

Proof Is Possible: The Only Difference Between Us and Them

by Corbett Lunsford

Editor's Note: If you work in the business of home performance, you've probably had a hard time lately not hearing about Corbett Lunsford and his Building Performance Workshop. His fast rise to high profile in the industry is a result of his very focused mission: to move the business of home performance towards a recognizable and compelling proposition for the average homeowner. His methods are simple, smart, and commercial—he uses modern media for all it's worth, and he's good at it.

I think we could all learn from his approach as we strive to build an industry that can change the world. If we can't tell our stories to the average homeowner, then we'll have to settle for the circular discussion of standing around telling other professionals about our great work. That in-house conversation, about the science and business of our industry, surely has its place. But the home performance industry at-large is now in a position to gain great benefit from a different conversation, one that addresses the very real needs and hopes and expectations of the average homeowner. We're building a new method of storytelling for this most important audience. And I'm glad that Corbett is a part of our discussion.

If you work in the business of home performance, or what I'll call performance-based contracting, I'll bet \$100 that you came in through the Energy Efficiency door. I did, too. And there's nothing wrong with that, except that, once through the door, many of us now think that we've arrived in energy efficiency land, and we have nothing more to learn. When the reality is that our door was just one of many entry points to performance-based contracting. And if you look back at the door through which we entered, you'll see that's its gilded with tons of outdated assumptions.

For example, common industry knowledge says that we need an army of Energy Auditors. Really? I don't think so, because I don't think we need to do as much analysis as we often have. Then, consider the very word "audit". It definitely does not connote warmth and joy, but what does it connote?

- An audit happens in the midst of a blue sky while you're minding your own business.
- An Audit lets an outsider examine and judge you.
- An audit may force you to change the way you've been doing things.

These are not happy images for anyone. They named them Auditors because the word was perfect for the initial idea of program design: we, via the government, tried to do a noble thing by reducing energy waste in tens of millions of homes. This entailed forcing normal people to allow an outsider to probe and judge their home, and then perhaps forcing them to change. Welcome to Energy Efficiency Land. It's not a pretty picture.

Measured Success

Look around the world of our industry with fresh eyes. I think that the best place for us to stand is Measured Success Land. Energy efficiency is not our enemy, especially since most people agree that saving energy is a good thing. But the whole idea of the initial energy audit as the foundation of an industry is a bad idea. No one wants to do it.

But there is a sure-fire way to welcome lots of normal people into Measured Success Land. First: don't offer an audit, whether free or for fee. Let them come to you when they're ready. Next: learn to identify the occasions when they WILL be ready. These may include these moments.

- When they're preparing for home improvements.
- When they know their home has a problem.

At these moments, these people are your clients. And I suggest the you can ignore the others who are not ready to work on their homes. Perhaps you can offer them free resources to equip them for times when they do fit into these ready-to-buy groups.

Many of us have had this conversation with potential clients. "You know, a blower door test could help you solve your home's air leakage problems." "Oh yeah? My house doesn't have any air leakage problems. *Piss off.*"

I've had innumerable conversations like this, and it's taken me a long time to realize that if people don't believe they have a problem, then they don't. I have learned to shut up more often.

So we may have been aggressive with the not-our-clients, and while ignoring the people who are begging for the knowledge we have. It is hard for



performance-based contractors to figure this out. Here is a note, for example, that I received from a fellow who would love to join the industry. But the only leads he can find are the not-our-clients:

The note reads, "I'm very interested in home performance as a new direction to take my company. However, I've been in the HVAC field for twenty years now and I cannot for the life of me see a market for home performance fixes. So, my question to you is, what exactly is the market or product the people you train are selling? I'd like to understand who the customers are. The only people I ever hear from are customers looking for a big rebate from the local utility companies. Can you point me in the right direction or help me to understand this market of customers so that I can figure out if this industry is something I can train my technicians for?"

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Motivational Metrics

This question perfectly illustrates the idea of Motivational Metrics. If the utility rebate programs we've had for decades were actually motivational, then they would have transformed the industry, and performance-based improvements would be mainstream for normal people. If performance contracting was such a transparently good idea, then the 20-year HVAC veteran who sent me this message would have long since been motivated to join in.

It seems that many of our metrics are not motivational. We're drowning in data on U-value, permeability, air changes per hour, kilowatts, and so on. These are important to technicians, but homeowners do not care about these things. We can do better. We can be sexier and cooler. And we can learn to **communicate** better.

We must start carefully crafting our Motivational Metrics, and I don't mean for mathematical purity. In the battle of Pure vs. Popular, I vote for popular every time since we can't feed our families on purity. You do need the right data on the back end, but just because a metric is right doesn't make it motivational to the buyer. And there are plenty of ways you can re-brand metrics to simply demonstrate Good, Better, and Best.

The home is a system, it's generally quite complicated, and yes we all get off on analyzing and describing the vast beauty of it. But the homeowner is the gatekeeper of What Happens Next. And performance-based improvements are always and only about What Happens Next. It's the before and after, the adventure of the makeover. What good does a metric do anyone when it cannot be improved? What good is it when it cannot be explained to a gatekeeper?

Also, friends, home performance contracting is not a standalone industry. It's simply one tier of a building industry that already fuels economies everywhere. Does the rest of the building industry even know we exist? Has decades of publicity for energy efficient home improvement and construction made any impact? And even among those practitioners in-the-know, is a conceptual understanding of the elements of building science enough to create an industry?

The answer to all these questions, it seems to me, is a timid and embarrassed, "No". We need more people in here with us, and we should welcome them through whatever door they choose.

The Difference Between Us

What sets performance contractors apart from the construction industry is not our fancy titles, our building science knowledge (which becomes obsolete with an unsettling regularity), or the help with publicity from publicly-funded programs.

What makes us special is the performance testing itself. Plain and simple, the ability to prove that a goal or certain level of quality was achieved, whether it's about energy efficiency or some other aspect of construction. It's the ability to apply Motivational Metrics. To pinpoint the exact opportunity for improvement so that money's not wasted on guesswork. To promise a measurable improvement, and then to prove it was met. Our diagnostic tools have evolved to the point where you cannot hide anything in construction today. The pros who use performance testing to greatest effect also

Recently, Whole Foods Store began rating their fruit and vegetable growers on all kinds of criteria: water efficiency, energy efficiency, employment practices, etc. They put a lot of research and science into this rating. But guess how they label the actual food in the aisles? Good, Better, Best. That's it. How much empirical data do Normal People really need to make a decision? But will they pay more money for something they believe is better? Absolutely.

have a deepest understanding of building science. But, without the testing, building science is just an opinion.

In his excellent book *On Bullshit*, philosophy professor Harry G. Frankfurt explains that bullshit is not simply less than an outright lie—it is unique. To either tell the truth OR tell a lie, you must know what the truth actually is. This shows an understanding of the truth, even if the goal is to ruin it. But to bullshit someone, you don't have to care what the truth is at all. You just say things. Therefore, bullshit is potentially much more damaging to the truth than lying. When every driver insists that they're a "good driver", and every building pro reportedly does a "good job", many could in fact be telling the truth. But the fact that we don't have proof of their claims means we have to assume it's all bullshit. If there's no testing, there's no proof that it's the truth

Proof is Possible

I think it will be easy to call out those in industry who rely on bullshit. We don't need everyone to trumpet this message—we need just one qualified, loudmouth professional in each local market (we know who you are) to tell normal people this: Stop guessing. Proof Is Possible. Ask for it.

And this is the magic bullet. For Normal People, our customers, they can get proof that they got what they paid for, and they didn't get screwed. For professionals, proof shows that they kicked the competition's ass. This can make all the difference. I can clearly imagine a building industry where the money isn't meager, the schedule isn't slapdash, haste and waste are mocked, and we're all enthusiastic about our buildings. And Proof is the door—the entry point—that can take us there.

Follow-on Resources

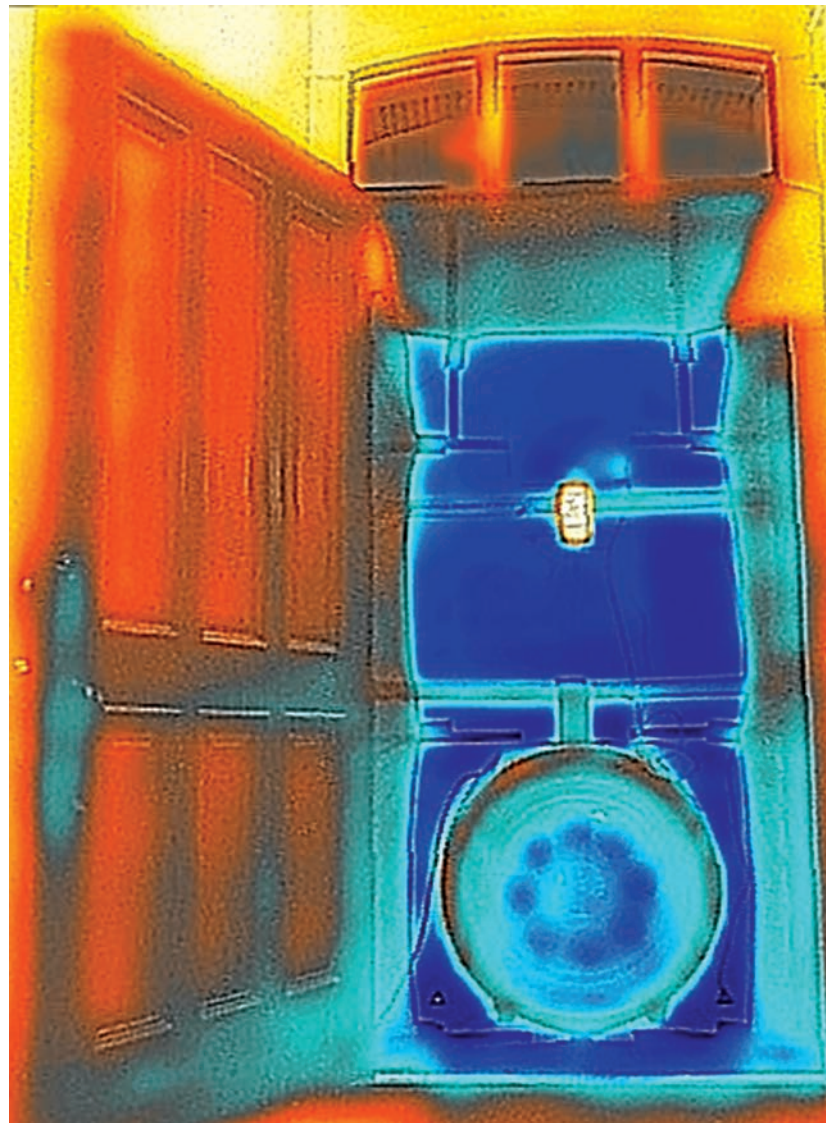
Building Forensics Mastermind Series of webinars are first Wednesday of every month.

Find out more:

<http://BuildingPerformanceWorkshop.com>

<http://BuildingPerformancePodcast.com>

<http://youtube.com/c/homeperformance>



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