Selling Advanced Framing

by Libby Maurer

One component manufacturer is cashing in on the green remodel market.

Every time you hear about green building being over-rated and over-priced, it seems there's another headline promoting its staying power in the market. In August, the annual Green Living Pulse survey by the Shelton Group found that interest in green homes decreased from 47 to 43 percent between 2009 and 2010. Then in October, real estate research and consulting firm RCLCO noted its data suggest green building will be a long-term housing trend once the economy recovers. But component manufacturers don't have to wait to see how these predictions will play out to get in the game.

The idea that a home is "green" only with solar panels that come with a 20-year payback or a wallet-busting geothermal heating system is a misconception. Do you have to supply expensive, high-tech building products to build a green home? The answer is no; there are plenty of affordable green building techniques component manufacturers can incorporate into their product lines to make a difference in home performance.

SBCA member Foremost Industries has successfully aligned its product offering with a critical cornerstone of green building—advanced framing. "We're working with two different builders that are very much into 'green' or advanced framing," says Tom Carr, Foremost sales rep. In addition to selling components to single family home builders, the southern Pennsylvania company is also a modular home manufacturer. One of its most important growth areas is in custom single family and modular homes, and supplying components with advanced framing specifications is a popular request for its builder customers.

Advanced framing techniques encompass a broad range of framing options ultimately designed to reach greater energy efficiency with fewer materials. These practices are commonly seen in wall framing, where studs in corners and Ts are positioned to allow for more insulation. Advanced framing can also be found in roof trusses with raised or "energy" heels that also increase a home's R-value with extra insulation.

Incorporating advanced framing gives Foremost an added sales tool it finds more and more handy. The company has a partnership with Bethesda Bungalows, a custom builder that's carved a niche in the DC metro area with its focus on green building. "They're very green sensitive. So we've structured our sales approach according to their needs," says Carr. Bethesda looks to Foremost to supply pre-insulated wall panels and raised heel roof trusses to serve home buyers' desire for greater energy efficiency.

Carr says the consumer is asking for it. "It seems on the custom end, home buyers are extremely literate and knowledgeable about their options. They understand that certain structural elements will get them a step closer to a more efficient home," says Carr. The same is true for the company's interactions with modular home buyers. What's more, Bethesda's Brad Beeson says consumers' desire for more efficient homes is part of a bigger movement. "There's a huge environmental movement here," said the Bethesda director of marketing.

The drive to conserve energy and other resources is tied to the availability of land in the area. Very little new land is available for development inside the beltway, so building out isn't an option. In many cases, Bethesda does a gut rehab—remove the existing roof and walls and reframe the entire house—or even a complete tear-down. Homeowners will often opt to add a second story to increase square footage. Remodels like Bethesda's are perfect opportunities to use framing practices aimed at reducing energy loss.

The companies' most recent project is a custom single family home in suburban DC built with advanced framing and other typically "green" materials. (See photos on page 20.) "The homeowners asked us to build them the ultimate green home," says Beeson. The home has earned Bethesda a lot of press, including a seven-part series chronicling the building process in *EcoHome Magazine*. Though the home is expected to earn LEED Silver status, the advanced framing within the house could easily be incorporated into any new home without the price tag and hoops LEED certification brings.

Getting building materials into tight infill lots creates a big challenge in their niche market. "The ability to get panels on site and set on the day we need them is a huge benefit," says Beeson. "There's many occasions when we're getting the products to the site on a just in time delivery schedule," says Carr.

Tying to a homebuilder that offers green solutions opens the door to a new market segment for Foremost—a segment that will likely grow as housing rebounds. Does supplying advanced framing necessarily make Foremost more profitable? Carr says, "It's too early to tell. But for now, it's another service that helps us sell our product." SBC

Readers Respond

Dear *SBC Magazine,*

The article, "Design Competition Leads to Advanced Framing & Energy Efficiency," in the Sept/Oct 2010 issue offered excellent insight into some emerging, innovative ideas that are buzzing through our industry. It offered some possible answers to questions that are currently nagging in the minds of many of our industry leaders.

It also pointed to one path that might help restore the relevancy of wall panels in the homebuilding paradigm at a time when many builders perceive value only by bottom line costs. How do we reduce costs and increase real value to the point where panelizing becomes a no-brainer for builders? How can we heighten the perceived value of wall panels in the minds of intelligent consumers who are beginning to understand exactly what it means to be "green"? Today, stick framing costs have shrunk to unprecedented low levels, triggering a growing perception that panelization just adds unnecessary cost to the framing process. So, how do we restore the real value of panelization to unprecedented high levels? I think the answer lies in dealing with the total framing system. The new advanced framing and green building ideas, as outlined in the aforementioned article, just may be pointing toward an answer to all those questions.

Adding to all this, Florida is not the only state mandating drastic reductions in energy consumption. Virtually every state in the lower 48 is considering (or already has in place) legislated energy reduction policies. The paradigm is changing in our industry. It has to change. Maybe, we've just seen a glimpse into the future.

—Phil Zurawski • PFS Framing Systems • Charlotte, NC

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