

Adapt, Migrate, or Die

By George Porter

According to Charles Darwin all the living things on this planet are compelled every day to make one of three choices. This is not limited to just animals; it includes plants and even businesses as well. Everything entity must chose between adapting, migrating, or dying. No matter how you feel about Darwin's other ideas concerning evolution etc. you have to agree with this one. Strangely, "nothing" is not one of the choices. The world and life are constantly changing things around us. Doing nothing means that you are not adapting with the changes happening everyday. You are being affected by being left behind and out of touch. You are either keeping up or falling behind, nothing stays the same.

This industry, and installation in particular, lends itself to this kind of thinking. I am sure Darwin never dreamed that his theories would be used here, but they apply nonetheless. Now, and in my next two articles in The Journal, we will explore how these three choices affect us.

Adapt

This works two ways. Either you adapt to the changing environment in the workplace or somehow you get the environment to adapt to you. What you can't successfully do is have your own way of doing things regardless of the real requirements. Adaptation is sometimes hard to do and often uncomfortable. The effects of not doing something the right way doesn't always become immediately apparent; but given enough time and the end results is revealed.

For adaptation to work it needs to be timely and effective. Doing the right thing at the wrong time is of little use. Just doing something for the sake of change doesn't work either. You must do the right thing at the right time to insure your future as a species or as a business.

The installation of manufactured homes has been going on pretty much the same way for years. Installers just do what they do and keep on going. However, the world around them has been changing, and I fear that the judgment day is not far off. Some examples of this are OSHA regulations. This federal agency has been around for decades and has been busy thinking up rules for the workplace the whole time. Practically no one in the installation business knows or cares about OSHA and their strange and troublesome rules. They sometimes chose to ignore the whole mess and may be setting themselves up for a very bad day sometime in the future. They have not been adapting their work habits to the law, and it's only a matter of time before it catches up with them.

In a recent seminar there were two building contractors sitting in the front row who are very new to this industry. They are looking into the possibility of using our housing instead of building their own. They are adapting their business to fit the economic environment in their area. It was a scary wake-up call for me to watch how they reacted to the information in the seminar compared to the reactions of very experienced installers in the same class. When we talked about site preparation and why the water must run away from the home the contractors were almost bored and the installers got irritated. The site built contractors knew it was necessary and in fact had always graded the lots. For them this is simply a routine procedure required for the home to remain structurally sound.

You can imagine the looks they gave the installers who said that this has nothing to do with their job! If they told their dealers that they would not install the home until the lot was properly graded, they would get fired. These installers never graded a lot in their life and could not see any good reason to start now. Their position being that if the homeowner wants his lot landscaped, and then he will just have to do it himself. These guys are just too busy installing homes to do that kind of work.

These building contractors and the installers are in the same business but you would never know it. The developers understood ridge beam support and placement, sidewall openings, frost-free footings, weight distribution, marriage wall securing and many other construction principles.

After an explanation of anchoring and how it made the home conform to the HUD Code as well as making the people in the home safer, one of the installers asked, "If anchoring is so important, then why don't they have to anchor the homes they install"? The inspector who looks at their homes does not require anchors so they never put them on, moreover, they are pretty sure anchors are a waste of time and money anyway. The building contractors stared at each other; they must have wondered what in the world they were getting into.

Thank goodness all installers do not have this attitude. Unfortunately, conscientious installers have to compete with the guys I just described for business. In other words a home with a graded lot and anchors costs more than one without these things and the cheapest guy usually gets the work and or the sale.

The contractors have safety equipment for their workers and safety meetings on a regular basis. It's not a big deal; it's just what every good business has to do. Everyone they know tries to comply with OSHA. They grade lots, kept records of soil tests, and many other business practices as well. These people are adapting as time goes along and continuing to adapt by taking a look looking at our industry for future business. What they see is a very confusing array of practices and personal opinions.

These building contractors know that they can use our homes more effectively than building on site. They understand the product and trust its construction. There are only two things that keep them from jumping into our markets in droves. One is the image we have created for ourselves, and the other is their potential liability if they have to conduct business the same way we do in order to compete. When conventional construction decides to become one of us, their arrival will be preceded by installation regulations that makes sense and will level the playing field. These builders will adapt the regulatory environment to their business practices and industry shipments will rise accordingly. This increase will benefit the present day dealers and installers who can adapt and will eliminate the ones who can't. The ones who adapt the first and best will be the strongest and will prosper the most. The ones who can't or won't will go the way of the dinosaurs who were forced to migrate or die. We will cover migrate next time.