

Make a sku for Education

Customer education is a product that every yard should stock—and sell.

From the year I started building houses in the mid-1970s, my business kept growing. Each year, I landed a few more contracts and built a few more homes. I figured it would keep growing just like that, too. After all, why would anything change?

My local lumberyard didn't offer any educational programs—they just sold material. I learned everything I knew then from reading Audel's line of construction books and making mistakes everywhere from frame to finish, including in bookkeeping. I paid for every lesson and late fee along the way.

Maybe that's why the recession of 1980-82—the worst this country had seen in decades—came as such a surprise to me. In fact, when interest rates rose to 16%, I had three spec homes on the market.

I moved back to California in 1982 with my tail between my legs, glad to work with my brother—we shared business and carpentry techniques that each of us had learned on our own, always believing that what we'd learned had to be the best way. But, financially and emotionally, I was still reeling from the recession the day I met a man who hung doors named Royal Sheifer.

Royal Sheifer had his door bench set up on a concrete patio, outside a middle unit. My brother and I watched him for 30 minutes. Each time he picked up a tool or rolled a door, he explained in detail exactly what he was doing and why.

I remember that day distinctly, all the mud around that large apartment complex in Camarillo. The weather was foggy and cold; I was wearing a light sweatshirt, and my brother was on my right side, taking notes on a block of wood.



The last house I built in Arizona

The techniques Royal shared, along with his passion for door hanging, changed my life.

Every time I reach for my scribes or my door hook today, I think of Royal. That's the way education is—when you learn something valuable, you never forget where you were, or who helped you learn it. And every time you use those techniques, you remember again.

But there's more to education than happenstance, otherwise many of us wouldn't have stayed in high school long enough to graduate. That's the other side of the education coin. We always end up thanking the people that "coerce" us into learning.

After moving to California, I started receiving fliers for dinners and seminars from my lumberyard—short classes in business or bookkeeping. I never attended any.

When it comes to education, it's not only the teacher that matters, it's people caring enough to push you, to *sell* you.

After all, my attitude was that it was better to be working, building, selling—that's how we make a living, that's our livelihood.

But if someone from that yard in Arizona had just put their hand on my shoulder and squeezed; if someone had taken the time to single me out and look me eye to eye, I probably would have gone to some classes. Maybe I still would have built those three spec homes—maybe not, but I bet I would have learned something worth remembering, something that would have changed my life.

When it comes to education, it's not only the teacher that matters, it's people caring enough to push you, to *sell* you.

As the building business slows, keep this lesson in mind: While your customers are looking for discounts and good deals, they're also looking for support. Be there for them. Success depends on more than prices; it's about relationships. Take a personal interest in your customers—help them succeed, and they'll take a personal interest in you.

If you're not familiar with educational programs in your area, the *LBM Journal* is a good place to start. Many of the writers in these pages offer such help, and numerous other programs exist that provide builders with solid information that can help make them more successful.

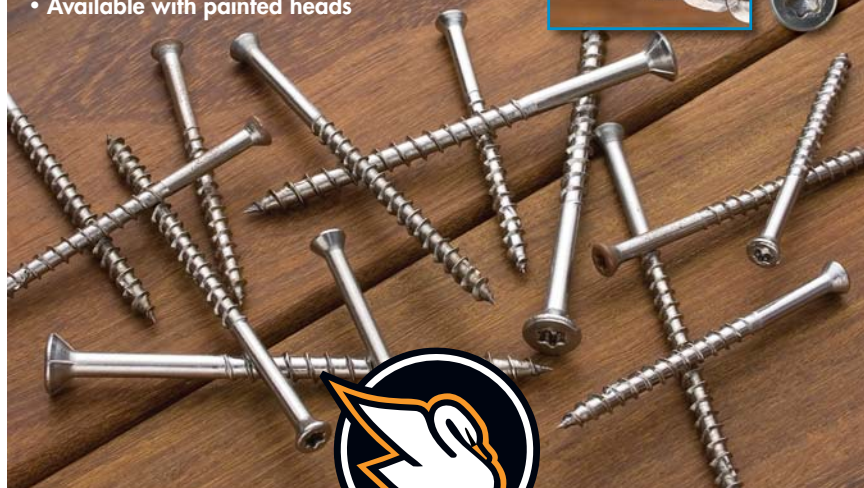
And if your yard is the one who steers customers to information that helps them weather the current storm in the building industry, they'll be loyal to you for years to come. ■



GARY KATZ, with nearly 40 years experience in the industry, is a contributing editor to *Fine Homebuilding* magazine, a frequent contributor to the *Journal of Light Construction*, and produces the Katz Roadshow—Carpentry Clinics at lumberyards all over America. To learn more, visit his web site: www.GaryMKatz.com.

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