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The Home Front

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The Home Front

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The Home Front

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The Front Porch

Shoulda...coulda...woulda. Terrible mantra to have. Shoulda gone there. Coulda bought that. Woulda done this. Each utterance is followed with 'but'. Ah, the 'buts' of our lives. Perhaps we would not dream of winning the super lotto if we would have avoided those 'buts'.

With our hot selling market that is about 3 years old now, you might ask yourselves why should I shop my agents? Because you need to. You need to fully assess who is representing you in terms of what they are saying and doing as well as how they are saying and doing it. Performance evaluations provide management with information about how their agents handle prospective buyers. It is that simple.

The number of sales to meet or exceed preformas is easy to obtain during a seller's market. With rare exception, in today's market there is little selling that goes on in the sales office. If you visit a competitors' sales office and watch agents line up the buyers with a priority list or similar selling program, you can be sure that is going on in your sales centers too. Unless you get confirmation to the contrary, you should not be satisfied with order taking. There are many ways to get that confirmation. Let's take a look at a few.

Friends, employees, etc: Some companies send their friends or employees out to shop their agents. This approach is convenient but is it objective and reliable? If your friends are industry related, how much do they know in terms of providing a solid evaluation of the agent's technical selling skills? They can surely provide some valuable feedback, but is it more subjective than objective? If the friends are not industry related, on what do they base their opinion. What criteria do they use?

Satisfaction surveys: This a terrific means to get feedback from existing buyers, etc. It is valuable to know how prospective and actual buyers feel about your agents. Nevertheless, is it the whole story? For the most part, the feedback will be based upon how the people feel about the agent, i.e. the likeability factor which is subjective. In addition, most people



Mary LeBlanc, President
LEBLANC & ASSOCIATES

will not be able to accurately remember how certain aspects of the sales process were handled. If the process was smooth, the agent will get credit whether he/she deserved it or not. Likewise, if there were some glitches in the purchase process, the agent could be blamed whether he/she deserved it or not. An engaging personality does not necessarily make a good agent.

Mystery Shopping companies: This is the time proven method to evaluate your agents on their technical selling skills and is extremely effective when combined with satisfaction surveys. Then you get the best of both worlds – Technical assessment and people evaluation.

It is critical to select a mystery shopping company that knows our industry. Companies that shop everything from Jack-In-The Box to major new home builders, usually operate on volume and do not necessarily deliver effective content. As this type of program should always be used as part of the overall sales training of your team, you must insure the agent assessment report you receive is beneficial for the agent as well as management. So choose wisely. Review the type of report that is generated and who actually scores and rates the report. Are the reports relevant and easy to understand? There is a lot on the line. Just ask any agent who has received a low scoring report.

Audio vs. Video: Our world is a visual one. If

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Basic Selling Skills: Be Prepared

By Manny Schatz, MIRM

Home Front: *When a performance evaluation (mystery shop) is conducted by an outside company such as LeBlanc & Associates, it is often discovered that sales agents work to their own standards. Should agents follow a builder or industry standard?*

Manny Schatz: Unfortunately, very few homebuilders have taken time to provide written standards of performance for their sales personnel. How can you measure performance if you are not sure of what the reasonable expectations are for both management and the sales people they supervise?

HF: *What do you recommend?*

MS: We recommend setting "minimum" or "fundamental" standards tailored to the needs of the company, the level of expertise already evidenced by the sales staff, and the competitive demands of the market place. You must clearly communicate your expectations and provide a positive environment for self improvement.

HF: *I've said sales professionals should follow the Boy Scout's motto, 'Always Be Prepared'. Can you offer specifics?*

MS: Preparation is the essential first step in any sales effort. Preparation starts with a thorough knowledge of the area and includes:

- Regional amenities such as shopping centers, medical facilities, recreational amenities, etc.

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Debunking The Myths – Part Four

by Charles J. Clarke III

This is the fourth in a series of articles in which we look at the most common myths about selling homes, based on an understanding of which animal personality you happen to be dealing with at the time. In my BOLT System, Bulls are the bottom-line take charge personality, Owls are analytical and detail oriented, Lambs are the people pleasers, and Tigers primarily seek fun and excitement.

MYTH 10 *Salespeople are money-motivated*

This is a popular assumption but the truth is that some salespeople, especially Lambs, are genuinely motivated by the desire to help people. They thrive on finding the right deal for their prospects, helping them avoid mistakes, and helping them improve their quality of life. Lamb salespeople simply strive to help prospects and buyers make the best decision. As a sales manager, realizing this should affect the way you manage your sales staff. You may need to alter the ways you choose to reward them for performance and even the nature of the goals you set for them. For instance, it is not unusual for the people-pleasing, Lamb salesperson to receive more word-of-mouth referral business than the average salesperson. That accomplishment could be one basis for their goals and rewards.

MYTH 11 *Practice makes perfect.*

Practice doesn't make perfect if you are practicing the wrong thing. If you are repeating the same incorrect procedure over and over again in your selling process, all you can reasonably expect are nominal results. You can never be truly successful that way. A more accurate statement is, "Perfect practice makes perfect." The key is first to learn what the right thing to do is, the correct procedure and process, and then you will know what it is you ought to be practicing.

MYTH 12 *Women make the buying decisions and control the purse strings.*

In most cases the animal personalities that are tell-oriented and high on the assertiveness scale, namely Bulls and Tigers, make the buying decisions. The less assertive animals, Lambs and Owls, defer to them. This trend is completely unrelated to traditional gender stereotypes. Also, because of the personality type's orderly and detail-oriented nature, it is not unusual for an

Owl, male or female, to be the spouse who handles the family's finances, keeps the checkbook balanced, and is responsible for budgeting.

MYTH 13 *Salespeople should only ask open-ended questions.*

As with Myth 12, the response to this perception is contingent on which BOLT personality type the salesperson is dealing with. For example, Tigers love being asked open-ended questions. They will gladly take that ball and run with it (and not in straight lines either). But asking open-ended questions drives other animal types crazy. Owls, for one, prefer to deal in specifics and would consider these sorts of questions too vague. Alternatively, if you were to start asking open-ended questions to a Bull, he would grow frustrated and think, "It's going to take forever to get to the bottom line." He will immediately cut to the chase. Lambs have a hard enough time making a decision when you are asking them a narrowed down, straightforward question. They will gladly answer open-ended questions if you ask them. However, you will not know any more than you did before.

Charles J. Clarke III is the creator of the Bulls, Owls, Lambs and Tiger System of Personality Based Selling, and can be contacted for speaking engagements at (770)287-7808. ♥

The Front Porch ...

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you are a company that generates an evaluation program at least two times a year (highly recommended), one series should be a video. The video eliminates doubt and is one of the most dynamic training tools in the market today. The audio process will always be a valuable tool and should be incorporated into your overall evaluation program. Again, check out the company you select. For videos, you need a company that knows how to keep the camera focused on the agent. Shots of walls, floors and ceilings don't offer you the body language feedback that you and the agent need to observe. Do not let pricing be your sole determining factor when assessing your sales team. Your agents are professionals and deserve to have the best feedback possible.

If you have put off evaluating your sales teams, don't be caught in the shoulda . . . woulda . . . coulda syndrome. The resulting 'but' could cost you dearly down the road. ♥

Sales Management ...

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- Each school in the region needs to be personally visited and specific facts gathered.
- Potential objections and issues related to selling the general location need to be identified and the responses should be rehearsed.

Then each sales professional should gain in-depth knowledge of the specific community including all features of the homes and each available home site.

HF: *What other issues should be included in the preparation kit?*

MS: Each sales professional should:

- Use a value index checklist to compare specifications, features, etc. of all competing communities. Know them better than they know their own.
- Identify and rehearse responses to all potential comparison issues related to competitors.
- Be familiar with the company they represent.

HF: *What skills do you identify as being critical to the sales process?*

MS: The sales professional needs to hone:

- Communication skills consisting of: Questioning, Listening, Understanding, Building Agreement, Overcoming Objections and Confirming/Closing.
- Presentation skills including: Qualifying and probing for motivations, abilities and needs. Also language enhancement with feature/benefit emphasis.

HF: *Anything else we need to address?*

MS: The sales professional needs to maintain a positive, enthusiastic and professional attitude. They need to maintain a climate of acceptance. They must be proactive and maintain a 'can do' attitude looking for solutions, not problems. Finally the sales professional must be responsible for the organization of their sales environment.

HF: *Any final thoughts?*

MS: The sales professional must maintain a very basic thought: "SERVE WELL AND YOU WILL SELL WELL". Customers can always sense when the sales person has their best interests at heart.

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

Avoiding Campouts – Part Two

by Dave Harding

Successfully Mining Priority Lists Increasing Sales, Revenues, and Customer Satisfaction – All At The Same Time!

In the last edition, #24, of the Home Front, we reviewed the different ways merchant builders can successfully add prospects to an already-long priority list, and still offer service and hope to the latest registrants. The article is available at: www.mleblanc.com/homefront.php

While we all receive complaints no matter which method of priority list we use, isn't it better to tell customers what to expect and then to do a superior job of qualifying so we can determine if we will meet their needs . . . in the next release, or at all? Isn't it also better for our sales teams to remember and be trained on the point that THEIR job is to reduce risk to the seller? As sellers, we hope to find, then select, the buyers who will be easiest to work with, who will be financially most able to buy our home . . . then to upgrade it with in those parameters we set. The entire priority system must be established to achieve that goal.

If our sales professionals have kept in touch with their prospects, they will know exactly what the customer is seeking in a new home. If the next release will not include this location, view, plan, elevation, etc., there is no point in inviting these customers to the next release.

Indeed, if properly done, a release can be a discreet, classy event that clearly shows the added value of being on the list and doing what needs to be done. Sell that used house. Pay off that credit card. Avoid adding new debts. Be available via phone, fax, e-mail, etc. Be pre-qualified by your lender. If a prospect is not prepared to do these things, why should they have a priority over those buyers who have shown their sincerity and commitment? Our sales teams need to remember that they are looking for the LAST sale in a community, not the NEXT sale. Anything that accomplishes a short term goal but slows down the sell-out is, in fact, a defeat. We must train and counsel them to be clear about our priority system.

Priority is established by the customer's ability to buy what we have available at the time it is released. Priority is NOT established SOLELY by being at the sales office earlier. Priority can be

raised or lowered. A laid-off customer may not be able to buy. They fall in priority. A customer who paid off debts, sold and closed that used house, and won the Super Lotto . . . they just went UP in priority. Of course, if there are multiple prospects of near-equal capability, they should then be prioritized based on who registered first.

However, a top-qualified prospect may still be passed over in the next release . . . if we do not have what the prospect has clearly stated as his UB (unique BUYING propositions). Dave Stone often said that customers often compromise their specifications but NEVER THEIR MOTIVATIONS. If we know that the true motivation is to have the front of the home face east, we serve no purpose at all by calling that prospect to advise of a release that will not include such a home.

If we have a list that has been managed well, we can have release parties at non-traditional times, only inviting those who we believe will be the real buyers. As stated above, this adds real value for those who participate . . . and it SHOWS the value for those who do not.

In the last year, we had one such release in Oxnard on the Friday night just before Christmas. Common wisdom told us that no one will buy so close to Christmas, particularly in a disproportionately Latino, close-family, Catholic community. Nonetheless, we had a release party, live music, food and beverages. By invitation only. Closed buyers and those in escrow were invited to reinforce the value of the community and the service of the builder. The only people allowed to buy were those on the invited list. That Friday night, without much cost, 22 sales were accomplished. No ad. No banners. No live guides. No campouts.

Next edition: Dealing with the belligerent prospect; establishing premiums and options by feedback from likely buyers, keeping prospects warm during the waiting period.

David Harding, CMP is Vice-President of Sales & Marketing of Western Pacific Housing, a DR Horton Company in Los Angeles. He is a Member of Builder & Developer Magazine's Who's Who for CA, NV and AZ. He has been recognized as Sales Manager of the Year and Volunteer of the Year in Southern California. His works have appeared in Big Builder, Master Builder, Builder & Developer magazines, and in the Journal of the Community Associations Institute. Dave is a nationally-credentialed instructor and trainer to our business as well as to judges, lawyers, arbitrators, shopping center owners, tenants and managers, condo associations and HOA's. He can be reached at dbarding@uphi.com ♥

Kudos Korner

This past quarter we had several agents who demonstrated solid selling skills. Each of them did not allow a seller's market to deter them from offering a full sales presentation.

DEBBY WIEGAND

Richmond American Homes

Scoring near perfection in 3 critical areas (Qualification/Needs Assessment, Closing and Overall Presentation), Debby's professional yet friendly demeanor built a level of trust, excitement and urgency for her buyer.

DEBORAH TRULLINGER

Richmond American Homes

Deborah excelled at confirming her buyer's questions/concerns were resolved and through assurances created a welcoming environment.

PATTY LEHMAN

Cambria Homes

Patty is delightful. Through a conversational, relaxed approach, she demonstrated strong product knowledge and confidence in her ability to sell. She takes immediate control and efficiently guides her buyers through a solid sales presentation.

SALLY THORNER

Toll Brothers

Sally displays a genuine interest in meeting the needs of her buyers. While friendly and relaxed, Sally effectively incorporates an appropriate qualification and assessment process. She used that information to tailor her presentation to her prospective buyer.

JESUS OROZCO

McStain Communities

Jesus focuses on his buyer and effectively moves them forward in the sales process. His qualifying skills are top notch as he gently brings the buyer to a purchase decision.

JOAN PAGLIA

Tanamera Homes

Joan enjoys what she does. With her warmth and caring nature, she exhibits a genuine delight working with people. We commend Joan for her strong closing skills. She is also tenacious and did not allow her buyer's hesitation from trying other closing approaches.

BRENDA JONES

Lucas & Mercier

Brenda offered a near perfect sales presentation that was professional. Brenda was prepared. She used photos, samples and additional print information during her model home tour. She created a high level of trust and credibility as well as demonstrating a skillful blend of persistence in pursuing the sale.

Our Kudos to each of you!