.

4. Every home should have a story, a very specific buyer profile in mind, and a distinct memory or smile point. It may be a full size Jeffrey, the Toys "R" Us mascot, or a tuxedoed mannequin in the shower, or apparently real bubbles nearly filling the spa tub, perfectly complementing the nearly-obligatory champagne flutes we see.

5. Every home needs to be focused on a specific buyer personality. If your sales team uses Bulls, Owls, Lambs, Tigers for its personality selling, the models need to be merchandised on identical analyses. If using VALS II, or Meyers-Briggs or other systems, logic demands that the merchandisers be skilled in these same systems to maximize the sales generated from the models.

6. Following up on 5 above, different homes will be strongest in different rooms. Not every buyer will make decisions because of strong kitchens or dramatic master suites. SOME will. So, merchandise one home to appeal most to a Tiger and a Bull. Another to a Lamb. Another to an Owl. Skilled sales and marketing professionals will know that there are sufficient overlaps that all personalities can be respected in less than four models. But one home cannot accomplish everything.

7. Merchandisers are REQUIRED at model frame walk. By the time of that walk, the merchandising plan should be developed and copies brought along to ensure that changes are known to all, and agreed by the entire team. That we are literally on the same page.

8. NEVER have vertical striped wallpaper. If there is a tiny framing error, it will be accentuated. Even if not, a poor installation can "read" like the framing is not true. Why take the chance? Models will represent your best work and you don't want even one customer to receive a subliminal (and poor) message about the quality of your construction. If this is your best work, and it has framing that is not square and true...

9. For the same reason, never have furniture against a wall where the furniture is designed to be other than square or round. I once discovered, to great horror, night-stands that were pyramid in shape. They made the entire master suite seem out of square.

10. Be extra cautious about plants. If you prefer living plants, they need to be individually selected to complement merchandising for the respective rooms. Then, they need to be groomed regularly to maintain that approach. In a long-duration project, plants can take over a room, block the natural light and reduce the apparent size of the home you are selling.

Next edition Model Merchandising 201.

David Harding, CMP, is Vice-President of Sales & Marketing at Western Pacific Housing in Los Angeles. He is nationally recognized as a trainer of sales and marketing professionals and a frequent author in professional journals. He may be reached at dharding@wpbi.com or by telephone at 310.665.3750, or cellular phone at 310.463.0454. ♥

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impact reflects not only on the agent, but also on the builder as a whole. This can easily happen in a priority list selling environment... more buyers than homes. But we have discussed priority list selling before. Not everyone on that list will still be around when you are ready to release your next phase.

To all our agents – keep your excuses to an absolute minimum in the sales office. Assume the sale until you qualify otherwise. No excuses! ♥

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Kudos Korner

Our Kudos to another series of agents who have demonstrated super star status during this second quarter of 2002. Here are some of the best:

BOB MOAWAD – Chaffey Homes

Bob excels in all areas of the sales presentation. From the start, you can hear his enjoyment for both his profession and builder. Bob builds trust easily, which allows him to control the sales process. He gains agreement and isn't shy about asking for the sale.

ROCHELLE ZUCKERBROW – Jackson Properties

Rochelle is a warm and energetic sales professional. She takes her job seriously but also enjoys having fun along the way. Rochelle excels in all areas of her well-rounded sales presentation.

MARK KOLLAR – Monterey Homes

Mark is a seasoned sales professional. His presentation is focused and seamless. He gains agreement along the way, which easily allows him to ask for the sale.

TROY SCHRENK – Centex Homes

Troy is perfection in motion. He is enthusiastic, motivated and knowledgeable. Troy listens to his buyers thereby allowing him to engage them in a personalized and proactive sales presentation.

JEFF DIMM – Centex Homes

Jeff is focused, direct and a superstar. His enthusiasm emotes confidence. We were impressed with Jeff's ability to weave discovery and qualification questions in a conversational manner throughout his presentation.

ADAM HIEB – Centex Homes

Another superstar, Adam is definitely customer service oriented. Not only does Adam sell his product well, but also he sells his community with the same level of enthusiasm.

STEVE BRADFORD – Centex Homes

Steve excels at establishing rapport, effectively qualifying and demonstrating excitement about his community and homes. Steve assumes the sale.

VICKI FORTEZA – Centex Homes

Vicki personalizes her sales presentation to the needs and preferences of her buyer. Along the way, she verifies her buyer's interest level, makes a mental note and then builds on that information.

TAUNA WAHL – Centex Homes

Tauna is an attentive and organized sales professional who offers a high level of personal service. While she controls the sales process, Tauna allows the buyer to ask questions and express their concerns.

From our Video Profile series, we extend Kudos to each of the following agents who excel at their chosen profession. Each understands and executes the art and technical aspects of selling.

CATHY PORTER, CHERYL DALE, ROLF FLOTMAN, CYNTHIA SOLIS, JANET BENAVIDES AND GARRY FULLER

they keep track of their buyers in a database. In short, agents need to be creative.

HF: Broker co-op programs have been strong in some markets and marginal in others. What do you suggest to your builder clients?

MS: It is important that builders create and maintain long range, consistent cooperative broker plans when markets are both strong and sluggish. Brokers tend to not want to support builders who only want their help when they are in trouble.

On site sales people should visit at least one real estate office per week. Participation in their sales meetings is also helpful in getting your message across. A monthly open house with written and phoned invitations to targeted offices and agents is another opportunity. There should be a specific reason for each such as a new release, new incentives, etc. Finally, it is very important to remember to recognize and reward those realtors who have been strong supporters of your community.

Manny Schatz, principal of Professional Builder Services, Inc. in Danville, has been involved in nearly every aspect of home building. He holds a general contractors license, a brokers license, and MIRM certification. In addition to his many professional affiliations, Manny was an associate of The Stone Institute, and worked closely with the late Dave Stone. For further information, contact Manny Schatz at (925) 837-1937.

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HF: How else can agents prospect leads?

MS: If their communities appeal to executive relocation groups, this contact should be high on their prospecting list. The sales agent should visit at least one, and as many as four, local industries per month. They should target those who employ your profiled buyers. During this visit, they should seek to establish relationships with those who influence and work directly with transferring employees. They should create a distribution system to ensure that information packets about their community actually get to the transferred employee. Video tape/CD ROM marketing is popular for this particular market segment and is cost effective.

HF: Where else should the sales associate look to prospect?

MS: Almost every housing community attracts people with common interests. Identifying those interests and the individuals who are the most active in them provides the base for a "center of influence" prospecting plan. Sales professionals need to take time to become friends with influential people from clubs, business groups, charity organizations, etc.

HF: Of course we can not overlook existing homebuyers.

MS: The greatest prospect generators are the people who have purchased homes for the sales associate in the past. We strongly recommend that

The Eyes Have It!

Even with the best product in the best of markets, success ultimately relies on the quality of representation in your sales centers. In our Video Profiles, we capture your agent's entire sales presentation through the eyes of the buyer. Get the whole picture.



Managers and agents are able to see what our evaluation reports have reported. Denial of the report is eliminated. Training. Use a Video Profile from LeBlanc & Associates to show your best sales agents demonstrating their selling skills. Quality. Our company has

established itself as the premiere sales agent evaluation company in the building industry. Our expertise in the housing industry enables us to suit your needs and provide you with a quality video.

Technically speaking. All work is done in-house so that we have direct control over the entire process. With our state-of-the-art editing suite, we can offer the best evaluation service in the industry.

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