

# NET ASSETS

Effective Online Sales Counselors  
Can Turn Web Site Visitors into  
Home-Tech Customers



## BEING THERE

WHAT "The Online Sales Counselor: Turning Internet Leads Into Sales"

WHO Blair Kunhen, owner, Lux Solutions

WHEN Tuesday, Jan. 20, 1–1:45 p.m.

WHERE Las Vegas Convention Center

**W**y Blair Kunhen

We all know that Internet leads are more plentiful than ever. But with heavy physical traffic and limited time, sales associates generally have little time to respond to them. Predictably, they're not converting many of these leads into buyers of your building or home-tech services. ■ Most homebuilders will admit they have trouble with any kind of follow-up, and unfortunately, the issue is most acute with Internet leads. In too many cases, sales people are simply doing nothing about leads, or following them up in ineffective ways. Consequently, they are not converting Internet traffic into acceptable sales results. ■ To have an effective Internet marketing strategy, you need a process that handles every lead as if it were a hot lead. That is where an online sales counselor program can help.

The November 2003 issue of *TecHome Builder* discussed the coming of age of the online sales counselor (OSC). The session "The Online Sales Counselor: Turning Internet Leads Into Sales" at the techHOMExpo will explore why progressive builders have made this move and what they are doing to make the position effective. For every success along the way, many builders take a misstep here and there. The advice that follows will help point you in the right direction.

## FINDING MR. RIGHT

Finding the right person for the job will make or break your program. The OSC is in a unique role and will probably work more independently than other salespeople in your company. In many cases, they work as if they are running their own business.

Consequently, the OSC must be self-directed. They will probably get little guidance or direction from project managers or sales managers. They will no doubt encounter problems and system limitations, so they must have strong problem-solving skills.

To drive traffic and sales, the OSC needs to establish a dialogue with potential customers. The first step is simple. They ask the prospect how they can be of help, and then the OSC provides service and assistance as needed. This brings tremendous added value to the homebuying experience, and distinguishes you from your competition.

The next step is to establish trust and to drive physical traffic into your communities. This should not be a "hard close" sales situation. The OSC must earn the right to qualify a lead by being responsive and helpful, so a strong customer-focus is a must. When prospective homebuyers and home-tech buyers appear, they need to be treated by the on-site sales agent as the highly valued potential customers they are.

## CAN WE TALK?

The OSC should also have strong verbal communication and writing skills. Since the OSC doesn't have the benefit of physical contact and the ability to assess non-verbal language with a potential customer, he or she must be an effective listener and a careful writer.

Professionally written template letters can help them in the task. But—and this is a key point—they will still want to customize and personalize responses. Remember, the goal is to turn generic leads into meaningful dialogues, and dialogues into physical visits. With strong written communication skills and a customer-service orientation, the OSC will build rapport and trust between your company and the homebuyer.

"To me, the right person is someone with a professional sales mentality who is aggressive and motivated," says Dana Greer, who served in an OSC capacity for nearly three years while at Kimball Hill Homes. "They are excited about using the technology and meticulous about the details."

If the OSC is to really add value to this portion of the homebuying experience, they need to know the home styles you build, the home-tech options you offer, and the communities you build in very well. It goes without saying that they must be ready to share detailed community information on schools and lifestyle attributes if they are going to help



homebuyers. It is part of the process of building rapport.

To find these key people, look internally and locally when you can. Remember, this individual should be spending time in the communities and getting to know the on-site salespeople. Their main role in helping you sell homes and home technology is getting clients to the sales office where selections are made.

Finally, the OSC must be very comfortable with office automation tools and have a high degree of comfort with the Internet. They don't need to be Web applications experts, but if they struggle with office automation tools, they are probably not the right person for the role.

## DO THE RIGHT THING

The entire process focuses on one thing, starting a dialogue with homebuyer prospects. Until you start a dialogue, it's very hard to convince the prospect to visit your community, buy a home, and consider home-tech options for the new house. There are many approaches to starting this dialogue, and what works with one prospect is not necessarily going to work with another. You must consider what they are buying, how they are using it, and how they came to your attention in the first place.

If the prospect came to you through your own Web site, this gives you a great leg up. They have already made a very purposeful step toward starting a dialogue. But if they came to you through a third-party Web site (e.g. [www.Homebuilder.com](http://www.Homebuilder.com)), cutting through the clutter is more difficult. Again, well-written direct-response email can make your process more effective.

The process needs to be more than a one- or two-shot canned response. You should tailor your process depending on the types of leads you get, and you should have an effective tickler system. Depending on your market and the segments targeted, your process could extend over months or even years.

## THE RIGHT STUFF

Obviously, the right people and the right processes are key.

■ An effective OSC must personalize responses and understand the communities in which you build.

## Doing It Right

To make the OSC program effective, you need to succeed in a few critical areas:

- The right person must be chosen for the role.
- They need an effective process for handling leads.
- They need the right tools to execute your process.
- The role has to be well integrated into the rest of your organization.

### What's wrong here?

The key factors leading to poor performance in handling Internet leads are:

- The leads go through a routing process before they are received by anyone responsible for follow-up, resulting in delayed responses.
- Responses are poorly executed, resulting in few leads turning into dialogue.
- Most builders have not implemented a structured follow-up plan that works.

But, if you are going to execute on the right process, you will also need the right tools. The broad requirements are fairly easy to understand. You need to aggregate your prospects, merge duplicate records, understand their status in the sales cycle (e.g., have they visited a community?), and be able to communicate with them.

Start by thinking through your lead-management approach. With smaller builders, you might be able to get by with a contact management tool such as Goldmine or ACT!

As your traffic grows and your process becomes more refined, move to a tool that can truly manage your leads and is integrated with your customer-management system. Ideally this will be integrated with your front-end sales tool and your third-party distribution partners such as Homebuilder, BuilderHomesite, and AmericanHome Guides.

There are a number of useful front-end sales tools, and some provide integration of Internet leads. An example of such a tool is EmpoweredBuilder. One thing all of the leading software tools do is aggregate leads from multiple sources, provide lead-management capabilities, and integrate the process with a customer-relationship management system.

"You put the customer information in just one time through the entire process, (right up to) delivery of the home," says Russ Allen, CEO of Empowered Builder. Alternatively, you may choose to create your own tool. For

larger builders this is a viable option because of the integration benefits.

One area that is often overlooked by builders when implementing a program is getting the OSC to work closely with the rest of the organization. The OSC can't be an isolated function that generates a qualified lead every so often. They need to know your communities and the on-site salespeople. "You'll love Jim, he really understands the schools. In fact, he moved there last year so his kids would be able to go there," sounds so much better than "Edison elementary is an exemplary rated school."

Think about how your organization will adopt and embrace this new process. Simply put, it needs to be communicated well and launched effectively.

"The quality of your Internet leads might not be the only thing your on-site salespeople are skeptical of at first," according to Greer.

When these steps are done properly, your salespeople will begin to treat the leads from your OSC in a very special way because they know they are pre-qualified and pre-sold on the community. And when these prospective buyers do buy, the hope will be that these Internet-savvy homebuyers will want to satisfy their technology thirst with structured wiring, surround sound and loads of other tech goodies. **THB**



## Where can we find the right home technology integrator?

- CEA's TechHome Referral Database is an online tool that allows builders to search for quality installers and dealers in their area.
- Search the comprehensive integrator database by Company Name, State or Zip Code.
- Read CEA's 10 QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE HIRING A TECHHOME INSTALLER --Asking the right questions is the key to a successful project!



It's a great way to find integrators qualified to work with your homebuilding company.

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