



them tell you why they want to buy a home, says Benshoof, former director of analysis for the NAHB Economics Group.

“Find out what the real need is for somebody to buy something,” he says. “That’s how you overcome objections and indifference. Most of the salespeople out there right now have no clue how to overcome indifference.”

Sounds relatively simple. But a study by The Berke Group, published in March 2007, found that 50 percent to 70 percent of builder on-site salesforces lacked “the personality and talent requirements to sell in a competitive environment,” Freedland says.

Selling homes with a system that worked wonders during the boom years, by greeting prospective clients, qualifying them, and constantly trying to close during initial conversations is now a doomed strategy, Freedland says.

“You can go through that crack system with them and they’ll say, ‘Thank you very much,’ and head down the road to see what kind of deal they can get there,” he says.

The Berke Group’s assessment, for which it collected data from 49 home builders, found that four personality traits are consistently and highly predictive of sales success.

Good salespeople scored high on sociability, rapid-fire problem solving, and idea productivity, one’s natural ability to produce ideas and brainstorm. The best salespeople also scored in the mid-range in assertiveness. They must be aggressive enough to follow-up with clients, but not to the point of being pushy and poor listeners, the study states.

Builder salespeople must get their heads around not trying to force transactions. Sales operations and strategies must be customer-based and geared toward selling to customers’ wants and needs, versus selling the builder to the customer. Salespeople have to earn the right to sell a customer a home, Freedland says.



Credit: Roy Scott

“Instead of trying to do something in 10 or 15 minutes, we have people spending three or four hours [with a customer],” he says. “When you’re able to do that and you have better communication skills, the chances of your being able to put a transaction together are a heck of a lot better.”

What it comes down to is using communication and good listening skills as your most powerful sales tools.

“You can learn an incredible amount about people in only seven minutes,” Benshoof says. “But people don’t know how to do it, and then when they do learn how to do it, it sounds forced.”

The way to combat sounding scripted is to practice through role play, he says. During the hot market, salespeople wanted no part of role playing, but now many more are willing to practice their sales strategies, Benshoof says.

“Over the last 12 months, it has gotten easier to train sales reps, because now they’re willing to listen,” he says. “If they want to eat, they’ve got to figure out a better way to do this.”

Salespeople weren’t the only ones disinterested in improving sales skills during the boom. Builders did not feel the need to spend a lot of money or time on sales training. Now they must invest in training their salesforce to become better listeners, Benshoof says.

“It’s not so much that they’re not listening because they don’t or can’t have good listening skills; it’s that they’re in a panic, because nobody ever taught them how to sell,” he says. “So they’re more worried about how to make the market come back to create a sense of urgency for people than they are to figure out what urgency an individual buyer has.”

Buyers will tell you why they want to buy. Listening to the customer, building a profile of them, and using that to sell them on their biggest concerns seems to be the right path to sales success.