

[ expert advice ]

# Mastering a Marketing Plan for Optimal Sales

Planning ahead makes for a great grand opening.

By Debra Bernard

**D**oes your marketing plan make the grade? Most of us would not settle for a “C” in school, yet many in our industry create marketing programs that are average at best — with only 50 to 75 percent of the critical elements handled correctly and on time.

A haphazardly conceived and poorly executed marketing plan with an inaccurate reading of the market, and a marketing manager who enters the process too late can tarnish what might have been a winning project. Overlooked details that diminish the impact of an opening, cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to repair.

Countdown to success

Homebuilders who understand marketing and give it the top-of-mind status it deserves, have the sales and lasting reputations to show for it.

An instrumental part of marketing research is creating a checklist of the elements that lead to a successful grand opening. Each item is arranged chrono-



Options are needed to give today's expetask.



*A unique marketing process helped Florsheim Homes' Rose Series communities change the face of the Central Valley home market. Rose Circle in Turlock — which featured a beautiful circular entry and stately site plan was the number one selling community in California soon after they opened. Photo courtesy of William Hezmalhalch Architects and Florsheim*

logically, starting with the grand opening and working backwards.

In creating this system, several factors became apparent, first is the importance of balance. Instead of heavily weighing marketing activities at the end of the building process, the most successful programs spread activities throughout the entire development span. While many activities are concentrated in the final three to four months before opening, dozens of activities must ideally begin seven to ten months before the grand opening.

This type of forward planning keeps a company from becoming overwhelmed as the grand opening nears. Early com-

pletion of all such tasks frees up the marketing manager's time during the critical final phase, and acts as insurance toward a smooth opening. The last two months before a grand opening should be focused on finding opportunities (new customers, profits, angles, etc.) rather than working on the basics.

The essentials of time

Timing is everything. Assigning each critical task ensures its appropriate place in the overall process — neither too early nor too late — enabling the company to handle it at the precise moment required.

The following is a thumbnail sketch of how to create your own grand opening

checklist.

**Start early**

Approximately one year before the grand opening date, the marketing project team should be identified and the budget approved.

Market studies researching local demographics, home designs, competition and pricing are initiated at this time. In addition, the marketing manager meets with the building team — the architect, land planner and internal experts — to create the community identity, land plan and product concepts/design.

Starting on the right foot is literally just that, taking a walking tour of the site early on to learn the essential aspects of the property that you simply can't see on paper. Special attributes of the property identify the site's personality. These ideas and images pull the marketing concept together, and influence the community's name, graphic themes and even the architecture and land plan.

**Ten key sub-areas**

During the 10 to 12 months prior to a project opening, the marketing checklist should track ten broad task areas:

- 1 Research/Positioning/Pricing
- 2 Product Design and Specifications
- 3 Financial and Legal Issues
- 4 Advertising and Public Relations
- 5 Brochure and Collateral Development
- 6 Merchandising
- 7 The Sales Team and Sales Plan
- 8 Sales Office Development



*A well-integrated marketing program is sensed from the moment a homebuyer enters a model home. The warm and exciting welcome extended by Oak Crest at Eagle Ridge in Gilroy, Calif. by Standard Pacific Homes is an indicator of well-considered upscale features found throughout. Photo courtesy of Standard Pacific Homes*



9 Construction Connection  
10 Signage Program

**Every decision counts**

Evaluate all that's needed to complete a task right the first time. For every item, particularly those that frequently present problems, ask yourself "How can I spend time up-front to minimize last-minute errors?"

Develop standard forms and schedules that give you all the information you want when you need it. No detail is too small. A consistent format for meeting agendas will help save time and confusion when the team comes together.

The accounting department has spreadsheets, construction has schedules, purchasing has computerized budgets — and the marketing department must be equally organized.

The countdown enables the marketing team to be better multi-task managers. It also helps coordinate with higher up's who may not understand the "trickle down effect" of a change. The broad scope of the list ultimately puts every

team member on the same page, and lets each know how his or her part fits into the whole.

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