

21st CENTURY TOOLS

A Special Report for Builders:
Using Communications Technology to
Effectively Build Customer Relationships.



21st century tools

Builder's Report

There was a time when a builder's toolkit contained equipment designed only for building homes. But the technology-driven 21st century requires the building of **relationships**. The physical nature of builder's tools has changed to the point where a modern builder often finds a web-capable cell phone or PDA hanging from their belt loop. It has become an intrinsic part of the landscape. Ignoring the benefits of communications technology is a good way for a builder to fall by the wayside, surpassed by competitors who exploit technology to increase sales and boost profits.

Fairly obvious, right? Those who don't evolve and adapt to changing circumstances suffer for their intransigence. It bears repeating, however, especially in terms of how many homebuilders approach using the web as a means to sell their products.

Builders must now incorporate a wide variety of software and hardware tools into their arsenals to remain competitive. Most importantly, homebuilders must also have a significant presence on the

web if they want to be able to reach their prospective customers. Homebuyers are increasingly savvy and are using the web as a research tool more frequently to help make their purchase decisions.

If a builder isn't able to **communicate** effectively with his customers in this fashion, they risk losing prospective sales and will miss lucrative opportunities.

Communicating with your customers is a vital component of your sales process and goes far beyond passive, one-

directional broadcasting of advertising propaganda. You need to be able to know what your customer wants so that you can work to fulfill those needs; otherwise they will find someone else who is willing to listen to what they have to say.

So therein lies the question... are you really listening to what your customers have to say? Specifically,

are you using your web presence as a two-way communications tool to share information with your customers and learn from them exactly what they are looking for?



photo courtesy of Click2Community.

Using software tools and services, like Click2Community's web site generator or home configurator, can improve your ability to draw and keep customers on your site.

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If you're not, chances are that you're losing out on a lot of opportunities that could translate into serious profits if you were able to realize them.

To use the web as more than just inert brochureware, you need to be paying a lot of attention to how it fits within your overall customer relations strategy. An effective web-based pre-sales channel that includes fully interactive capabilities can substantially broaden your market reach and significantly increase both the quantity and quality of your sales leads.

That's an important point to understand as your web presence needs to be fully interactive if you hope to capture your prospective customer's interest. You can generate increased interest in your communities, homesites, plans and options if you can present them so that homebuyers don't click on the BACK button within a few seconds of visiting your site.

An **effective** site changes a visitor to your site from a casual browser to an interested prospect and then into a pre-qualified buyer. An ineffective site bores people and causes them to look elsewhere.

Am I telling you to use all sorts of fancy graphics and animation so your web site resembles a Vegas casino?

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No.

I'm saying that you need to look at your web site in a holistic fashion. It's more than just images and text... it's an experience that your customers will undergo as they view your information and learn more about what you have to offer.

Your job, as a homebuilder who wants to be successful, is to make that experience a satisfying and rewarding one so that your web site becomes a place visitors will return to over and over again. And each time they return, they can add to your knowledge of what they want and need, further strengthening your sales effectiveness.

A fully interactive web site can turn pallid marketing materials into a personalized experience that leads your customers to create a place on your site they can call their own. And in doing so, it can generate qualified sales information that can be invaluable.

So what do they need to be able to do in order to have a personalized experience? What are the components of an interactive web site that captures your customers' interest rather than losing it?

Components of an Interactive Web Site

1. Flexible Navigation

Moving around your web site should be both easy and intuitive. The features and functions of your web site must be readily available and organized in such a fashion as to present your products in the most appealing way possible.

2. Look & Feel

A professional design that enhances your brand strategy through use of visual style and color for maximum impact.

3. Organization

Information about your products, services, company and policies should be presented in a logical and easy-to-follow pattern.

4. Security

Your customers value their privacy! It must be protected and they should be assured that their personal information won't be broadcast to the public at large. Security authentication for registered users to log in should also be supported by automatic email response for reminders in case the user forgets their password.

5. Indexing

A parametric search so that visitors can quickly and easily find the exact information they want is essential. This would be especially useful for those builders who have more than one community as information can be cross-indexed between sites.

6. Readily Available Plans

Homebuyers want to review floor plans and this information must be presented in a comprehensive and easy to navigate manner. Plans should be available both in graphic form and in detailed statistics.

7. Educational Elements

While increasingly knowledgeable about technology, some of your customers may be first-time homebuyers and will value helpful information about the home buying process, financing, design tips or similar material. If visitors consider your site helpful and useful, it will further develop your customer relationships.

8. Valuable Tools

Beyond interactivity in terms of being able to access information, your customers should also be provided with the ability to manipulate that data in real-time and with powerful functionality. For example, calculating their own quotations on the fly as they pick and choose different options is one way to provide serious value to your customers.

9. Currency

Not money but rather the latest in terms of offerings and pricing. Information ages rapidly on the web, so you must be able to easily and frequently upgrade and maintain the content you're providing to ensure that your customers can take advantage of the most current information.

10. Self-Selling

Design your web site so that potential buyers can view a wide range of options and sell themselves on your products. This includes upgrades as well as initial purchase decisions so ensure that your entire product mix is portrayed in the best light possible.

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Creating an interactive web site that lets prospective buyers sell themselves on your products pre-qualifies them as informed and interested prospects. Your sales staff can then use this information to develop targeted sales strategies based on the prospect's configuration selection patterns, thus increasing the amount of profit on each individual sale. And since the web site has done a lot of this work, the process requires less involvement from your sales staff thereby reducing the strain each sale places on your resources.

A dynamic and interactive web site that effectively captures customers' interest can decrease the need for model homes and design centers, further reducing your financing and administrative costs.

Customer satisfaction can be directly improved by providing a flexible, personalized, attractive and intuitive web site

that makes it simple for potential buyers to locate, explore and build interest in your homes. These potential buyers can become more comfortable as they experiment with possible configurations at their leisure and in the privacy of their own homes. And as they experience your web site and provide qualified lead data, your customers' satisfaction will continue to rise as your staff becomes better able to quickly provide consistent, accurate responses to their inquiries.

You may already have a website and consider it to be quite professional in its appearance. But is it really working for you, increasing the interest of potential buyers with a dynamic and interactive experience?

If it isn't, then you're missing a vital tool from your toolkit - one that can dramatically improve your customer satisfaction levels and sales revenue.



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