



BY ROB HONEYCOMBE

# Trust starts with your display, suite?!

Choosing how much to spend on a project display or sales office is one of the toughest questions you'll face in your marketing planning.

Perhaps you want to go the whole hog with completed mock-up apartments and all-singing, all-dancing sales displays. Or shove a salesperson into a caravan, paint the side with a logo and hope for the best.

We all know plenty of projects that have failed and succeeded with both options. So here are some suggestions to make your decision easier.

## BUYERS GO IN BLIND

Your potential buyer knows nothing about you or your project and they're expecting both to disappoint them. This might be a negative way to look at prospects, but it helps better define the whole purpose of any sales office or display: to build trust. If you're a multi-national public company you start with some advantage, but don't assume your fame has spread to the back streets of suburbia.

Buyers generally won't read this magazine, they don't attend industry events and they couldn't care less if you've won 17 "biggest and best" awards – unless they're for projects really similar to the one they're considering. Even then they're cynical and you can't blame them. Think back to when you last chose an architect: how many are "award-winning"? All of them!

## SIZING UP YOUR PROJECT

So when buyers are sizing up your project they're looking for all the tangible evidence they can find that demonstrates quality

and, more importantly, your willingness to do what you say you're going to do. Like many industries ours is one where word-of-mouth recommendations are by far the most powerful marketing. So if you were bashed by your builder to within an inch of your financial life on the last job, and chose to snip a handful of items out of the spec, don't come crying when those disenchanted buyers bad mouth you.

The developers with predictable pre-sales successes are those who have repeat and referral business that follows them, and they understand the critical role of after-sales service. Blaming the builder won't cut the mustard. Buyers pay you and it's you they'll recommend to their friends, for better or worse.

Presenting a well-planned display or sales suite can go a long way to "involving" a buyer in your project and establishing that critical trust, and we believe it's not always "bigger is better".

Consider your target market and key issues in their decision-making. If you're offering lease-back investment stock they're going to want to know a lot more about you or the ultimate guarantor, some hard numbers on underlying tenant demand and some proof that this product matches that need.

A full display apartment is always nice to have, but it's not critical. Few of these buyers will care if there's Blanco or Bosch if you've established that the choice of finishes has been made by someone who understands the needs of



IMAGES ABOVE & BELOW: DISPLAYING ACTUAL FITTINGS FOR BATHROOMS AND KITCHENS HELPS BUILD CREDIBILITY WITH YOUR BUYERS. IMAGES: COURTESY OF BEES NEES CITY REALTY.





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the end user. In this way we suggest it's often more important to share the stories of why certain decisions were made in the project than it is to show them what was chosen.

**GO THE WHOLE HOG**

If you're chasing a top-end owner-resident it's no surprise a full mock-up apartment has a big role to play. Without doubt the most lavish we've seen and been involved in was the recent "Vision" display gallery in Brisbane city. At a cost of more than \$4 million this temporary building had two fully completed apartments and a sales suite that established a superior brand experience immediately on entry. It was bulldozed recently to allow siteworks to start. But that developer was relatively unknown in this market, had a lot of product at the very top end and they had a very long (five years plus) project lead time. They had little choice but to spend big and establish an emotional bond with the product that overcame all other concerns.

When we visited the Q1 display suite a couple of years prior to it rising out of the Gold Coast we were shown a couple of kitchens and bathrooms, but told that taps and appliances were indicative only. The long construction timeline meant buyers would need to trust the team to choose an appropriate item at a later date. It's a credit to Sunland's reputation that buyers accepted this.

Some more food for thought... If you do build an apartment we strongly recommend enclosing the space entirely and allowing a buyer to immerse themselves in the space. Half walls between sales and apartment areas lead to confusion – is this the kitchen or your desk? We've had great success with backlit vinyl photos of views that really can mirror the property's final setting. The best displays are ones that have plenty of sex appeal but remain liveable (at an aspirational level!), so ensure your design team don't go nuts with obscure art or furniture. Leave the "wow" to things that do come with the purchase price.

**SOME QUICK TIPS**

Humans have five senses so appeal to all of them in order to create the real soul and mood of the product. What music will be playing? If it's too quiet buyers feel uneasy, so choose a style that matches your project theme. We once had a lot of fun with a tropical design, palm tree and waterfall job where we used Latin American music throughout (yes, including Ricky Martin – it was the 1990s!). Buyers actually came out with a smile on their face and a higher heart rate, in a perfect buying mood.

What will the display smell like? Yesterday's cleaning bleach or a salesperson's curry lunch? Throw some rosewater in a spray bottle and give the area a dose every few hours. Look to our best retailers for presentation tricks that don't cost a lot, and museums and theme parks for ways to really enhance the experience. Lighting is always important and you can't have the place cleaned too often. Mow any grass twice a week, polish the glass, dust the tables, vacuum daily if possible. Think Disneyland. Any visual cue will help establish quality in your buyers' minds.

**CRUNCH TIME**

Our last suggestions are ones we know some of our project marketing competitors disagree with. Don't let your sales team follow buyers into a display apartment, nipping at their heels like an unloved dog. If you have a separate



sales area agents should stay there until a buyer asks for help or has lingered long enough that they're inviting assistance. This is a chance for them to talk to each other out of earshot and you won't make a sale until they've had that chat.

And please, if you use a "crunch room" (and yes, buyers do know what they're for) give them a reason to sit with you. Maybe it is plans you have in there, further financial info, whatever. Many will want a quiet spot to talk through some

details with a consultant. But if you force them to follow a sales-track that ends in an obligatory visit to that awkward little room, all the hard work you've done in establishing trust has just been thrown out the window. Might as well have stayed in the caravan! +

ROB HONEYCOMBE IS MANAGING DIRECTOR OF BEES NEEES CITY REALTY, A SPECIALIST INNER-BRISBANE RESIDENTIAL AGENCY. PHONE 07 3214 6888 OR EMAIL ROB@BEESNEES.COM.AU