



Whole House Services Meet Builder Needs, Increase CM Profits

by Steve Shrader

A few years ago the BCMC show was swamped with a trendy type of saw, the single-bladed linear saw. Last year (August 2005), I wrote an article about the evolution of the saw and the advancement of servo technology. There was a lot of debate among component manufacturers when these saws came out:

- "Are single bladed saws really needed?"
- "Do we really need to bevel truss parts?"
- "Where do these saws fit in?"
- "Is the conventional component saw going to become obsolete?"

Well, the market spoke and the industry seemed to recognize the value in linear saws. We have learned a lot about the flexibility of the saw from manufacturers in the past few years. Single-bladed saws have been used to cut onsie-tuosie parts, while some are cutting everything under 3'10". Linear saws have been purchased to cut wall components, truss components or BOTH! We even have customers using linear saws to cut EWP (engineered wood product) components.

While a lot of linear saws have been implemented, contrary to popular belief, the dust still has not completely settled. In the last year I have been noticing a new trend. It's a trend that reflects a shift in market demands. And it's a trend I think CMs could stand to profit from.

Let's face the reality that is influencing the shift I'm seeing. The truth is that the construction economy is in another slowdown. It seems like every day we hear more bad news from housing starts perspective. As I write this, the recent August starts reflected the greatest decline in 40 months. In these markets the industry gets creative in order to remain competitive. I'm already witnessing manufacturers who are harnessing creativity thanks to equipment technology.

Economics & New Customer Demands

I was recently part of a panel that was interviewed for an article about the trends in the industry from an equipment supplier's perspective. The overall theme was that lumber yards and dealers have hit bottom on acceptable margins in lumber prices. Many of you are also probably at rock bottom material prices just to stay competitive. Lumber yards and dealers are helping customers find more efficient installation, fewer callbacks, as well as materials handling efficiencies in the factory and even labor savings from turnkey framing. Your customers are shopping for the component manufacturer that offers more whole house solutions.

But economics isn't the only driver at play. As a part of this industry, you need to know that homebuyers are becoming smarter, more savvy about their new home purchases in terms of the materials used within it as well as the process by which it is built. They've done their research and know which building materials they want and where they want them. Examples of what they're asking:

- "Is it GREEN?"
- "Can we use more engineered lumber products?"
- "Are the correct components being used?"
- "Is that hole in the correct location?"

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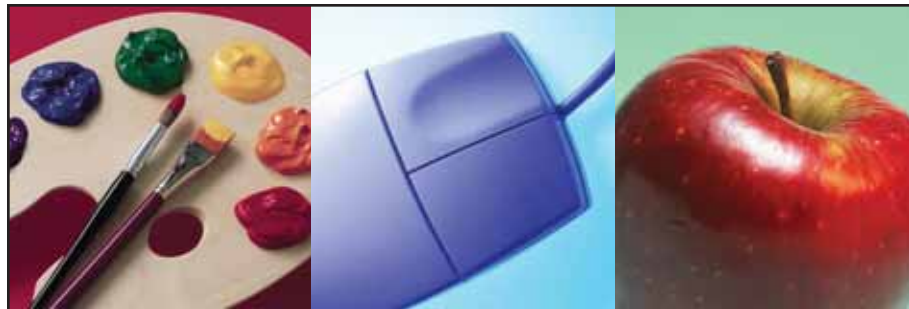
With a slightly gloomy economic picture and evolving customer needs, linear saws offer flexibility for manufacturers.

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Whole House Services...

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Dealers and builders have to respond to these questions, which in turn means that you should be able to respond. Builders and developers are turning to manufacturers for ways to make the building process more cost effective and more systematic. Many lumberyards and CMs are responding by **adding value**, helping builders save money by being more efficient on site. The trend is creating new ways to meet today's customers' needs, while carving out new revenue streams. In an industry where the production, service-oriented mentality is already paired with the right equipment technologies, it can make a lot of sense.

More and more profits are being recognized with the movement toward more and more hassle-free components. You will find that your customers will be looking for the one-stop shop with design, engineering, more efficient installation, less callbacks, as well as materials handling efficiencies in the factory and even labor savings from turnkey framing. I predict that your customers will start buying from the CM that offers more "whole house" solutions. This explains why I've begun to see lumberyards and component manufacturers **adding value** by adding new products in the form of pre-cut solid wood headers, pre-cut blocking, stair stringers or precision end trimmed (PET) EWP, like I-joists and rim board and even engineering!

You may have already realized that this industry is no longer just made up of wood truss manufacturers. And your association—WTCA—has a diverse membership that reflects it. Just a few weeks ago at BCMC 2006, you may have noticed a number of EWP related booths. This trend is becoming more common every year at the show. The BCMC has truly

evolved into the Building Component Manufacturers Conference, and not just a truss manufacturer's conference. You will see EWP businesses focused on combining all structural frame technologies into a more seamless process by bringing together lumber, EWP, software and consulting expertise into a whole house solution.

Thanks to faster, more precise and more flexible production saws, component manufacturers are finding that they are able to handle just about anything. We all know that whole house software is available to component manufacturers to assist in this one-stop/whole house design process. If prices can't go much lower, the next logical line item for builders to bring costs down is in labor—jobsite labor. In other words, increase efficiency at the jobsite. Whole

house services will become more popular with builders as they are pressured to turn more of the on-site framing procedures over to component manufacturers that are willing to assume these additional services. The greater your flexibility, the greater the efficiency and less labor cost on the jobsite. The more you do at your operation—from additional design work to more cutting and assembly applications in the shop—the more added value you offer.

Like I said, the dust is still settling. With whole house software availability and whole house equipment technology, the movement toward ultimate efficiency and cost savings for you and your customers will become clear. These technologies bring design, engineering and cut files together that allow equipment to automatically cut stairs, truss parts, wall parts, floor parts and more.

Consider your truss business and EWP business complementing each other by generating more business. Ultimately, your builder customer will appreciate that you've streamlined the process, and is likely to consider you as a valuable long-term material supplier. You, of course, enjoy the benefits of an additional value proposition.

The market is speaking and the industry is recognizing the value in linear-servo saws. Manufacturers, builders and end users are seeing the value in flexibility and service. It has been said that the only solution to a slowing economy is to eliminate all the external forces that inhibit your ability to produce. Whatever the future holds, entrepreneurial production will thrive in any economy. Turn this trend into an opportunity to provide more value to your operation and your customer. **SBC**

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