

# Managing for Quality Control

Quality in housing relies on good construction details and good customer relations

by Michael Chapman

Many builders believe that “quality” homes mean expensive cabinets and appliances, and lavish square footage. But quality has as much to do with how you put the parts of a building together as it does with the products you choose. We’ve all seen top quality products ruined by a lousy job of installation. And we’ve seen low-priced products installed properly and operate satisfactorily.

As a builder in Santa Fe, N.M., I’ve sought to establish my reputation as a quality contractor, and that has forced me to think about how to control quality on my jobs. My ultimate goal is to turn over a blemish-free building to clients who feel happy about their new home and satisfied that the building process has gone smoothly. On that final walk-through, I don’t want them holding back my check, and I don’t want a long punchlist.

To avoid this, I focus on two areas. First, I pay attention to building details during both design and construction. And second, I maintain good communication with clients and tend to the little things that concern them.

## Keeping On Top of the Details

Nothing creates more quality-control problems than poorly planned construction details. To prevent problems, we have the construction super review and critique the plans as soon as the designer finishes them. He looks for unclear details, errors, and omissions. For instance, he might see that the plan would work better if we brought the water in at another location or reversed the swing on a door.

After any revisions, we hold a pre-construction meeting. The estimator, the designer, the construction superintendent, and the sales person discuss the orientation on the lot, key construction details, specialty items, or specific dimensions that are critical — such as for a piece of furniture.

After any revisions, the super puts together a set of plans for each sub, marking notes in red pencil. The electrician’s plans might be marked to highlight the exact placement of an electrical outlet or to indicate a floor



Author Mike Chapman, at left, and super Andy Barbero review construction details as a house nears completion. Barbero is on site every day to assure that the subs do high-quality work.

outlet that needs to be roughed in before we pour the slab. Marking up the sets also helps the super think through the job and plan any difficult sequences.

**The same subs.** We build 15 to 20 custom homes a year, but unlike many companies with that volume, we do a large part of our work through subs, using the same ones on every job. We often hold open houses in houses under construction, and customers will say, “We want the same framer to build our house.” With the same subs, we can guarantee uniform quality.

We don’t deviate from our list unless the sub can’t schedule us at the time we need him. This

means the sub doesn’t have to come in with the low bid on every job. When you take the low bidder and you bring your customer to the job site, you could be embarrassed by the quality of the sub’s work.

The key to getting good work from subs is to communicate with them when they begin a job and every time they arrive at the site. I want a super on site half an hour every morning and afternoon. If the sub is going to show up at 1:00 p.m., the super will be there to go through the plans. We don’t allow subs or crew foremen to solve problems without the superintendent’s approval.

We also have to make sure subs

remember how we want the work done. For instance, with drywall I want a three-coat job, not two coats. Without a reminder from the super, details can slip a sub’s mind, particularly if he’s rushing off to another job. Also, unsupervised subs may take short cuts or forget change orders.

Correcting mistakes adds time to the schedule and costs more too. If the drywall contractor leaves sloppy work, like a buildup of joint compound in the corners, and the painters coat the walls, someone has to come back and clean up after the drywall repair and touch up the paint.

Our superintendents do walk-throughs with the subs and provide them with a punchlist of items needing attention. The subs know they’re going to get our next job if they provide service. And we expect to get taken care of.

We’ll also use payments to get a sub’s attention if he’s behind on service calls. Subs can sometimes try to collect on jobs that aren’t quite finished. The boss comes over to the office to pick up the check; maybe his crew told him they were done. But our super knows when a sub has to come back to finish up. He holds the check until the work is done completely and correctly.

## The Customer Is Always Right

We place just as much emphasis on building a quality relationship with the customer as we do on building a quality house. To start this relationship on the right foot, we begin with a contract that clearly spells out our expectations of quality and defines how disagreements will be resolved.

**Contract for quality.** Customers often create problems because they’re nervous about quality, but not knowledgeable about construction. This can lead to clients holding back money during payouts or until the final punchlist is complete. Haggling about payouts will cause a relationship to quickly deteriorate. If you have a qualified buyer and can get construction loans, you can avoid this problem by dealing with the bank, not the client. The bank is an objective third party

that knows how to evaluate job completion.

However, if the clients are financing the job themselves, we insist that the inspection be conducted by a third party who will authorize the release of funds. This can be an appraiser or an independent construction inspector. I include in the price the cost of hiring an inspector — generally \$50 each time.

Our contract is set up so that our draws coincide with the start of a phase of construction rather than the end. Many contractors specify a draw at the completion of framing. However, this can create a delay in getting paid if you've substantially completed the framing, but still have kitchen soffits to fur out or a few studs to straighten. If you time your draw to the start of insulation instead of the end of framing, the customer can see when the insulation installers begin their work, and you're not in a rush to get every last bit of framing complete in order to meet Friday's payroll. Working this way reassures the customer that construction is proceeding on schedule, and helps maintain the good relationship that is so important.

**Scheduled walk-throughs.** We require customers to attend five walk-throughs and sign off on the specs and plans at each stage:

1. We rough stake the home prior to excavation and have the client walk the site with us to be sure of proper location, orientation, and tree removal.

2. At the foundation stage, we do a "color consultation" and have the client take a final look at colors for tile, paint, and cabinets. This gives us time to order all necessary items.

3. We also do a framing walk-through where we review window and door placements and electrical, TV, and telephone outlets. We also point out quality features the customer is not likely to recognize, such as caulked sill plates.

4. When drywall is hung and taped, we do a "trim" walk-through. Linen closet shelves and master closet shelving and rod heights have become very important to our customers, so we mark them on the wall with the customer prior to installation.

5. During a final walk-through, the customer checks out the house completely. We prepare a detailed punchlist of items needing attention.

A key factor in quality control is having enough time to complete the house. To make sure you have enough time, you'll need to extend the completion date if there are legitimate delays. During walk-throughs is a good time to identify problems that might cause delays. On the foundation walk-through, for instance, we might say, "We lost a couple of days because of rain." Or when showing them the framing, we'll say, "The windows didn't come in yet, and that will set us back a couple of days."

If the customer makes changes, our contract allows us to add days to the schedule, and if these changes are made after the framing stage, we dou-



Hand-crafted features, such as the rounded stucco chimney (left) and exterior scrollwork (right), require good subs and close supervision.

ble the markup.

You really have to level with the client if you aren't going to make the move-in date. Don't wait until a week before closing to discover you're three weeks behind. Rushing to complete a house by an arbitrary date will lessen its quality.

**Regular meetings.** In addition to walk-throughs, we meet regularly with clients to resolve questions before they grow into problems. We keep the meetings short and precise. With difficult clients or those who worry excessively, we schedule weekly meetings between the client and our superintendent. These generally take only about 10 to 15 minutes and can turn a difficult client into an easy one. They'll have a list of questions and come prepared to discuss them, and the discussion gives us a chance to educate them about how we work.

**Solving problems.** When a problem arises, I call the clients and ask them to meet me at the job site. For example, on a recent job I ordered interior doors with operable transoms, but the doors showed up with fixed transoms. Although the door company made a mistake, I knew I'd have to pull the doors after the customer moved in, which was only three weeks away.

I explained the problem and told the clients how I was going to solve it. I didn't wait until the week before the people were supposed to move in to spring this on them. Communication early on is the key.

Clients often worry more about minor details of the job than about big ones. If you don't meet with them frequently, you may not notice these red flags. For example, on one house we had a beam that was undersized. This was a serious structural problem that meant I had to pull the beam and replace it. But when I called the client,

he said, "Okay, but what are you going to do about the telephone outlet in the den?" That was what was really bugging him, because he thought I was going to forget it.

**Punchlist performance.** I schedule a final walk-through two days before closing and correct anything on the punchlist the next day. I like to close immediately after the job is complete. I won't sign a contract that has a retainage clause because I feel that shows a lack of trust between the client and builder, and trust is something I work very hard to maintain. If a guy wants to withhold \$2,000 because of a late microwave delivery and a door that needs to be planed down, that's the last guy I want to take care of.

We've already caught most of the problems by the time we do the final walk-through. The job super has already worked up a punchlist with the drywall sub, painter, electrician, hvac sub, and cabinet installers and has corrected any problems. The super has also checked appliances.

Items the client comes up with are usually minor and can be taken care of in a day. They typically involve finish details, such as a drawer or door that sticks, paint touch-up, caulk, or a carpet that's tucked up.

**Warranty follow-up.** If you've done the proper job during construction and finished the home as agreed, then the warranty items should be minor. We call the customer thirty days after closing to do one more walk-through and review necessary corrections. We try to complete all the work in a one- or two-day schedule within two weeks after the walk-through. The work is generally scheduled with the customer the day of the walk-through.

We also try to pay attention to non-warranty items that concern the customer. For instance, I had a gentleman

explain to me that his toilet was too small. I was tempted to suggest that he sit down and I would take my tape out and see where the problem was. Instead, I told him we would see what was available. We found a larger one and replaced the one he had. This was done at his expense. After all, he had signed the spec sheet. He appreciated the help with what he felt was a major problem, and I had a satisfied client.

**Maintenance tips.** Customers sometimes feel they haven't gotten a quality house when little things begin to show up after construction — cracks due to wood shrinkage, for instance.

To address this, we give the customer a three-ring binder of tips on how to take care of tile, grout, roofs, and floors. The binder also contains appliance warranties.

This information educates the new homeowners about what they can expect in the next year. We tell them the house framing will shrink, and show them that they'll get a crack between the plaster fireplace and the drywall above it. We also warn them that the beams, which come from the damp Northwest, will dry out during the first heating season, opening some joints. We ask them to let the building go through a winter and a summer and assure them that we'll be back to take care of minor problems. Forewarned in this way, they don't get upset when small problems occur. They know we've predicted the problems, and that we'll fix them.

Quality in housing comes both from the structures you build and from the relationships you build with your clients. To succeed as builders, we must effectively manage both these processes. ■

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