



Editor's Message

Framing Up the Wall Panel Market

by Don Groom

Involving builders and framers early on could be your key to selling wall panels in a resistant market.

When it comes to wall panels, most component manufacturers wonder: "Is there a demand for wall panels in my market, and if so, how do I ensure they work within my business structure?" Whether or not your company currently offers wall panels, they are, and will continue to be, a major part of the overall component growth in our industry. Because they are still new to markets in many parts of the country, wall panels are the next frontier in component construction, much like roof trusses were four and five decades ago.

Wall panels are a very market driven component; it only makes sense to commit the time and effort to produce them if there is a steady and reliable demand in the marketplace. Component manufacturers can also do a great deal to bolster demand in their market by reaching out to builders and framers and convincing them that component construction is a win-win for all involved. The outlook has been good lately and many markets across the U.S. are poised for the introduction or the increased use of wall panels. The strong housing starts we continue to see—especially in multi-family markets—are proof that builders are busy and focused on the



The 1996 Framing the American Dream® project helped to illustrate the many benefits of building with wall panels (see list on page 8).

at a glance

- A little education can go a long way in showing framers the overall time, labor and material savings of wall panels.
- In order to make wall panels cost effective, the builder's framer has to buy-in to the concept.
- It's true, wall panels may not be a fit in every market, but there are many markets throughout the U.S. that have yet to realize the full potential of these components.

value of time. Compared to stick framing, wall panels offer builders the opportunity to increase productivity and complete more projects using fewer framing crews.

Whether a company will succeed with wall panels depends on many factors. Do the builders and framers in the field truly understand the benefits of wall panel framing, and are they willing to work "outside the box" of stick framing? A little education can go a long way in showing framers the overall time, labor and material savings of wall panels. WTCA's *Framing the American Dream*® brochure compares component construction to stick framing and illustrates many of the benefits of wall panels. This 1996 project sponsored by WTCA, in cooperation with the Building Systems Council of the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), constructed two identical house plans side by side using

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two different methods—one stick built and the other constructed with wood roof and floor trusses and wall panels—and the results are astounding.

The results from the project clearly show that, when wall panels and stick framing go head to head, wall panels:

- Offer better utilization of material.
- Reduce man-hours required to frame a structure.
- Optimize scrap utilization.
- Decrease the likelihood of theft at the jobsite.
- Save money in waste removal.

Educating customers may sell them on the idea of wall panels, but they won't sign on the dotted line unless they see true all-around value. In order to make wall panels cost effective, the builder's framer has to buy into the concept. In other words, they need to be willing to offer a framing package discount for the set time efficiencies that go along with wall panelization. They have to fully understand that they will win, the builder will win and the component manufacturer will win. One of the best ways to help customers transition from stick framing to wall panels is to bring the builder and the builder's framer to the table at the very beginning of a project. Establishing relationships early in a project and getting on the same page can be invaluable in winning over builders and framers on the benefits of component construction and preventing costly backcharges.

Once they decide to use wall panels, customers need guidance and training to understand how component construction is installed on site. Component manufacturers can do a lot to sell the benefits of wall panels, not just in theory, but out in the field by making component construction an efficient and profitable choice for customers. Customer service can go a long way in building a package of value around the wall panel business that includes having a knowledgeable sales staff, providing easy-to-read dimensions on the field installation drawings, and by providing installation efficiencies such as stacking components on the truck in the order they will be used at the jobsite. Building strong relationships is a sure-fire way to help builders succeed with wall panels.

It's true, wall panels may not be a fit in every market, but there are many markets throughout the U.S. that have yet to realize the full potential of these components. The need for wall panels is out there. Component manufacturers have the power to break into these markets and, through education and unbeatable customer service, create an environment where wall panel business can flourish. **SBC**

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STRUCTURAL BUILDING COMPONENTS™

THE FUTURE OF FRAMING

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