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In praise of caring builders

Some go the extra mile to fix buyers' problems

Last week's Title Page column told the story of Mark, the buyer of a \$500,000 Thornhill home who received shoddy treatment at the hands of his builder.

Among the faxes and e-mails I received in response was a message from one Lorraine McEwen, a customer service representative for Monarch Construction.

Lorraine wanted me to know the "flip side of the coin on customer service expectations," and wrote a long letter last weekend without the knowledge of her employer. When I asked for permission to convey the builder's side of the story as told by Lorraine, her bosses gave their consent.

Although Lorraine's job involves high-rise condominiums, Monarch's customer service philosophy seems to me to be a model for the industry.

"Customer expectations are getting higher and higher every day," Lorraine wrote.

Based on her experiences, many new-home owners fail to read the manuals that come with their new floors, carpets, bathroom fixtures and kitchen cupboards. Often, Monarch repairs or replaces these items out of goodwill, even though the damage was caused by owners' neglect.

"We understand you have put your life savings and confidence in us and we will do more than our best to help you live there happily and comfortably. We never run away. We have the best on-site service reps who go above and beyond the call of duty," Lorraine wrote. "We change light bulbs. We unplug toilets (due to owner's neglect). We call hydro and cable when the power goes out (even though the whole street is out) and somehow it is always the builder's fault.

"We chase the trades to fix one broken tile in a bathroom (due to owner's neglect). And, when this takes two weeks, we take the blame and the verbal abuse with letters and phone calls. What we also do is listen and help.

"So why must some people wait a year for service?" you ask. Unfortunately you must sometimes be patient. We have never ignored a phone call, a service request, or a letter from any owner. Sometimes repairs are held up by the trades. Sometimes it's weather-related and although we are a large builder we aren't as large as Mother Nature.

"I take great pride in the work I do. I not only feel that I work for the builder I work on behalf of the owner."

Words of wisdom for the entire industry.

Another response to the column was from Eric Wegler, a past-president of the Greater Toronto Home Builders' Association (GTHBA).

In the column, I took issue with a comment by current GTHBA president Sheldon Libfeld. In a recent New in Homes story, Libfeld said it is not unreasonable for a homebuyer to wait a year to have all the deficiencies in a home rectified.

Wegler told me he was surprised at my response that a year is too long and that the Ontario New Home Warranty Program (ONHWP) should get involved to initiate service quicker using its own resources.

"Your response," Wegler wrote, "was over-simplified to the extreme and will only cause to inflame a volatile situation with purchasers rather than educate them to the realities."

He argues that there is a shortage of skilled tradespeople who can build and service new homes quickly. Since the public pays the full cost of housing, the homebuyer would end up paying more money if ONHWP had to step in and complete outstanding items if the builder couldn't do it within my suggested 30-day time frame.

"I believe that you took Libfeld's comments out of context," Wegler added. "He was only stating the current process and trying to set expectations based on industry standards. I feel your comments should have been more balanced and you should seek to educate, not irritate."

The context of the Libfeld quotation, in a New in Homes feature story by Paul Lima, was that compared to jurisdictions where homebuyers "have to resort to litigation to remedy disputes, a year is not a long time to wait for peace of mind."

It's hard to disagree with the concept that waiting is better than suing. In fact, almost anything is better than suing.

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