



Ray of Light

Sunroom companies are working harder and smarter for leads and sales.

In a moribund housing market, companies that sell sunrooms find themselves facing bigger challenges than those selling windows and siding. Sunrooms cost more, and helping people find ways to pay for them is a problem. In response, sunroom companies are fine-tuning their marketing message and looking to knock on new doors. "Not everybody's broke, and not everybody has quit spending," says Rick Degan, president of Pacific Builders, in Sacramento, Calif.

WHERE THE LEADS ARE

Though sunroom leads have become more costly, several company owners see potential customers in a baby boomer demographic with money in the bank. They will continue to buy, despite the economy's woes, Degan and others point out. "Fortunately, sunroom [sales] have a long gestation period, about three years," says Kip Lee, area manager for Four Seasons Sunrooms of Georgia and South Carolina, in Savannah, Ga., "so there are always people who are incubating."

Credit is more difficult to get, so Lee tries to attract cash customers with favorable payment terms — currently 18 months with no payment and no interest.

Rick Edwards, president of Custom Patio Rooms, in Murraysville, Pa., recently began canvassing, "so we can talk to people who would not pick up the phone and call us." More attention paid

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Sunrooms are a tough sell, so companies are fine-tuning their marketing and knocking on new doors.

Glass Is Green

Fiberglass windows are busting out of their niche-product status.

Dennis Gehman, owner of Gehman Custom Remodeling, a design/build company in Harleysville, Pa., is set to enter the replacement window business. The separate division he's setting up will be run by his son Elijah, and will sell Infinity, a brand of fiberglass window made by Marvin Windows and Doors. Joe Sandino, owner of Weathertite, a Sacramento, Calif., company, has carried several brands of fiberglass window for five years, but says he's seeing a lot more interest. Alex Matus, co-owner of Matus Windows, north of Philadelphia, notes that his company's sales of fiberglass windows rose 40% to 50% this year.

STRONG, GREEN, MORE

Fiberglass windows have been around for years, but it seems that more homeowners are becoming aware of their advantages and are willing to pay more to obtain them. Those advantages include strength (nine times as strong as vinyl), color (i.e., paintable), and low maintenance.

Although research firms tracking home improvement trends typically project the market for fiberglass as small — Ducker Worldwide, for instance, says that in 2007 fiberglass units

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time I go out, they're replacing wood shakes and considering concrete tile," says Kim Smith, owner of J.N. Davis Roofing Co., in Pasadena, Calif. "And when I leave they say: 'Thank you for telling us about this. We never knew it existed.'"

Smith cites, as major selling points, the product's light weight and walkability (especially matched against concrete tile), reliability, and the fact that "it looks gorgeous."

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Siding, continued

Bloomfield Hills, Mich. "It depends on what your goal is. If you want maintenance-free, to save some money, and your house is in the right location, vinyl is fine." But vinyl probably isn't a good choice if all the surrounding homes are faced with brick, stone, or wood siding, Petrucci adds. The vinyl he installs in his upscale market "has deeper cuts and a deeper butt edge, so it looks more like wood."

 Read more about vinyl siding at replacementcontractor.com.

NO PRODUCT DOES EVERYTHING

At Amazing Siding, in Houston, consumers choose from three siding products and two levels of installation, explains Bob Birner, vice president of sales. "We educate the customer on the good, the bad, and the ugly of every product we carry, since no product does everything."

Customers often want fiber-cement siding at first, but "we find that by going over the pros and cons, the warranty coverage and exclusions, and, finally, the price, typically customers have what they need to determine what is best for them," he says. "So instead of it being a yes/no proposition, it's a question of which they prefer." —*Jay Holtzman is a freelance writer based in Jamestown, R.I.*

Roofing, continued

The disadvantage? It's a tougher install, notes Ribble, who says that a 1½-day asphalt shingle job would typically take 2½ days with stone-coated steel. And it's all in the flashing. "Your rake edges and valley cuts are more difficult," he says. "So are your roof-to-wall interfaces."

His company's metal shop produces the necessary accessories. The Ribble Group, which also markets as Security Roofing, has spread the word, Ribble says, by doing stone-coated steel roofs on churches, which then, essentially, become an advertisement for the product and get parishioners interested.

GROWING APPEAL

Ribble estimates that as recently as three years ago 2% of his business was stone-coated steel. It's now 7% to 8%. Dale Brenke, president of Schmidt Siding & Window Co., in Mankato, Minn., says that his company did 17 steel-shingle installations last year — most of them stone-coated — and estimates that he'll do twice as many in 2008.

Buyers are typically past window or siding customers, and the lure, in a climate particularly tough on roofing, is longevity. Smith says that he has yet to make a repair call on a stone-coated steel roof he has installed. "I've got one on my house," he adds. —*Jim Cory*

Sunrooms, continued

to sales and marketing metrics pays dividends, as does getting salespeople involved in lead generation and quality control. Custom Patio Rooms now holds daily rather than weekly sales meetings, and salespeople are involved in marketing as never before. "We get more suggestions from the salespeople, and we also show them how hard we are working to get leads," Edwards adds.

With fewer and more costly leads, "we have to work the referrals harder," Degan says.

INVESTMENT YOU CAN LIVE IN

So what are the most persuasive arguments to convert leads to sales? Menendez advises reminding customers, "why it's a good idea to do business with a stable company that has good business principles. Many people are afraid to buy because a lot of businesses have closed their doors."

And, if you have the money, there's no better time to buy a sunroom. "There are no good investments out there now, so people have cash and no good place to put it," Lee adds. "We tell them that the housing market will turn around. In the meantime, why not have an investment you can live in?" —*Jay Holtzman*

Windows, continued

made up just 2% of the total window market — some window companies are seeing a surge of interest from firms looking to differentiate. "It's the fastest growing material in the industry," says Duane Putz, director of sales and marketing for Pella Corporation's Advanced Materials Division, which introduced its Impervia fiberglass line in 2003 and won a *Consumer Reports* "Best Pick" recommendation in 2007.

RESEARCH-DRIVEN

Alan Wall, general manager of Infinity Replacement Windows, in Needham, Mass., and others, such as Matus and Sandino, say that aesthetics are a major attraction of fiberglass windows — the narrow profile allows in more light. "It's a great base for paint," Sandino says, "it's super strong, you get the colors you want, and you don't have the sun issues."

Wall notes that "there's a definite buzz in the architectural community" about fiberglass, in part because it's a green product. Matus and others say that consumers choosing fiberglass typically research their purchase on the Internet, and that many had no idea that windows made of fiberglass even existed until they did a Google search. "A lot of people who buy [them] are those who do research," Matus says, "and the more research they do, the more they like fiberglass." —*Jim Cory*