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## Squeaky wheels get after-sales results

Of all the mail and e-mail I receive from Star readers, by far the greatest amount deals with workmanship issues and uncompleted items in new homes and condominiums by a small number of local builders.

Most of these letters relate in some detail the frustrating experiences of buyers as they try to get the defects in their new purchases remedied.

Many of the problems are small and inexpensive to fix, but the homeowners who write to me have been unable to get a satisfactory response or in many cases, any response from the builder's after-sales service staff. Unfortunately, too many of the defects readers write to me about are major and even structural, yet the items are not attended to week after week, and month after month.

Even worse, perhaps, are the defects noticed by the purchasers before closing. Despite their complaints, buyers frequently report that they can get the brush-off from construction personnel even in situations where a careful explanation is all that would be required.

Typical of the complaints I receive is a recent e-mail from one reader, who wrote that she has never been so frustrated with anyone as she has with the builder of her new home.

"I really can't get around the fact that homeowners pay out over \$250,000 and get this sort of non-client customer service are all builders like this? I was just wondering if you know of any articles have been written about the lack of customer service with builders or the many frustrations people have had with them ... They seem to always have an excuse because they know we are uninformed about the processes and we have to take their response at face value."

After receiving this letter, and dozens more like it, I began to wonder: How would I react if I was buying a new home and the builder's staff were not responding? How would I advise readers or clients?

Aaron's first rule of dealing with problem builders is: The squeaky wheel gets the grease. The second rule is: Never take "no" or "later" for an answer.

If weekly phone calls, letters or faxes are not producing results, increase the frequency to every three days, then daily, even hourly. Ask the receptionist for the names of everyone at the builder's office, and contact all of them.

Find out the name of the company president or owner it will be on file with the Ontario New Home Warranty Plan and the Greater Toronto Home Builders' Association. Call, write or e-mail the president. If he doesn't return your calls, look up or ask for his home phone number.

If the construction problem occurs before closing, prepare to spend several hours on the pre-closing inspection. Bring a home inspector, write down every single problem, and photograph every defect.

If the issue is after-sales service or repairs, file a claim with the Ontario New Home Warranty Plan immediately and call them regularly for progress reports. Consider a small claims court action.

Contact my fellow Star columnist Sheldon Libfeld, president of the Greater Toronto Home Builders' Association. Explain the problem and find out what the association will do in your case to ensure that its members adhere to its high standards of construction.

Call the municipal building inspector in charge of the condominium or subdivision, and demand immediate action on the defects. If that doesn't work, enlist the help of your local city councillor.

The bottom line is this: There is no excuse for builders to tolerate shoddy workmanship or poor public relations. If they're too busy or understaffed to help you, they shouldn't be in the business.

By the same token, most builders create superior products and have excellent relationships with their customers. If you are happy with your home or condominium or the builder's after-sales service, tell everyone you know. Good builders are proud of their homes and satisfied customers are their best advertisement.

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CORRECTION: My July 6 column contained an error in suggesting ways to prevent household mould. The suggestion should have read to consider the use of an air conditioner or a dehumidifier.

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