



Telling the Story of HOME PERFORMANCE

We're all engaged in the business of education, whether we recognize it or not. Every time we speak or write, after all, we're hoping to educate others about our knowledge and beliefs. As home performance professionals, we have a great story to tell—an education to deliver—and that's the intent of this column: to discuss language and communication as it relates to the business of home performance. I think it'll be relevant to your work, whether you're a trainer, salesperson, technician, manager, or anyone else who works in the world of high-performance housing.



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Today he leads Habitat X, a private organization that hosts professional development events for the home performance industry.

We use language to express ideas, sell products, give instructions, get opinions, or ask for help. If you don't understand the effect your language has on others, you may not get the responses you expect. For lack of clear language, things can go very wrong in the workplace, whether you're communicating with a customer, an employee, a coworker, or a building inspector. It's worth your time to pay attention to language so you can be more effective in whatever you do.

We face a unique challenge in communicating with the public about the world of home performance. We have in our grasp a set of tools and techniques that can improve homes, save a lot of money, protect the planet, and help us build a bridge to a sustainable future in which homes are less of a burden on their owners and on the planet. Yet we're still waiting in most markets for the groundswell of interest and sales that'll indicate when home performance has finally gone mainstream. We've made some good progress here and there, but some days it seems that no one is paying attention to our message. We're all very good at talking shop to other home performance practitioners, but it appears that we haven't yet compiled a truly compelling story to tell the rest of the world. We all need some practice educating others about our products and services, whether we're making sales calls, speaking to community organizations, or just trying to tell our friends what we do for a living. I think we could each tune up our talking points by considering these questions.

What Do People Want Out of Life?

The truth is that most people want, at a basic level, only a few things in this life: comfort, security, and social status among them. The good news is that home performance can deliver all three.

Comfort is easy for us to sell because high-performing homes are indeed more comfortable, due to consistent temperatures, low air leakage, and good indoor air quality. On my retrofit jobs, I've had many customers tell me that the improvement in comfort was apparent the day we began work.

The security benefits of home performance are equally compelling. If you take time to calculate the possible future utility costs for their homes, most customers will recognize the financial security they gain by controlling their home's consumption. If you tell the story properly, most people will also derive some security from knowing that their high-performing home will be more disaster proof because they spent their money on shell improvements rather than oversized HVAC systems.

The third piece of the puzzle, social status, may still be the hardest sell. A few homeowners will want to own a home that performs better than the neighbors' house. Or they may care about the social stigma of owning a wasteful low-performing house. But the real shift toward social enthusiasm for home performance will take place when average folks recognize the inherent smartness of being thrifty, and of taking control of their shelter. This simple shift in attitude will have a profound impact on our industry, and it'll happen when intelligent public policy, favorable economics, and environmental concerns are finally aligned.

Communication Tip: When discussing the value of owning and living in a high-performance home, you'll get greater acceptance if you bundle personal values into the proposition.

How Do You Tell the Story?

You'll get a better reception for your message if you consider who you're talking to and what they're ready to hear at a particular time. This is not to say that you should change your message for every situation, but rather that you should consider how to express your



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When your job is to deliver education in the field, whether to professionals or the public, you'll have the opportunity to craft an extremely relevant story that addresses the interface of people and their homes.



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It's in the controlled environment of the classroom, with professional learners who are focused on education, that you can best discuss the advanced technologies of home performance.

message in different ways. Every technical trainer knows, for example, that you cannot effectively teach until you learn about your students' prior knowledge and about their attitude toward learning. The same goes for telling the story of home performance.

We all process new information using a variety of approaches. In the home performance sales cycle, for example, homeowners make decisions in different ways during each stage of the process. If presented with an itemized audit of their home, most people will engage the scientific part of their brain, at least for a moment, asking themselves, "Does this make sense? And do these people know what they're talking about?" Once they have a proposal in hand, they'll surely make some purely financial decisions, asking, "Can I afford this work? And will it add value to my home?" But in the end, most people will make largely emotional decisions about home performance, asking questions like "How will this help my family? And do I even want this contractor's crews in my house?"

You'll be most successful in communicating the benefits of home performance to homeowners, or anyone else, if you understand and have compassion for the situation the listener is in at the time you're delivering your message.

Communication Tip: Learn to tell the story of your profession from a variety of

approaches. Refine your message to address the needs and interests of your listeners.


How Much Detail Do We Provide?

We are all guilty of talking shop to the wrong people. The truth is, few people outside the home performance industry really care about the technologies that we housing specialists have invented and love. You can be assured that when newly minted electricians swept across North America selling the benefits of home electrical wiring during the 1920s and '30s, they didn't lecture homeowners on the beauty of Ohm's law and other principles of home electrical wiring! Yet that is what many salespeople in the home performance industry do when they elaborate to homeowners on the value of things like pressure diagnostics and worst-case combustion testing.

We professionals definitely need our equipment and procedures to do our jobs, and there may be times when you can show off your technical prowess by describing them to a particularly astute listener. But in general, the technology is not the story. It's just a methodology that we use to accomplish a job. And that job is to create comfort, security, and status for the public.

Communication Tip: Refine your message to showcase the benefits of what you can do for people, not how you do it. Drop the

techno-talk unless you know for certain that the listener cares about your toys.

When you speak to the public about home performance, you'll have the best success if you translate the language of technology into human terms. The home performance industry has done a lot of great work in the last generation, but we still have not touched the vast majority of the 100 million-plus homes in North America. If we really want to promote the idea of high-performance housing across society, we'll need to hone our ability to speak of home performance in ways that are compelling, believable, and actionable. And that'll require a shift in approach among housing professionals toward a style of effective communication that supports rather than hinders our efforts. It'll be a process of education for all of us, and practice will help. We just need to adjust our thinking, work on the script, and get out there and tell the story. 

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