

WHAT THE CUSTOMER WANTS/NEEDS

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Introduction

When Scott Henry called last week and asked me to give this talk I was a little hesitant in accepting simply due to possibly not being able to properly prepare. But when I got off the phone I thought to myself "...oh, this will be easy..". Why would it be easy? Because in my previous life as a large scale buyer of treated wood products I always knew what I wanted. I know that there are some salesmen who will dispute that, but I did. How did I always know what I wanted? Two words - requirements and specifications, with the latter tending to be the driver in most cases.

Specifications - we as an industry are inundated with them - CSA, AWPA, AREA, RTA, etc. etc. On top of that most large companies also have their own. No matter what you WANT you're never more than a specification away. Now, I am on the other side of the fence. In some cases I'm selling treated wood products as well as buying consumer treated lumber. All of a sudden it is not necessarily a case of WANT but rather of NEED. Therefore, this talk is correctly entitled, "What the Customer Wants/Needs."

While some may state that this is simply semantics, I feel that the terms are not interchangeable when comparing Industrial to Consumer requirements. My experience to date has been that the Industrial Users' requirements are being met by the treated wood industry. The question then becomes "Are the Consumers' needs being met by the treated wood industry?" Before attempting to answer this let's have a look at the factors that are involved in determining the Industrial and Consumer requirements, without necessarily prioritizing them.

Price is certainly important to both market segments. The Quality of Wood is also important to both segments. The Quality of Treatment is undoubtedly important to an Industrial User but how is a Consumer to know what is or isn't properly treated?

Supply and Delivery is at times crucial to an Industrial User, but a Consumer will simply go to Lumber Yard B if the material he or she is looking for is not available at Lumber Yard A.

While Environmental factors, especially disposal, are very important to Industrial Users they are much less so with Consumers. Apart from taking the proper precautions during installations, disposal is not a problem-4 since all treated consumer wood is supposedly guaranteed for life. Therefore, whomever purchases the wood may be in their second or third home, by the time the need for disposal arises.

To the Industrial User the Sales and Service factor is certainly important, especially the after sales service. With the Consumer his or her success with this factor depends solely on the proficiency of the Retailer's salesperson.

As we can see the two segments' requirements are not necessarily one and the same. The bottom line is that the Consumer just wants: A Good Piece of Wood at a Decent Price. Once again "Are the Consumers' needs being met by the treated wood industry?"

In order to determine whether or not my perception of Consumer Needs are valid I decided to visit a large Retail Lumber Yard and ask a few questions. Needless to say I was quite pleased with both the service and information I received.

Regarding price, there was only one brand of treated wood available but the sales person told me that there are only two brands on the market and that I should compare before buying. Concerning the quality of the wood, the sales person did tell me that what he had was a mixture of species and grades. While I did not like the wood I saw I would have the opportunity to hand pick the pieces once I made my purchase. The sales person could not tell me what specification the wood was treated to but he did know that it was pressure treated and explained to me why some of it was incised. If you look in the brochures there are no references to any type of specification other than mentioning that the preservative has been approved by Agriculture Canada. Supply and delivery was not a problem, especially since I only needed the wood in the spring, but he could not guarantee price at that time, rightfully so. Environmentally, I was assured that I could dispose of all remnants in the regular garbage. Regarding the Guarantee for Life, it is so limited that it contains more clauses than there are lawyers at Palais de Justice. Sales and service was first class due to the professionalism of my sales person. Regarding the product itself, the brochures state that if there is a problem you should contact not the retailer, nor the treated, nor the lumber company but the supplier or manufacturer of the preservative. Now I ask you, is it the preservative company's responsibility to know the condition and whereabouts of every treated 2x4 in this country?

Some fifteen years ago, when I started working with treated wood I heard some real horror stories of how the Consumer market had been flooded with substandard wood, improperly treated by unscrupulous treaters. This created a black cloud over the industry, which to this day unfortunately still exists, albeit to a lesser extent. I personally had two experiences this past summer, apart from the one I just mentioned, which clearly depict this fact.

My first experience happened to me in the US, but I am sure also happens in Canada to a certain degree. I was visiting a friend in Connecticut who was in the process of having a landscaper install some retaining walls in order to terrace his back yard with treated railroad ties. My friend had no idea whether or not he was getting any value for his investment so he asked me to look into it. This was my first actual consulting job and the conversation with the landscaper went as follows: Question 1 - What type of railroad ties will you be using, new, used, IG's, etc.? Answer - They're not really railroad ties, they're sort of, more like landscape ties. Question 2 - Do you know what species and grade the timbers are? Answer - No, but the Lumber Yard tells me that they are the right kind for the job. Question 3 - How have the timbers been treated, by pressure, dipped, etc. and if so, to what specification. Answer - I think they are pressure treated, but any way I go by what the Lumber Yard tells me and they say it's properly treated. Last and best Question - How do you know if one piece of wood is treated better than another? Answer Easy,

the blacker it is, the better treated it is. He did take the name of a Treater I know in Connecticut but I still haven't talked to my friend about his landscaping.

My second experience happened right at home. Our next door neighbour wanted to replace his fence with CCA treated wood so I recommended that he stipulate to all perspective builders that their quotes show materials and labour separately. I would then determine whether or not he was getting a fair deal. Time passed and he hired a contractor without my looking at the cost breakdown but he still wanted me to talk to the contractor, nonetheless. I asked the contractor some general questions about the wood, its quality, the treatment, where he got it, etc. He very calmly turned to me and said, "You know, it doesn't really matter what I get or whom I get it from, because it's all crap." Needless to say I slid back into my hole and let him get on with his work.

These three separate experiences certainly send out mixed signals, perceived or otherwise. Has an industry which prides itself on quality products and creating material specifications to the nth degree turned its back on, ironically, the largest segment of the market? Or is this segment impossible to please? Or are we not giving the Consumer what he or she needs? In reply to the last question I answer "Yes we are..." but with some trepidation. In order to fully rectify this dilemma there is work yet to be done. But whose responsibility is it to do this work?

The Logger, the Sawyer, the Grader, the Buyer, the Treater, the Wholesaler or the Retailer. It is none of these in particular but it is the Industry as a whole that must rectify this situation.

Unfortunately, the ultimate responsibility falls on the shoulders of the Retailer since he is the level closest to the consumer. Yet I look around the round the room and I do not see any Retailers in the audience.

In conclusion, Ladies and Gentlemen, I applaud the Industry for what has been done to date, but the work's not over yet. Hopefully I have brought some issues to the forefront that the Industry in general, and Associations such as the CWPA in particular, will address and/or revisit in the near future. I know that we can give the Consumer exactly what he or she needs.