

A Reprint from *Tierra Grande*, the Real Estate Center Journal

Sell Her,  
Sell the House

# Designing for Women

By Shirley E. Bovey

**M**ost homes are sold to couples, but the woman has the primary influence on the buying decision. She makes the decision 85 percent of the time.

What does this major market segment want in a home?

At their 1995 show in Houston, the National Association of Homebuilders (NAHB) offered some answers based on focus groups composed of women homebuyers, a Harvard University housing study and surveys conducted by firms such as Yankelovitch.

Four professional women talked about "Design and Merchandising for Women Buyers" during a panel focused on how some developers and designers have used this information to create houses and products that respond to women homebuyers' specific input.

Knowing what this powerful economic segment desires better equips the real estate sales professional for customer-matched selling.

Here's how some builders and designers have incorporated women's demands and desires into today's homes:

## Market Research

- Women's top five design concerns: first, an open kitchen-family room; second, a master suite retreat space, including a bath and sitting area; third, a home office or multi-functional room; fourth, dramatic formal areas; and fifth, elegant elevations.

- After extensive market research, Ryland Homes in Houston designed 15 new plans reflecting women's dream homes; sales increased by 22 percent in one year, compared to 2 percent across the board in Houston.
- Some 40 million people headquarter their careers at home; "flex space" or "smart space" allows the same house plan to be adapted to different buyer's needs for customer-matched selling. This is not the same space as the retreat area.
- A dramatic entry or foyer, a formal space for entertaining and well-designed external elevations communicate *status symbol*, part of a home's value for today's buyers.
- NIKEs are here—"no income kids with education" are moving back home; parents preserve their privacy with a second master bedroom suite. Other buyers need a second suite for elderly parents who are also moving in.

## Design

- The command-center kitchen forms part of the great room—a family room, breakfast nook and kitchen combination. Work areas oriented toward the media center or fireplace offer a pleasant view. Women want to use this space for both private festivities and formal entertaining.
- Wrapping the breakfast room in glass brings light into the kitchen; a dark kitchen is a negative in home design.

- His/her closets, his/her vanities and oversized showers with dual showerheads accommodate two-career families.
- A master bath zoned with a "getting-to-work triangle" allows two adults efficient use of the same space when grooming for the office concurrently.

## Merchandising

- The most important room in the house in the homebuying decision? The kitchen.
- Black, one of the fastest growing decorator colors for kitchens, ranks as the number three choice for countertops.
- Appliances are becoming invisible; one manufacturer has a refrigerator cabinet on the market, setting a new standard for appliances. (The refrigerator is the most-used appliance in the home.)
- Color consistency in interior decor prevents an emotional roller coaster ride.
- Lower maintenance products preferred—women who can afford them will pay more for less drudgery.
- The lighting trend is toward more natural lighting; uncovered windows let sunlight bathe the rooms. Under- and over-counter lights are replacing fluorescent boxes.
- More money is spent on furnishing the master suite than any other room; second is the dining room.
- Dining rooms are a must, but size is less important than artful execution of detailing.

- The "Imaginarium," one builder's name for the children's play area, is uncarpeted because flat floor coverings work best under most toys. Durability is an important concern of women homebuyers.

## Sales

- The cost is significant to get a customer in the broker's door, but product is not the first

thing to talk about; real estate professionals are selling a lifestyle, not a product.

- The gender gap has closed; the female buyer has her own checkbook. For the 25-to-54 age group, chances are seven in ten that the woman holds down a job.
- Single women buy more than half the suburban houses priced from \$70,000 to \$120,000.

- A salesperson has only eight minutes to interest the buyer. ☐

Source: National Association of Home Builders and Real Estate Center at Texas A&M University.

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