

The Educated Consumer

By George Porter

This entire industry is powered by the wants of the consumers, not necessarily their needs. The consumers may want something and therefore feel they need it. On the other hand, if the consumer's don't want something then they probably feel they don't need it. If this seem a little confusing then bear with me for a few minutes and I will explain.

When consumers want central air conditioning they know what it will do for them, the same applies to self-cleaning ovens and extra insulation in the roof and walls. They understand these things and are willing to pay for them. They can easily see they are getting value for their money, and are willing to spend something extra for these benefits. Many times, after the sale, consumers wished they purchased more or upgraded an item, but it is too late. Their options are to purchase the items separately on their own or simply to do the upgrade when the original wears out, as in the case of a washing machine or carpet. There is really no harm done, just the inconvenience of doing without the better items for a while.

If the salesperson treats a feature like an option then most consumers are not likely to want to purchase the item and unless it's hidden value is explained to them. An example of this type of option might be a frost free foundation or proper site preparation. These items can add significantly to the cost of the home. When the consumer can't understand the reasons for spending money, then he will not do so. By the time he realizes the just how much this is really worth to him, it is too late. The home may be badly damaged and will probably never be as good as it should be. The consumer is mad and the industry has another black eye.

How can we keep this from happening? It would be great if anchoring, frost free foundations, and site preparation were standard in all homes, but they are not. These items are not standard in the vast majority of this nation because the average consumer knows almost nothing about this industry. Where would they learn? The media teaches them that "trailers" are not safe; our political leaders and entertainment industry use our product as a joke or the sign of a seedy second class population. How many times have you seen manufactured housing used in film or television as a normal home with average middle class citizens living there? How many times when watching local news about a crime do they show the criminal living in a "trailer"? Nobody cares when he lives in a stick-built house. During the Paula Jones hearings James Carvill's famous quote about "trailer park trash" was meant to discredit Ms. Jones, picturing her as an obviously sleazy person because she lived in a manufactured home. She apparently had more morals than other people involved, and they all lived in some really large homes. (Does this mean that stick-built mansions breed corruption?) The US Weather Bureau advises all occupants of our homes to "seek safer shelter" whenever a storm is in the area. Shouldn't they issue the same warning for other homes?

With all of this "information" in print and on the screen no wonder the public it might feel foolish

to spend money on one of our products if they didn't think they had to. So what do we do?

Here are a few observations and suggestions.

1. Has anyone out there ever seen a course on manufactured housing repair at any local college or Vo-Tech school? If not, why not? These schools give every course under the sun from auto repair for housewives to quilting, gardening, and welding, and even palm reading so why not something for our homes? There has to be someone in the local area within the industry who could teach such a course. Thirty-three percent of all new homes are HUD Code so there has to be a market.
2. Every weekend there are at least thirty TV shows on cooking, ten programs on bass fishing, and another ten half hour to hour segments on home repair. Nothing on us. I have tried for 3 years to get the interest of TNN and HGTV but all their replies are single sentence answers, "not interested at this time." **WE NEED GOOD EXPOSURE!** We are not in the mainstream of the public even though we are doing fairly well. Can you imagine what would happen if we were considered "conventional" housing? The effort would be worth it for the zoning alone.
3. We may be one of the last large industries to consider the retailer the customer. This is slowly starting to change, but for the most part factories sell to dealers, not to consumers through dealers. When you walk into a Chevy dealership you know a whole lot more about cars than you know about a manufactured home when walking into one of our dealerships. Generally the Chevy salesman will also know a lot more about his product than most of our representatives. The car salesman has training from the factory on all aspects of the product, not just pricing and closing.

The point is, our sales forces are just not informed enough to overcome objections to proper installation that the customer raises. First of all, the sales person may not know what it takes to install a home correctly, and secondly, it is always easier to just agree with an uninformed customer than bring him around to another point of view.

If the customer knew just a little about what was proper, then a salesman who also knew about proper installation might have a chance to do the right thing without jeopardizing the sale. Nowadays when the sales person gives the consumer the bad news that it is going to cost extra to properly grade the lot, then he may very well lose the deal. There's always a sales person down the street that doesn't know about the importance of the extra work, and will be glad to sell them a home without any grading or other site preparation. The consumer doesn't know the impact of skipping these steps, and is eager to hear that extra expense is not necessary, and acts on the cheaper but wrong advice. The first sales person learns his lesson quickly and never brings it up again when talking to a customer. The topic seems to cost him money so as far as he is concerned, it is a dead issue; besides, he's probably is not breaking any law so what's

the problem? Well of course the problem is that if water runs under the home for a few years the floor rots and a long, long list of other problems develop.

4. Educating the consumer will take more than a visit to the sales lot. We need to change the whole attitude toward manufactured housing and bring it into the everyday life of the nation. The media is the key here. We must be better represented in the public eye. When TNN and HGTV don't think there is an audience for manufactured housing programs, then we have not done our homework. This is the single greatest public relations program we could possibly have and it needs to happen as soon as possible. It would give us a chance to show how well our homes are built. Grand communities and the people who live in them could be showcased. Fine people from all walks of life live in our homes and the world need to know this fact.

When consumers start to have some idea what it takes to make a HUD Code home what it should be, then sales people will not have to explain why you need anchors. It would be like explaining to a car buyer why he needs brakes. When sales people present the features of the home and are educated about proper installation, then the customer will appreciate the problems that can be avoided down the road by following sound advice, not to mention building practices.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, when some politician decides to pass a law that affects our industry, maybe then he and his staff will know enough about our homes so that the new laws do more good than harm.