

Smart selection

Help homeowners make informed roofing decisions

by James Baker

Homeowners throughout the U.S. likely can agree the 2010-11 winter was one of the worst in recent memory. Snow piled up from New York to Dallas with the Northeast experiencing brutal storms weekly and sometimes daily. The extreme weather events have left many roof systems needing repair or replacement.

Typically, roof system replacement is a nondiscretionary budget item. Homeowners do not have much choice: Replace their aging or storm-damaged roofs or face major consequences. This is a primary reason why residential reroofing remains a viable profession as demand for new home construction remains stagnant in many parts of the U.S.

Furthermore, with resale home prices still low, many homeowners are being forced to hold on to their current properties longer than they intended and are facing decisions on capital costs, such as reroofing, which they might otherwise have left for the next owner to make.

Although many homeowners contact you out of necessity, to prosper you must present them with a high level of service. You must compete for individual homeowner business on a job-by-job basis; listen to homeowners and understand their wants and needs; and be an expert at identifying, recommending and delivering products to satisfy those requirements.

In the current competitive market, when you think of yourself as a consultant first, you will be more likely to earn homeowners' trust and roofing jobs. Homeowners should believe they can trust you to explain the ins and outs of their roof systems, which can add protection, beauty and value to their homes—often their largest investments.

Rather than thinking of your role in a more traditional sense, you should think of yourself playing three roles—professor, pundit and protector. By playing all three roles well, you can build your company's reputation for service, win referrals, and continue to grow and prosper.

The professor

Your first responsibility to homeowners is to ensure they possess the information needed to make informed decisions. For most homeowners, a replacement roof is a one-time purchase. And in most cases, homeowners did not select the original roof system when they bought the house and are not knowledgeable about current roofing options. When faced with a bewildering array of choices and little knowledge of what they're selecting, homeowners likely will turn to you for help.

Importantly, many homeowners may be unaware of the vast changes that have taken place in the residential roofing industry during the past decade.

"They may know next to nothing about architectural and designer shingles," says Reed Hitchcock, executive vice president of the Asphalt Roofing Manufacturers Association (ARMA). "They may misunderstand basic terms such as composite, laminate and dimensional shingles. They almost certainly have not read or don't understand the significance of ASTM International performance standards relating to these shingle types. This is where professional contractors can step in and help homeowners make the best decisions for their homes."

Homeowners sometimes are partially informed about roofing options through consumer magazines and Internet sources, which appear to educate consumers about product offerings but may not come from credible sources.

Consumers typically have enough knowledge to ask some pertinent questions but often receive out-of-date or even false information, resulting in misconceptions. Many mass media, consumer-oriented sources provide incomplete information about the differences among products. Those sources may not explain particular product benefits or indicate best choices for a particular style of home or climate.

This situation presents an excellent

opportunity for you to step into a consultant's role, allowing customers to benefit from your professional experience. You can refer inquiring homeowners to ARMA's website, www.asphaltroofing.org, for answers to frequently asked questions about steep-slope roof systems, and NRCA's website, www.nrca.net, for additional information for consumers. You also can provide homeowners a glossary of basic roofing terms to help overcome the language barrier. Another helpful tactic is to show homeowners product samples and explain in simple terms the "good, better, best" tiers available.

During the past decade, the competitive marketplace has resulted in production of shingles incorporating remarkable technology. There are many innovations that directly can benefit homeowners, and those options must be presented and explained to them.

Specifically, shingles may be tailored to a homeowner's climate and expectations. If a home is located in a windy area, for example, there are shingles designed to withstand ASTM wind-uplift requirements. If a homeowner has concerns about damage from hail, impact-resistant shingles can provide extra protection. Consumers may mistake thickness for impact resistance, and it may be necessary to explain what really makes a shingle impact resistant (fiberglass scrim or SBS polymer-modified bitumen).

Some shingles also are made with special additives that inhibit algae growth in damp climates or on shaded roofs.

Light-colored shingles with higher solar reflectivity may be preferred in the Sun Belt or certain parts of California. In warm climates, cool roofs reduce the transfer of heat from the sun's rays into homes by reflecting the rays back into the atmosphere, lowering air-conditioning costs. There is a great deal of information regarding cool roofing as an environmentally friendly option, one with which more homeowners are becoming familiar and viewing as

significant during their decision-making processes.

Ventilation is another area where your knowledge will be appreciated and can help you avoid callbacks. Achieving the right balance between climate, roof design, insulation and attic ventilation can positively affect asphalt shingles' longevity.

One way proper ventilation can help extend a roof system's life span is by reducing moisture common in poorly ventilated roof systems. The attic also stays cooler, reducing the load on air-conditioning units, which is evidenced by lower energy bills. Homeowners typically don't know much about ventilation, so take time to walk them through the system.

When you can assure homeowners you are employing the best practices and helping them select the best products for particular home designs and climate conditions, you will build a good reputation and receive more referrals.

The pundit

The next important decision for homeowners involves aesthetics, which presents an opportunity for you to step into a new role as exterior design consultant.

Homeowners reroof not only in response to weather events but also to improve their homes' appearance. Many are unaware of the vast selection of roofing materials available and rely heavily on advice from professional roofing contractors, distributors and dealers when considering the many roof system choices. A typical homeowner will want to explore many shingle styles, textures and colors before making a final choice.

The shadow patterns of architectural shingles, shingle shape, and matching of shingles to exterior walls and trim are important considerations. In addition, the way light reflects off a roof from dawn to dusk throughout all four seasons and under different cloud conditions can be important.

Homeowners' aesthetic considerations should not be taken lightly. After all, choosing a roof system is not the same as matching a shirt and tie. The latter easily can be corrected; however, in the case of a new roof system, homeowners may have to live with their decisions for many years.

It can be argued the roof is the most visible, distinguishing part of a home. Many home shoppers might even make a decision about purchasing a home based solely on how the home looks from the curb. High-end asphalt roofing products can add curb appeal to a home's exterior and significantly affect whether a home shopper will consider a closer look. For this reason, it's wise to consider all available options for roof style and design, and you can help enlighten homeowners about those options.

Homeowners may not have an expert eye for design, but you can provide them with enough information to make an informed decision. Many ARMA members provide online design tools that allow homeowners to match shingle styles and colors with home design, including the exterior wall type and color.

Beyond computer simulation or providing shingle samples, you can show prospective customers recently reroofed homes in the same neighborhood, emphasizing attractive color combinations. This is a great way to demonstrate the visual effects of architectural shingles.

Although architectural shingles once were reserved for luxury residences, a majority of shingles currently sold are architectural shingles. Prospective customers initially may be driven by the immediate functional need for a new roof system, but all except the most price-sensitive consumers will express a desire for a makeover once they are familiar with the affordable options available to them.

The current up-sell is not from three-tab shingles to architectural shingles but rather from architectural shingles to

designer shingles. Designer shingles and architectural shingles mimic other types of roofing products, such as slate and cedar shake, which give roofs a more distinctive look.

Additionally, designer shingles may provide varying performance levels that sometimes are greater than those provided by typical three-tab or standard architectural shingles; however, one always should check manufacturers' specifications for more information.

Because labor is the most significant component of reroofing, many homeowners are willing to spend a little more for affordable asphalt designer shingles with the profile and appearance of wood shakes or slate.

The protector

The final role you should play is that of benevolent protector. Although this may sound a bit archaic, it is vital. Trust is the basis for building a good reputation and relationship with customers; homeowners want to be able to trust their roofing contractors for the most critical component of their homes.

Also, now more than ever, many homeowners are trying to make environmentally friendly decisions. They want their roofing contractors to make environmentally conscious decisions, as well. You can build and reinforce trust with homeowners by fully protecting their homes while keeping the green factor in mind.

From an environmental standpoint, the best roof system is the longest-lasting roof system. Of course, this means a roof system should be installed to maximize shingles' life. The longer a roof system lasts, the less energy is wasted installing a new roof system and less landfill waste is generated through tear-off of the old roof system.

You also can help maximize roof system longevity by choosing a suitable underlayment. There is a growing understanding

that using new types of self-adhering or synthetic underlayments as a secondary water barrier adds value to roof systems throughout the U.S.

In some areas, the International Residential Code and International Building Code require the application of self-adhering underlayment along roof eaves to prevent damage from ice dams.

In cold climates, ice dams can form along an eave edge, increasing the chance of a roof leak and damage to gutters. Excess moisture also can lead to moisture buildup in the insulation, which can lessen the insulating value over time and even lead to mold buildup in the attic.

In addition, complete coverage of a residential building with a secondary water barrier adds value. No matter what type of asphalt shingles are installed, a self-adhering underlayment ensures easy installation and offers an extra layer of protection generally at a nominal increase in the overall installation cost.

Always ensure proper roof assembly ventilation when applying such a product over the entire roof.

ARMA has formed a sustainability committee to further research environmental issues, such as recycled content and shingle recycling. Many asphalt shingle roof systems contain recycled content and use less energy during their manufacture than other types of roof systems. Shingles may be shipped in recyclable packaging, and many use locally available raw materials. Given a choice, many homeowners will opt for products made from recycled materials; you can find out the recycled content of various products from their manufacturers and pass this information to homeowners.

Participating in a shingle recycling program also can enhance your reputation with homeowners; visit www.shinglerecycling.org for more information.

Considering energy costs in many facets, energy efficiency is an issue that is relevant for homeowners. You can

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help your customers by being informed about rebates and tax credits for energy efficiency in states where you perform work. Are there rebates available for installing energy-efficient insulation, attic ventilation or shingles with high solar reflectance?

Increased interest in energy efficiency presents an opportunity for you to expand your business. When you inspect a roof system, enter the attic; take a few extra minutes to assess whether the attic is properly insulated, and discuss with homeowners the benefits of increasing or installing insulation. Discuss how an insulated attic works with a roof system and potential savings in the homeowners' monthly heating and cooling bills. The Department of Energy estimates 80 million homes in the U.S. have insufficient insulation in their attics. This is an

opportunity for you to provide added value to customers, increasing the take-home revenue per job by providing more service.

Looking into the near future, photovoltaic (PV) systems are blossoming into an important roof-related technology and are expected to be more readily available for installation on residential roofs within the next five years. Be ready to answer customer questions about when these new technologies will become practical.

Homeowners will appreciate your knowledge regarding the latest developments in energy efficiency and solar technology. Earning their trust eases their selection process, and they may show their gratitude with future referrals.

No place like home

Nothing says "There's no place like home" like a home's exterior. Current residential roof systems with modern designer shingles are affordable and aesthetically pleasing. Some homeowners or even communities may be amenable to roof makeovers to help avoid decay and preserve the value of their properties. Asphalt shingles are the most widely used roof covering for new home construction and reroofing, installed on four out of every five homes in the U.S., according to a shingle forecast by St. Paul, Minn.-based 3M.

A properly designed and maintained residential roof system constructed with premium underlayment, adequate insulation, proper ventilation, and architectural- or designer-grade asphalt shingles provides a level of permanence, protection and energy efficiency unmatched by previous generations of residential roof systems.

By aggressively promoting reroofing and embracing your expanded roles, you can weather these austere times and emerge stronger and more knowledgeable of your profession. 🌱 🌿 🌻

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