



# PLUGGING in the *right lead*

Leads may pour in through new digital doors, but how are housebuilders handling the e-post? Most of it is left unopened. **RUPERT BATES** speaks to a company sorting the mail fast and efficiently.



**While the new homes industry is waking up – in a ‘heavy-eyed hippo after a mud wallowing rave’ way, rather than a ‘leap out of bed, 100 sit-ups, sing pouring the cornflakes’ way – to the value of digital marketing in driving web traffic and generating leads, it is still fast asleep when it comes to making the most of those leads.**

Are there really thousands of web browsers – the online equivalent of carpet traders – trawling the web for the sheer nosy, hell of it? Do they take a virtual tour simply as sleazy voyeurs hoping to catch the sales negotiator in the ensuite shower? Do they fill in registration forms for fun?

Well there are some deeply weird people on the web, so there are bound to be the usual time wasters, and worse, trying to distort figures.

But within the hits and, even more significantly, within those who have gone deeper into the registering interest process and handed over personal information, are some seriously well-qualified leads.

If I was a housebuilder, I would be sending chauffeured limousines (blacked out windows in case they pass a rival’s site en route) to these homes to whisk them round the new developments they have expressed interest in.

“You have updated your website, signed up to your favourite property portals and started a Twitter and Facebook page. But what happens to all the leads you get from these new sources?” says Malcolm Freeman, director of ContactBuilder, who has been in the housebuilding software business for 25 years.

“Are they consigned to last century’s mechanisms of fax, paper, or – the perennial show home favourite – the hotbox card index file?” asks Freeman.

ContactBuilder, founded last year, provides software solutions for housebuilders and is a web-based, fully integrated prospect marketing and customer relationship system.

“It allows your sales agents to communicate, track and manage all aspects of new home sales. It helps to qualify and follow up prospects, as well as running targeted marketing campaigns. New homes sales activities can be managed from any sales office or internet location,” said Freeman.

In boom times, the queue snaking out of the show home door was your lead management system. How long ago was it that half the new homes press releases were accompanied by photographs of buyers with sleeping bags and coffee flasks, camping outside show homes?

The modern buyer does not own a sleeping bag. He is in front of his laptop in his pyjamas and pity the dilatory soul who does not respond to his online request in real time. In the internet age the interested, polite, prospective purchaser can, if not replied to immediately, soon transpose into a cyber-bully, trashing the useless housebuilder on Facebook and Twitter. And if you really upset him, he will start his own website [www.ihateblogshomes.com](http://www.ihateblogshomes.com).

When it was all about face to face impressions in the show home, many sales negotiators were, and still are, guilty of judging books by their covers. The ‘tramp’ coming in from the cold for a coffee ▶



Danielle Mitton and Malcom Freeman of Contact Builder

and a chat may be an eccentric multi-millionaire. Likewise with an online registration, Mickey Mouse of Donald Duck Drive, Pluto could be a lottery winner with a Disney fixation.

"The speed of response should be seen as a great opportunity, not a challenge. It shows your prospective buyers your efficiency and professionalism. Seizing the opportunity will certainly give you a head start on any competitors, who may have to wait until head office opens on Monday, to send out a fax to a closed showhome, to initiate a phone call on Tuesday to leave a voicemail on the prospect's mobile," said Freeman.

"By this time the net savvy housebuilder has had a flurry of email, text and phone conversations with every hot prospect, arranged site visits and even secured a reservation."

The key, says Freeman, is to have one centralised lead management system, available at every sales location, handling both walk-in enquiries and web leads and simple to use.

"Take any other big ticket purchase, like a car. Every major car manufacturer operates a sophisticated database, containing every enquiry to make sure it is followed up by the relevant dealer with the requested information," said Danielle Mitton, director of ContactBuilder.

"The manufacturers can hold dealers to account for leads to ensure responses to expensive advertisements and promotions are not wasted."

The ContactBuilder software is Software as a Service (SaaS), hosted or cloud computing software. It does not have high capital costs, but has 24/7 availability anywhere with an internet connection.

Google has seen web-based software applications emerging across all industries, saving costs and improving efficiency. Cloud computing solutions let companies focus more time and

money on their business and less resources on internal IT systems.

"ContactBuilder allows you to import your web leads directly. If 50 per cent of your leads come via your website, then 50 per cent of your data entry is done directly by your prospects," said Mitton.

The software also gives the housebuilder real time management reporting systems and sales reports, analyses customer profiles and communicates with them through their preferred media.

"Like many housebuilders we plan to open several new sites this year and it is important we build and stimulate a solid pipeline of well qualified enquiries for them. The ContactBuilder software makes it easy for us to track and assess each potential buyer's interest and make sure we have sufficient prospects for each new release. Our site sales staff have taken to the system extremely well," said Natalie Flint, sales and marketing director of Rydon Homes.

"We also gain much better management information on our sales performance and are more easily able to determine where to direct our marketing spend for best results," added Flint.

Helen Todd of Stubbings Property Marketing says ContactBuilder allows them to deliver a stream of qualified, ready, willing and able buyers to their housebuilder customers and track every lead.

"Being designed specifically for housebuilders, we were able to implement ContactBuilder within days. Comprehensive reports of lead sources and buyer profiles within ContactBuilder provide us with an instant measure of the effectiveness of each marketing campaign," said Todd.

"The digital landscape has profoundly changed customer expectations of how they are served by everyone they buy from, whether it is books, holidays or cars," said Freeman.

"Yet so many housebuilders I visit are still using the same processes they have used for many years and some do not even have a computer on site. As a busy homebuyer I would expect to be able to communicate by email on what is the biggest purchase of my life."

Equally less can be more. While no or slow response to a sales enquiry frustrates, being bombarded by email, text and phone is equally infuriating, if not relevant or requested.

"An early expression of interest in a future site does not need, or welcome, a sudden flurry of intrusive hard sell communications. Longer-term enquires often just demand a trickle of communications every few months to keep them up to date and re-validate the lead," said Freeman.

"We have noticed particular interest from retirement homes developers. They often have long lead cycles with buyers planning a retirement move many months or even years ahead. It is useful to have a system that will prompt a phone call, or an email to build customer relationships over a longer period of time," said Mitton.

In the good times, there was always another customer next in line and ready to sign. In the bad times it is easy to blame the market and no budget to improve systems. The best builders have used the bad times to streamline and focus their business on maximising customer relationships, making maximum use of new technologies, without forgetting old-fashioned face-to-face courtesies.

Homebuyers are not hitting a button on new homes websites marked 'Add to Shopping Basket' just yet. [Sh](#)

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