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BUILDER

A 'BUILDING SCIENCE TRANSLATOR': SAM RASHKIN ON HOW TO SELL ZERO NET ENERGY HOMES

Builders of energy-efficient homes should use words that appeal to consumers, not turn them off, says Sam Rashkin.

By [Jennifer Goodman](#)

Building science guru [Sam Rashkin](#) stopped by the BUILDER offices recently. The founder of the Energy Star program met with editors to bring us up to speed on his latest endeavor, running the Department of Energy's Building Technologies Office.



Aside from helping builders construct better, more durable, more efficient homes, Rashkin and his team are working to create consumer interest in high-performance homes. Projects certified to programs such as Energy Star for New Homes or the DOE's Zero Energy Home program give buyers peace of mind and help small to middle size firms differentiate themselves in markets dominated by big builders. "It means you can say you're in the top 1% of builders across the country in terms of credibility," he told us.



The Zero Energy Ready Home program helps participating builders communicate this message of credibility by providing customizable marketing materials that contain messages about durability, health, quality, and efficiency. Rashkin has been studying the type of words used in these messages, and his office is on a crusade to help U.S. builders rethink the way they explain their energy-efficient offerings to customers.

For example, he said, it's difficult to sell buyers on items like transfer grilles and ventilation systems but by rewording the language, most consumers would likely be interested in products called comfort vents and fresh air systems. "You use a phrase that consumers will connect with, not that will turn them off," he said. "Nobody wants to be audited so why use the term 'energy audit?' A 'home checkup' sounds so much nicer."

The department's new [Building Science Translator](#) provides a glossary of "power words" that builders can use to reinforce the value of high-performance homes. These terms are based on the consumer experience rather than building science, Rashkin told us. For the next few months, [the agency is inviting builders to provide their thoughts about building science terms that could use a power makeover](#).

Here are a few of the terms that the DOE has transformed from potentially off-putting to consumer-oriented:

OLD TERM	NEW POWER TERM
High-R Window	High-Efficiency Window
Sealed and Flashed Window	Premium-Installed Window
High-R Insulation	High-Efficiency or Super- Insulation
Fully Aligned Air Barriers	Premium-Installed Draft Barrier
Reduced Thermal Bridging	Thermal Buffer Construction
Raised Heel Truss	Energy Saving Attic Edge Insulation
Structural Insulated Panels (SIPs)	Energy Saving SIP Wall/Roof Thermal Buffer
Insulated Concrete Forms (ICFs)	Energy Saving ICF Wall Thermal Buffer
Double-Wall Framing	Energy Saving Double-Wall Thermal Buffer
2-Stud Corner with Drywall Clips	Energy Saving Corner Framing
Insulated Headers	Energy Saving Window Framing
Radiant Barrier	Energy Saving Sun Control Layer
Proper Sizing HVAC System	Engineered Comfort System Sizing
Proper Duct Installation	Premium-Installed Comfort Delivery Ducts
Tight Duct Sealing	Premium-Sealed Comfort Delivery Ducts
Pressure Balancing Bedrooms	Comfort Balanced Rooms
Ducted Returns	Optimized Air Flow Comfort Delivery
Dehumidification	Whole-House Moisture Control System
HVAC System Diagnostics New Homes	Comfort System Certified Performance
Ductless Mini- Split Heat Pump	Advanced Ductless Heat Pump Technology
High-Efficiency Gas Furnace	Advanced Furnace Technology
Variable Speed HVAC System	Advanced Comfort Flow Technology
Storage Water Heater	Advanced Water Heating Technology
Heat Pump Water Heater	Advanced Heat Pump Water Heating Technology
Solar Hot Water	Free Hot Water Solar System
High-Efficiency Appliances	Advanced Appliance Technology
High-Efficiency Lighting	Advanced Lighting Technology

To me, this call to change the way builders present information about their sustainable homes seems like a great idea. It's a simple, free approach that builders can use to help explain and sell green features, which are generally more expensive than traditional building techniques.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? Which type of term are you using with your customers? Respond in the COMMENTS section below.

About the Author



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