

Where's the Wow?

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By R. E. Blake Evans

The building industry just sailed through 10 years of prosperity, during which builders—yanked along by an insatiable home-buying public—donned blinders and frenetically built, built, built. Now the economy has cooled a bit, creating a perfect opportunity to rethink an area you may have let slip: customer service.

Fact is, the 21st century is fast becoming the age of the uber-consumer. These folks can be summed up in three words: fast, smart, and jaded. As a builder, the only thing you can offer them is exactly what they want at the price they want to pay and with service that dazzles—service that makes them say, "Wow!"

"Builders who employ Internet service companies to provide sales, options, and scheduling services to home buyers can earn serious brownie points from time-strapped consumers."

So how do you impress this consumer?

Glitz and glitter won't cut it. You need to get back to basics. To show you how easy, useful, (and fun) this process can be, the editors of Builder went undercover to produce our first nationwide customer service report card for point of sale. Plus, we've reviewed research tools and online customer service solutions that will help you burnish your customer service skills and sell more homes.

Virtual Customer Service

By Daniel Walker Guido

With online sales estimated by Forrester Research to climb to \$3.5 trillion nationally and \$6.8 trillion worldwide by 2004, America's home builders are increasingly using online software to lure Internet-savvy home buyers to their developments and provide services after the sale.

For some, having an online Internet sales and marketing tool is what helps differentiate them from their competition. Customers will look twice at a builder who offers them the ease of selecting floor plans and options on their home computers...more than 59 percent of builders use the Internet primarily to attract

new customers, according to a study conducted last fall by Beta Research for Hanley-Wood, LLC, publisher of Builder. Now, builders are taking the next step

by providing more interactive customer service applications and not just relying on a Web page with a few model illustrations and a contact number.

In many cases, these builders are relying on software created by third parties. For this story, Builder identified and test-drove the products of eight software companies providing customer service applications for the home building industry. Read on to see what they offer and how they compare.

Click2Community

By Daniel Walker Guido

Dave Goettlicher's goal is nothing less than to revamp and revitalize how production home builders market, sell, and service their homes.

Goettlicher, president and co-founder of the year-old Click2Community, hopes to accomplish that by providing marketing sales and service applications that completely integrate all the "touch points" between builders and customers. "Every time there is contact, the builder will be able to track it through the application. This will enable them to market through the Internet better than they ever have. They will be able to tie the Web site into sales force automation tools and tie both of those to a customer portal. [The portal] will provide ongoing communication and coordination between builder and buyer and after-market sales and service."

By year's end, Goettlicher says Click2Community will roll out its Internet software, enabling builders to provide products to home buyers after closing. In the meantime, Click2Community is focused on improving communication between the builder and buyer from before the sale through closing.

That includes pre-sales marketing, sales force automation, tracking leads, and providing automated e-mail correspondence responses. Customers also will be able to choose options. Those capabilities were featured in Click2Community, the company's first Internet-enabled software release, which debuted this past May.

