

THE HOMEBUILDERS' NATIONAL DESIGN RESOURCE™

OPTIONS

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Lead, Leverage, Win!

The era of high volume orders is gone. Success in a buyer's market is directly linked to enhancing the abilities of your sales and design center professionals to connect with the customer on their terms.

Part 3 of 3

BY JAIMI JULIAN THOMPSON

As the full impact of changing market dynamics was being realized throughout the country, participants at Artisan Design Groups' DESIGN CENTER FORUM 2006 were hard at work focusing on their most important resource of all — their people. Great sales do indeed hide a multitude of sins, and the bad habits that had evolved in the boom years were beginning to show themselves.



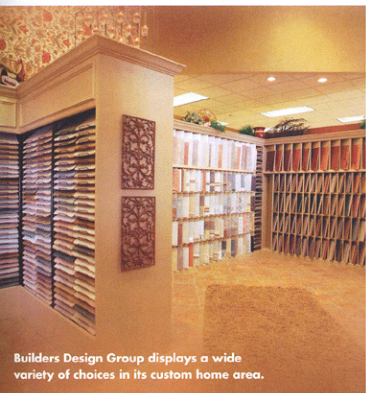
Building your "A Team"
Fielding the best team is the single most important thing you can do to win in a slow market. Hiring the best people, coaching and developing them and continuing to improve the quality and performance of the team will help enhance results. Scott Thompson, who has built sales organizations for almost 20 years, encourages companies to look at the real costs of each new hire, as well as the costs of a "mis-hire." "The most successful companies are proactive in utilizing every tool available to match the right candidate with the right job," Thompson says.

Hiring practices

One of the keys to fielding the best team is implementing a hiring plan that focuses on the key attributes of a successful design center employee. "A common hiring mistake is that managers often don't have a prioritized listing of attributes that a specific role requires," observes Jon Horwitz, director of performance programs for Artisan Design Group. "By listing the priorities you are looking for in a quantifiable competency model, it is easier to measure and qualify designer candidates. At ADG, we have developed new hire testing programs for our clients that are specific to design centers and include questionnaires and ratings that help identify key attributes for success in the design center."



Builders Design Group in Dallas, Texas, invites all of its customers to view choices in spacious common area displays.



Builders Design Group displays a wide variety of choices in its custom home area.

Coaching techniques

Training in management skills specific to the design center is frequently inaccessible to design center managers. With the development of design consultants, purchasing administrators and customer support personnel more important than ever, managers seek to hone their abilities in motivating their teams, providing feedback and coaching their staff to achieve the results they need to be successful. According to Kurt Gibson, the director of design centers for Calgary, Canada-based Unity Builders Group, the "Coaching Techniques" seminar at the Design Center Forum provided tools for team building, goal setting, instilling a sense of achievement and providing constructive feedback. "I found the Forum invaluable in helping me evaluate where we are in our design center processes," says Gibson.

Training and education

Until a few years ago, design consultant training was limited to product knowledge sessions and retail-oriented sales trainings. With the assistance of Artisan Design Group, STAINMASTER® carpet developed and launched the "Designer Sales Success" training series that focused specifically on the new-home design center environment and the needs of a new construction homebuyer, which are unique from those of retail store consumers. Communication skills, homebuyer education and solution selling are some of the critical tools provided in the "Designer Sales Success" programs.

According to Billie Milam, president of Builders Design Gallery,



a very short period of time. Extra efforts must be taken to repeatedly educate buyers on product performance to ensure they select materials they will be happy with in the long run and have accurate expectations of maintenance needs. Many design centers utilize pre-appointment brochures, CDs or Web sites to let their customers know what to expect during the process and from various products. Buyer orientations and "browse hours" are the next level in building that knowledge base. In their actual appointments, designers must reinforce verbally and through displays and collateral materials the key factors to keep in mind while making their selections. Finally, when they are finalizing their selections, designers should read through product disclosures with the customers and have them sign them. Bonnie Craddock, design center manager for McMillin Homes, emphasizes, "The key always goes back to learning about your homebuyer. Really listen to them and ask questions, because that gives you the opportunity to provide the solutions that are the most relevant and make sense to them."

Forum 2006 wrap up

Jean Johnson, design center manager for Renaissance Homes in Oregon found the DESIGN CENTER FORUM "a great opportunity for design center teams and management to share best known methods with each other, to benchmark our successes against and/or to take away great nuggets of information with renewed enthusiasm back to our corners of the world."



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"The program has been received so well throughout the country because it provides an extremely practical, hands-on approach to the many challenges design centers face. Our designers walk away with tools they can immediately utilize to enhance their success. Training is one of the most important things we can do, particularly in a soft market. We find that the time invested in training and the additional time spent with homebuyers always creates increases in options sales, not to mention consumers who are more satisfied with their selections and the process in general."

As quality training resources in the design center field grow, the key to successful training efforts relies on management support during training, reinforcement of training in day-to-day efforts and making sure that the performance matrices match the overall goals of the organization.

The power of an educated consumer

"My designer didn't tell me that..." is a refrain all too often heard by builder personnel from new homebuyers. That is precisely why the homebuyer education needs in a new-home design center are so different from that of a retail store environment. In a retail store, a customer might be purchasing one item or redecorating one room and may be able to take all the time they would like to research and select that room. In the new-home construction environment, in addition to all the other issues of loan qualification, selling a current home, moving, etc., they must select every finish for their whole home, usually in



Builders Design Group has selection areas for each of its builders' specific options to be displayed.