

Homeowner's Manual A Valuable Tool

by Carol Smith



When conflicts between builders and their customers occur, the source of the problem usually turns out to be poor communication. Builders must make sure that good information is available and bring it to their customer's attention.

The best way to handle a large volume of complex information is to provide it in written form. A well-organized "homeowner manual" guides the customer through contract negotiations and construction, helps to orient them when they move in, and clarifies the warranty. And a homeowner manual serves as a resource while the customer lives in the home, providing a convenient record of important information that can be passed along easily to subsequent owners.

Setting The Stage

The overall objective of a homeowner manual is to make clear what happens, when it will happen, and who is responsible for which details. An effective manual helps you to anticipate questions, identify recurring issues, and set expectations, giving you the best opportunity to satisfy your customers.

Most builders already have many of the items that go into a homeowner manual. But because they give this information to the customer a few pieces at a time, most of it is never read. For example, builders often deliver warranty information at the walk-through or at final payment. This practically guarantees no one will read it. Customers who have just closed on a new home seldom retire to their easy chairs to read a handful of paperwork — more often, they go directly to their old house and start

loading the car. Later, when the builder refers to something in the warranty standards, customers complain that they never got any such thing.

Everyone benefits from organizing all of this material in a way that makes it easy to locate specific pieces of information. If you introduce a homeowner manual early in your negotiations with your customers, fewer conflicts will occur later because the customer will develop a better understanding of how the process works and what comes with the product. Waiting for the paint to fade and then saying, "That's only natural; we don't fix it," can make your customer feel cheated and let down. But if you address the issue up front — "Let's talk about the responsibility of caring for your new home; there are some things we all know will require attention on regular basis" — angry accusations are much less likely to occur. Delivering the manual early on in the process also lets you channel your customer's enthusiasm into reading the information you have supplied.

Everything you include in a homeowner manual should be written in a positive tone (see sample above). This is particularly important when discussing warranty and maintenance items. Delineating clearly where your warranty responsibility ends and the homeowner's maintenance responsibility begins can be awkward and uncomfortable if the material on this subject is not well written. For example, all homes exhibit the effects of wood shrinkage, but if the homeowners don't know this, they might conclude that you are at fault. Informed of what to expect, cus-

tomers see this "damage" as natural and take it in stride.

Putting Together a Manual

To develop a manual, begin by assembling the materials you already use with customers, arranged in order as you normally present them. If you conduct a customer survey on completed jobs, use the feedback you get — what would have been useful, what would have prevented inconvenience — to fill in the gaps.

For the manual itself, you can use everything from a pocket folder to a leather-bound volume. A standard three-ring binder works well. It's reasonably priced, it allows flexibility when changes are made, and it permits customers to add materials, such as product selection records, as they are finalized. You can assemble your manuals as you need them, or prepare several dozen at a time in advance. The binders with clear vinyl covers also allow you to add artwork inexpensively, achieving a very attractive and professional presentation at low cost.

What To Put In a Homeowner Manual

There are lots of things you can include in a homeowner manual. Use this list as a guideline, but don't be afraid to add ideas of your own.

- Tips on moving, including phone numbers for movers and cleaning services
- Planning calendar
- Instructions on how, when, and where to make product selections
- Punchlist and final payment procedures, including sample forms
- Tips on home maintenance — if you don't write your own, include a copy of "Your New Home and How to Take Care of It" (NAHB Bookstore; 800/368-5242)
- Warranty information, including a sample copy of the warranty (deliver the actual document at the time of final payment)
- Quality standards for things that commonly generate complaints, along with the repair procedures you will provide if the standard is not met
- Warranty procedures, service request forms, and a clear definition of "emergency" items and who to call if one occurs
- Several plastic page protectors to hold product warranties (turn the actual warranties over as they become available)
- Landscaping tips
- Information about homeowner associations
- Community information, such as addresses and phone numbers for fire and police departments, hospitals, recreation facilities, and government services ■

Expansion and Contraction

The effects of normal expansion and contraction can be seen in such things as small cracks in the foundation, drywall, and paint — especially where moldings meet drywall, at mitered corners, where tile grout meets the tub or sink, etc. Shrinkage of wood in your home is also inevitable. This will be most noticeable during the first year in your new home, but typically continues into the second year.

For many of these occurrences, we will provide repairs, adjustments, and touch-up one time during the warranty period (see individual categories for detail). In all such cases, subsequent maintenance is the homeowner's responsibility.

By explaining the effects of expansion and contraction, and outlining repair and maintenance responsibilities, your homeowner manual will help to shape your customer's expectations and reduce complaints.

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