

# Stand Out From the Pack

## How to position yourself as an expert eco-builder

by Dina Lima and Michael Strong



## Introduction

Builders and remodelers seem to be in the same category as attorneys and auto mechanics—necessary, tolerated, but not especially embraced by society. That may be because in most places, the bar is set pretty low to become a builder or remodeler. Unfortunately a lot of underqualified folks get in to the trades. Many backed in to it because they couldn't think of anything else to do and the home building market was booming. The bad news is that we're often painted with the same broad brush as the worst of the worst are painted. The result is that we spend a lot of time battling dumb pricing and dumber workmanship while pursuing smart building practices.

The good news is that with such a low bar, it's pretty easy to set yourself apart from the pack. But why be satisfied with positioning yourself away from the worst, and among the 'good'? Why not position yourself as among the best? That's what this article is about. Green building is one way to deliver the next step in quality—because it comes with built-in advantages (like comfort and low utility bills) and quality assurances (in the form of green ratings). Most of these steps focus on what the best builders do anyway: communicate, differentiate, and manage projects in an organized manner. When you add best business practices to best building practices, you position yourself as the best.



Daniel Morrison, Managing Editor

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## How to position yourself as an expert eco-builder: 7 steps to success

Rapid changes in the residential construction industry are providing new profit and diversification opportunities for builders. Those who see and understand these opportunities can position themselves as experts in the field and provide exemplary service to gain an important edge in the marketplace.

Knowing where you stand in relation to your competition is paramount. Educating and communicating that position to prospective customers is equally important.

### 1. Identify your ideal customer

Do you have your specific customer base identified? Do you have a particular label for your customers, such as “first-time home buyers,” “baby boomers,” or “single moms”? If your marketing effort doesn’t speak directly to your ideal customer, it should, and it should stand apart from that of your competitors. Your message should leave customers hungry for more details, not be generic (and thus boring). If your catchphrase is something like, “I’m a green quality builder,” you’re not alone—there are thousands of other builders saying the same thing. You are just one of the pack!

Clearly defining your ideal customer will help you stand out from the pack. Not everyone is your customer, and it is impossible for you to be everyone’s builder. The clearer your message, the easier you make it for your ideal customers to find you in a crowded market. Be specific and you will attract prospects who identify with your message. You want them to say, “Hey, that’s me!” or “That’s not me, but it sure sounds like my friend John!” This way, they may become your customer or refer you to others.

The key is to identify your market niche first. Second, work up your message to express the essence of the value you offer to that ideal customer, such as “Helping first-time homebuyers build their dream home” or “Helping affluent professionals build their one-of-a-kind castle.” Use this message everywhere to capture the attention of ideal customers who are looking for their ideal builder—you!

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## 2. Deliver great value

Make it easy for customers to put you on a pedestal. Focus on the baseline specifications that will resonate with your ideal customer. Create a concise and easy-to-read list of the construction specifications, highlighting the benefits that your ideal customer wants. This is why it is important to understand your ideal customer—you cannot tailor information to everyone and once you know whom to focus on, the rest gets easy.

Review your specs and make sure they provide value relative to your competition. For example, radiant-barrier roof decking is great, but if it is a common building practice in your market, consider other differentiators.

### Green Certifications

There are a few major national green rating systems and many local and regional ones. For information on choosing a rating system, click the links below or go to [GreenBuildingAdvisor.com](http://GreenBuildingAdvisor.com).

#### Green Ratings Overview

[www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/ratings](http://www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/ratings)

Options for selecting a green rating system, from the major programs below:

- National Green Building Standard  
[www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/ngbs](http://www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/ngbs)
- LEED for Homes  
[www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/leed](http://www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/leed)
- Environments for Living  
[www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/efl](http://www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/efl)
- Local Green Building Programs  
[www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/local](http://www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/local)

Keep your specifications list concise. Go through every one to make sure it belongs on the list. A list of 20 specifications that makes you the world's greatest builder will be hard for any prospect (or salesperson) to remember. Condense your checklist to five to eight "Super Specs."

Study what others are doing to distinguish themselves from the rest of the builders. Pulte Homes, for example, installs displays in its model homes that help homebuyers understand the value of a high-performance home ([www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/pulte-vegas](http://www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/pulte-vegas)). Because your prospects may not fully understand the benefits of your baseline specifications, don't just list features; explain the benefits.

Green certifications are important and valuable specifications for homes you build or remodel. Check with your local homebuilders association to see what green building programs are available in your area. Study the National Green Building Standard

created by the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) and the International Code Council (ICC). Educating your prospects on any green building programs that you employ will help them further appreciate the benefits you offer.

Many builders do not realize that they are already exceeding minimum standards for green homes. Find a certification program that fits your construction practices, and get your homes certified. Don't forget to include any professional designations you may have earned, such as NAHB's Certified Green Professional (CGP).

This shows you have gone through training and that you stay abreast of green building practices. Magnify the value of the things you put into your homes and the efforts you personally make to keep up with your professional education.

### 3. Listen to your customers

Be proactive in answering commonly asked questions. Consider having a “Frequently Asked Questions” section on your website—and on printed material as well to hand out to walk-ins at your model homes. These questions should clarify inquiries on green building practices, green products, indoor environmental quality, and construction processes. Don’t eschew elementary questions; if the question were not important, it wouldn’t be asked.

**A well-prepared homeowner manual should be a foundation of your customer service approach.**

Don’t assume that homebuyers already understand terms like “tankless water heater,” “radiant barrier,” “high-performance insulation,” “sustainable,” and for goodness’ sake, “green”! Define these and all other technical terms on your website, in your homeowner manual, and in your contract. Hire a copywriter to translate your words into consumer-friendly language if necessary. This small investment could be well worth it! Better yet, use a trusted third-party resource, such as [GreenBuildingAdvisor.com](http://GreenBuildingAdvisor.com), for these definitions and explanations.

For questions that fall outside the realm of FAQs, make your contact information clear and easy to find. Give customers the appropriate email address for construction questions and service requests after move-in; these are most likely two different addresses (project superintendent and service desk). Getting the email address right will get them answers more quickly. When is the best time to set the boundaries and expectations in any relationship, business or otherwise? You guessed it—at the beginning.

### 4. Get organized with a homeowner manual

A well-prepared homeowner manual should be the foundation of your customer service approach. The manual should educate the customer about what activities and services to expect from pre-construction to post-construction—yes, preconstruction to post-construction. This is a communication tool for the whole process, not just for after occupancy. Everyone else treats a homeowner manual like a “How to Use This House” document, when in fact its benefits can extend much further. Seize the opportunity to stand out from the pack by educating your customers

throughout the construction process by integrating the homeowner manual into the homebuying experience. Introduce it up front during the sales process, and refer to it frequently during the course of planning and construction.

Take sufficient time to walk customers through the manual in the first place: explain each section, answer their questions, and address their concerns from the start. Do you know how many thousands of headaches, misunderstandings, and unnecessary phone calls (during your kid's birthday party) this could save you and your customers?

## Time-Saving Tools

Getting the team on the same page and staying there is crucial to the success of green home building because the details matter. A couple of tools at [GreenBuildingAdvisor.com](http://GreenBuildingAdvisor.com) can help:

### Green Primer: 20 Questions

[www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/primer](http://www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/primer)

This series of articles can answer a customer's basic questions about green building. Time that you don't spend explaining the basics is time you can spend planning the process.

### My GBA

[www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/my-gba](http://www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/my-gba)

A content management tool. Share construction details, informational articles, *GreenSpec* product listings, and a custom strategy checklist with members of your green building team.

Ask customers to bring the manual to all meetings during construction so that they can integrate any additional information provided during the meetings. This makes it a living document for them and acquaints them first-hand with the contents. Offering more information during these meetings will further emphasize the importance of the manual. Note: have your legal advisor review your manual—this small investment could mean extra protection for you.

## 5. Update your website

Homebuyers today surf the Internet for everything before they buy. Your website is the face of your business. Here are a few vital topics your website should address: what you want potential buyers to do first when they land on your homepage; what you do; who you are; and how to contact you.

The question of what you want potential customers to do first when they land on your homepage is seldom addressed by websites. But think about it: What do you want people to do when they find your website? Does the landing page provide direction to your visitors? Does it answer questions as they occur to visitors? Your website needs to capture your customers' interest in the first couple of seconds.

Most websites do not direct the visitors on how to navigate through the site, let alone express clearly and concisely what the company does, who its clients are, and what benefits those clients receive. This is where identifying your 'ideal' customer comes in. Because you know exactly who your customers are, and you have a direct message that will resonate with them, you should be able

**Exhibit your knowledge through social media sites with articles, photos, and videos of your projects.**

to answer that first question or two before they occur to your customers. Make your website informative, content-rich, and easy to navigate.

The “What We Do” section should be clear and to the point. Here you should include pictures of the features and benefits that your homes offer.

Here’s a quick tip on websites: Don’t build a website yourself—an amateur website will look amateur. Hire a pro to do it; they can make it appealing and user-friendly. Keep it simple. Think quality over quantity.

## 6. Embrace technology

Buyers of green products are savvy and connected through online social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Position yourself as an expert in your market niche, and exhibit your knowledge through these social media sites with articles, photos, and videos of your projects. Use Twitter to market open houses, Realtor workshops, and informational consumer seminars offered at your model home or jobsite. Use LinkedIn to connect with other professionals in your industry. You never know whom they are connected to and how your relationship to them could result in a sale.

Consider blogging—a blog is a great way for prospects to get to know you better and learn about current projects. They can see firsthand how your construction process unfolds and how well you work with your customers. Every time you blog, add a tweet on your Twitter page with a link back to your blog. Link between your website and blog as well. Webinars, live or recorded, can be posted on YouTube almost effortlessly.

## 7. Stay connected with your customers

Quality builders listen to their customers and stay engaged with them. They hear their customers’ needs, questions, and concerns and respond to questions promptly.

Have you ever forgotten about a restaurant because you had lost your “top of the mind” presence about your positive experience? Thousands of businesses (the pack!) fail to maintain relationships with past clients. Harvest emails, inquiries, and accolades from customers that you have collected over the years. These are truly “word of mouth”!

Find innovative ways to capture the email addresses of new visitors to your website, and continue to build your database. Offer valuable information or a report at no cost.

For example, when customers visit your website you could invite them to receive an instant free report or article on a green home topic. Give your free report or article an appealing name, such as

“11 Secrets of Sustainable Homes That Other Builders Don’t Know” or “41 Easy Ways to Green Your Kitchen.” When the visitors click on that link, they should be prompted to enter their name and email address. Resist the temptation to ask them for more—many people are uncomfortable giving out much personal information online.

Now that you have an email database, use it! Send out periodic newsletters or updates to your contacts. Include topics of general interest apart from marketing your green homes. Emphasize things that could help them or are interesting to them. In this manner, you may start to gain ground in their minds as a trusted advisor.

Include invitations to green workshops that you may be offering. This type of newsletter update is inviting rather than threatening. Best of all, there is less chance of them relegating your email to the junk mailbox. Include an invitation to follow you on Twitter or Facebook, or to check out a recent article on your blog. Send your updates consistently but not too often—monthly or bi-monthly.

Why bother trying to stand out from the pack?  
Because your competitors already are!

## More on Marketing

Entries to the Business Advisor Blog at [GreenBuildingAdvisor.com](http://GreenBuildingAdvisor.com):

How to Identify Your Ideal Customer  
[www.livinggreeninstitute.com/resources/how-to-identify-your-ideal-customer/](http://www.livinggreeninstitute.com/resources/how-to-identify-your-ideal-customer/)

Create Your Killer Marketing Message  
[www.livinggreeninstitute.com/resources/how-to-identify-your-ideal-customer/](http://www.livinggreeninstitute.com/resources/how-to-identify-your-ideal-customer/)

Doing Business in the Green World  
[www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/doing-business](http://www.greenbuildingadvisor.com/doing-business)





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