

# Builders glean likes, dislikes from focus groups

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 basement. Rather than a walkout basement or a regular basement with the small windows near the ceiling, some sites told themselves to full-size windows that extend all the way down the wall.

"That can really make a difference when it comes to how people use the basement."

But focus groups are helpful in pointing out where builders' ideas are impractical.

Sometimes things happen by accident. Hyde said, for example, when building a house for a recent Homearama, a decision was made to cut a hole in the wall between the master bedroom and a second smaller bedroom.

"The people loved it," she said. They wanted to use it as a sitting area or a computer room — so now we include that as an option."

JOHN BLAND, executive vice president of The Brand Consulting Group, said just about any type of business can use the information culled from focus groups to improve their business.

"The key, the objective of any focus group is to understand 'why,'" Brand said. "Why they like something, why they hate something, why they buy here, why they buy there."

Each type of company will have a different "why" they need answered, Brand said. The type of people in the focus group will change depending on what the company is trying to determine.

"There's a saying: If the client wants to market something to people exclusively with square belly buttons, well, we'll find them," he said. In the case of the builder, that why could be one of two things: why a house isn't (or is) selling, or why a sales program doesn't work (or works).

"Sometimes you can see these things without the focus groups," he said. "It's not unusual to see a manager say, 'We know that' when he

looks at the report. But if you know that, why weren't you doing something about it?"

The focus group does exactly what it says — it helps company managers focus on what is important. "Sometimes, managers get caught up in things that are important to the company, but they lose sight of things that are important to the customer."

"People don't always know why they do the things they do," he said. Focus groups are helpful tools in problem-solving for several reasons, but perhaps the greatest reason is that they produce ideas that might not come to light otherwise.

ELEEN WHITEFIELD, marketing director for the Selective Group in Farmington Hills, said focus groups have been an integral part of the company's marketing strategy

almost since the company began.

"We use them typically in two ways," she said. "In pre-marketing, we want to know if the plan we intend to provide is appropriate for that community."

"After the sale, we want to know did we do what we planned to do," she said. "We might do a focus group after (a project is completed) if a community isn't taking off."

Because communities are different, a home in one community may not sell well in another, she said.

"A builder may also use focus groups to help determine why a particular sales program worked or didn't work," she said. "Why is it they came to visit a particular model? Did they like the ad? Was it informative? Was it not informative, enough and they needed more information?"

## 'What do you think about...?'

By Gerald Frawley  
 staff writer

Although the process can change depending on what results the builder is seeking, focus groups involve getting a group of people together who evaluate house plans the builder is proposing for production, Pullie Home Corp. marketing director Deen Hyde said.

"After the architect designs the house, we walk them through each room (on the drawings)," she said. "Borrowing from its own experiences, the focus group then makes suggestions for change or points out

likes and dislikes about the plan, she said.

Typically, the builder then takes the focus group report, evaluates the suggestions and comments, and then incorporates them into the house plan.

Then he builds a prototype, she said. Once completed, the builder invites the focus group back to view the house and make additional suggestions.

Those suggestions are then incorporated into the final design that is then put into production.

Building a prototype that people like may or may not like may seem like

an expensive proposition, she said, but that's not necessarily the case. "We actually save money in the long run," Hyde said.

Building a home based on the perception of what a lot of actual home buyers will result in a home that sells. "Otherwise, we'd get a house that a committee of builders like, but maybe no one else."

There's nothing worse than investing a lot of time and money into something that no one likes, Hyde said. "If we build four or five of them and no one buys them, then we'd have a problem."

## Readers respond to survey

Observer & Eccentric readers formed their own focus group of sorts when they responded to the Landmark Designs 1992 Dream Home survey.

More than 100 readers made their new house preferences known by filling in Landmark's survey that was

printed in the Observer & Eccentric in January.

Results of the survey will be carried in next Thursday's edition along with color sketches of three houses drawn up by Landmark architects based on the newspaper surveys.

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