



Finding & Taking

Advantage
of the *Opportunity*



Editor's Note: At the 2007 National Congress & Expo for Manufactured and Modular Housing, held in April in Las Vegas, one of the keynote speakers was Dennis Snow, who consults organizations around the world on creating world-class customer service. Snow's customer services abilities were honed during 20 years working with The Walt Disney World Company where he managed various operating areas throughout the famous theme park, as well as teaching corporate philosophy and business practices to Disney cast members and leadership teams. Snow's presentation was focused on creating a memorable and positive customer experience and how these concepts could be applied to the factory-built housing industry. The following article is derived from Snow's presentation and his book, "Unleashing Excellence," co-authored with Teri Yanovitch.

Creating a "Wow" Customer Shopping Experience

There can be no doubt about it...first impressions are lasting impressions. If you're walking into a restaurant or stepping into a furniture store, your senses immediately create a lasting impression and set the stage for how you will judge your experience with that particular business. First of all, was parking a chore and how far did you have to walk to get to the restaurant or store? What did the establishment look as you walked up to the front door? Did you have to wait to be seated by the hostess or waited on by the sales clerk? Did they act as though they were glad to see you or act as though you were imposing upon their time? All these experiences help form those first, important impressions that shape your opinions even before sitting down or looking for that special piece of furniture? So what does this mean for the factory-built housing industry?

A truly customer-focused organization or business needs to see things through the eyes of the customer! That means looking at all aspects of the business as the customer sees or experiences it. Everything that that customer sees, hears, smells, touches, or otherwise experiences speaks immediately for your company or business and forms that first, lasting impression. For the factory-built housing industry, that means approaching your business as though you were a first-time homebuyer. Let's assume that you are that first-time manufactured home buyer and you're going to visit a local retail sales center for the first time. Let's go through a "Everything Speaks" checklist. ■ ■ ■ ■

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If you're driving up to the retail sales center, what are your first impressions? Does the sales center have professional signage that clearly identifies what the establishment is about and creates the feeling that this is a professional establishment that will deliver professional service? Does the signage convey a temporary, "fly-by-night" image that raises serious questions in your mind? This is going to be one of the most momentous and largest consumer purchases you will make in your life! Do the flags and banners around the sales center's perimeter create a level of comfort and confidence in your mind or do they create a negative first-impression.

Brian Ridgway has been serving the manufactured housing industry for the past five years with a marketing system which includes electronic signage for retail sales centers. He makes the point that retailers pay thousands of dollars to get a great location and a great display of homes, along with thousands of dollars for advertising to get people to a retail sales center, yet retailers refuse to invest in quality signage that will make that positive first-impression with potential homebuyers. Ridgway (www.homesalessecrets.com) claims that the average manufactured home retailer using proper signage experiences in excess of a 50 percent increase in net profits.

Next, what's the condition of the parking lot? Were you able to park easily or does the parking lot look as though the large potholes would swallow your car? Does it provide clearly designated areas for you to park or did you have to guess where to park?

As you approach the sales office, what's the message being delivered by the landscaping and the general condition of the center's exterior? Does it look as though the sales center staff cares about their "showroom" or does it look as if the sales center is an afterthought with overgrown lawn and a few plants scattered around?

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Moving into the lobby or waiting area of the sales center, what do you find? Is it clean and welcoming or does it immediately smell of tobacco, stale coffee or someone's leftover pizza? What's the lighting and condition of the furniture saying to you? Did someone greet you upon your arrival or did you have to ask to be served? Are there informational materials and brochures available for you to review while you wait for a salesperson? Are the restrooms clean and well maintained?

When you finally meet with the salesperson, do they act pleased to see you? Is the salesperson's desk neat and orderly or stacked high with clutter? Does the salesperson immediately begin telling you about what homes are available ONLY today or do they ask you questions about what you're looking for in a home and listen to what you have to say. Do they factor in your wants and needs into the homes they describe or do they ignore your thoughts and offer you only homes they want to sale.

Also go through your sales process from the customer's perspective and develop a similar list of each step of the sales process and whether your company's approach creates a negative or positive customer experience. A good way of doing this is to create a flow chart of the sales process and ask yourself, "What would excellent service look like a this step in the process?" Then compare this against the reality of what you're actually delivering.

Now that you've gone through this checklist to determine how your customers see your sales center and your sales process, the next step is to develop a disciplined approach that tackles those items that fall short of creating a positive customer experience. This requires establishing a service improvement team that can assist you in correcting problem



areas and enhancing those things that you're already doing right. This team will be responsible for bringing your customer service plan to life and keeping it at the forefront of everything you do in your business. So work with the team to ensure they fully understand their mission—delivering superior customer service—and that they will have the authority to fully implement the service improvement plan.

Then go about tackling those problem areas you identified earlier, establishing time schedules and goals for each action. Hold regular meetings with the team members to measure progress, successes, and any problems that arise from implementing these corrective actions. Keep these improvement team meetings focused and moving forward, with a rewards system that acknowledges key successes. Communicate these successes throughout your company and let everyone know that these efforts are instrumental to the company's and the employees' future. Also work to integrate this service improvement system as an ongoing component in your management philosophy so that your team members don't see this exercise as simply a "passing fad." As employees leave

or join your company, make sure they know of your commitment to service and they brought into the service improvement team's efforts.

Simply stating that your company is committed to delivering outstanding customer service is a formula for failure. Implementing a sustained culture of service should be your goal. There is no "finish" line. The key to your ultimate success in implementing the culture of service in your company will be to keep it simple and focused on actions.

But the most important element for success will be to always look at your business through the eyes of your customers. Using that perspective as your overriding management philosophy will help guarantee that everything you do in your business—from the all-important first impression to the sales process to the moment when you turn over the keys to the homebuyer—will deliver an outstanding customer service experience. By delivering such excellence, you will build a loyal customer base that will recommend your company to family and friends, distinguish your company from the competition, and build a strong future for you and your company. Simply by looking through the eyes of your customers! ■