

# How We S'posed t' Get Paid fer This Green Stuff?

It's not an UPGRADE; It's what makes us different from the competition



By [Michael Chandler](#) | May 6, 2009



"Marketing is not a four letter word"

Image Credit: Leigh Scott, HBA-DOC

I teach the NAHB Certified Green Practitioner class, and it's a wonderful gang of skeptics and beleaguered tough guys I'm faced with every time. These guys don't sign up for the class until they're ready and eager to learn, they want to build tighter, healthier, more durable and efficient homes. But they are convinced that the customer isn't ready to pay for it. The bottom line is, they aren't ready to sell it, and if they can't get the contract signed at a price that supports the effort of stepping up to Certified Green building practices, this whole movement is dead in the water.

There are two themes at work here. First, **green building is not an upgrade, it's a differentiator**. To a certain extent, "green" is just a handle that we put on durable energy- and indoor-air-quality—focused building. If you are a conscientious builder, you are probably pretty close to building green already. So when builders are just getting started on green certification, I

encourage them NOT to try to build the next house green before finding out just how close to green the last house was.

We need to stop dancing around the discussion that you don't want to have with our customer. "I can build you the very worst-performing, D-minus type, barely legal home (code minimum), or I can go green, but green will be more expensive." We're not going to have that conversation—you wouldn't be reading this unless you're already building a much better-than-code home because **both you and your customers demand it.**

So when you run the last house you built through the on-line calculator at [www.nahbgreen.org](http://www.nahbgreen.org), you are going to find out that, but for a few cans of low-VOC paint, having a pizza lunch to get all the trades together to go over the plans before construction, a legitimate Manual J calculation from your HVAC guy and some CRI labeled carpet, you could have certified that last house Green and Energy Star just for the cost of the report cards. And the only thing that costs extra out of all that was the pizza, the Manual J and the report card.

Green isn't an *upgrade* — it's the way quality builders build houses. We would no more offer our customers discounts for letting us build to the lowest standard allowable by law than we would charge extra for building a house good enough to let us sleep well at night. Green-building certification is simply a way to put a meaningful number on just how well-built a home really is under the granite countertops and the fancy trim details. It's what **differentiates** the good builders from the mediocre ones.

Back to the class. We had an experienced green builder there who was just banging his head against the wall. "I know," he says, "but I talk to them about the HERS ratings and the blower door numbers and ERVs and low VOC everything we use, and their eyes just glaze right over." This guy was so passionate and so frustrated. And I can relate; I'm a shelter nerd too — I think energy-recovery ventilators are just fascinating. My customers find this amusing, I think.

The regional marketing director from the giant national building company had the answer that makes the second theme for this story. "**You're trying to sell the features, when what they are interested in are the benefits.**" Customers don't really care *what you do* to make the house better than the one across the street; they care that you are conscientious enough to build them a home that uses less energy, is more comfortable, has cleaner

indoor air, conserves water in times of drought, is more durable, and requires less maintenance on the weekends.

This is what “green” means to them. It helps if it gives them a warm and fuzzy feeling when they talk about how green their house is at the family reunion and if it looks like it will hold its resale value better than the energy hog across the street with the smelly carpet. But it’s about the *benefits to their family*, not the methods you employed to achieve them, and it’s the same for the small custom builder, the small production builder, and the national giant. So we’re not selling green features, we’re selling differentiation and benefits. As green builders, we don’t just say we’re conscientious about the details, we *prove* it with third-party testing through Energy Star and a Green Building Certification program. We bring value through our green building systems and products, which have measurable benefits for the family that will live in this house.

Green building is not an *upgrade* (from brown to green); it is what *differentiates* your company from those who don’t care enough to build green. The customers don’t care about what you do to make their house green, they care about how living in a green house will benefit their family.

## One Comment

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**[Carl Seville](#)** | May 06, 2009 02:37pm | [#1](#)

### **Gettin paid**

Michael - You summarized it best in this line "it's the way quality builders build houses". The most effective way I have explained the difference to people to date is using a car comparison. They can drive a Yugo, a Chevy, a Toyota, or a Lexus (or pick your personal favorites). Their homes are equivalent - basic barely code or lower is the Yugo, slightly above that is a Chevy, and so on. If they want to live in a piece of crap they are welcome to, but competent builders need to set their minimum standard at something above the Yugo and let their clients upgrade from there.