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Chick Pick

Homes designed for women hit their mark.

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Her Way: Recent studies suggest that women influence more than 90 percent of home purchasing decisions. Builder Hugh Fisher is listening to the ladies and giving them what they want: small homes with serious style and serious storage.

In the past, building and selling 20 to 25 homes in 12 months constituted a good year for Hugh Fisher. That was before 2008, when he sold a whopping 90 homes in nine months.

It wasn't a silver bullet that sent this small New England builder's contracts skyrocketing in spite of the worst recession in modern history. The strategy was more akin to cupid's arrow.

In late 2007, Fisher started to get his houses in touch with their feminine side. He began softening his design repertoire after attending a workshop held by Design Basics, an Omaha, Neb.-based consulting firm that provides "women-centric" stock plans, as well as design and marketing -advice to builders hoping to win the hearts and wallets of female buyers. Design Basics (which, not surprisingly, is woman-owned by entrepreneur Linda Reimer) began -licensing its "women-centric" logo in 2006 and now has more than 70 licensees—Fisher included.

For women, it's the little things that matter, and that's where Fisher began making tweaks to the house plans he'd always been able to build in his sleep. His basic formula remained the same for Deer Brook Estates, a 164-acre development slated to include 64 single-family homes and 66 age-qualified condos at build-out: four house plans with three different

face-plate options. But to mix things up, he began experimenting with a variety of small indulgences in his first model. They centered around four themes: relaxation, organization, flexibility, and entertainment.

At just under 2,000 square feet, the first single-family model at Deer Brook proved modest in size but big on functionality, thanks to a host of sanity-saving features. Among them: a walk-in kitchen pantry with built-in shelving; a drop zone near the garage entry, complete with mail cubbies and an electronic recharging station; and a laundry room on the second floor (close to bedrooms) with additional shelving, storage cabinets, and a designated area for ironing.

Personality points: Little things such as paint colors, trim details, and lighting fixtures make a difference.

Accessorizing also made the little house big on style and romance. Quaint outdoor features include optional stone driveway pavers, metal roof accents, wide porches, mahogany decking, a floral motif doorbell surround, and curved landscape lighting fixtures. The inside similarly displays a woman's touch with arched doorways, window seats, wide plank oak floors, antiqued bronze and brushed nickel fixtures, and custom cabinet pulls made by local jewelry designers. Fisher now allows buyers to spec up to three paint colors of their own -choosing. All rooms are tricked out with 5 1/4-inch crown molding.

"The women-centric people suggested some minor changes to our existing plans and advised us not to nickel and dime buyers. They were right," says the Warwick, R.I.-based builder, who welcomed more than 250 visitors to the model on opening day. "Our homes now have very few optional features. We just load them up. It's like buying a Lexus. Everything is included."

It helped that a newspaper reporter caught wind of Fisher's plans and ran a preview story about Deer Brook Estates in late December 2007, shortly before the model opened. "The next day, on Christmas Eve, cars were coming through the gate in droves even though we didn't have the model

finished,” Fisher recalls. “Every day this went on, and some people came back three or four times. We started taking names and numbers so we could call them when the model was ready.”

This move paid off. The model opened in January 2008, drawing more than 1,100 visitors the first month. “The first day, we had only -released five homes, but we took seven deposits,” Fisher recalls. “One woman called me on the phone wanting to buy a house; she had just come from a birthday party where a friend told her about it. Then a FedEx guy came by saying, ‘My wife sent me.’”

Which brings up another important revelation about women, he observes. They talk to each other. A lot. “Our best salespeople are the people who have purchased from us,” he says, noting that nearly every sale to date has come via word of mouth. “The waiting list still has 45 people on it. I can’t build fast enough.”

Granted, the shift in trade sequencing and cycle times has required some of the guys on the crew to step outside their comfort zones. “We had to train our subs to think women-centric,” he says. “Sometimes you’ve gotta beat them over the head with a shovel, but they’re getting there. In one of the condos, we took a fireplace down three times because the interior designer kept wanting to change something. That’s how we’ve changed our way of thinking.”

And although the attention to detail has increased the construction costs on each home by \$10,000 to \$15,000, Fisher says he’s been able to raise prices to absorb that cost with no buyer resistance.

“Before, if I had two people come by on a weekend, my salespeople were excited. When hundreds of people show up at your model from a \$75 ad and a newspaper story, you know you’re onto something.”

“I’m a typical cement-head builder,” he says. “When buyers used to ask me, ‘What color can I have?’ my answer was, ‘You can have off-white or off-white.’ Not anymore. I’ve drunk the Kool-Aid. I’m in.”—J.S.

Community: Deer Brook Estates

Total acreage: 164

Date opened for sale: January 2008

Product: Single-family homes ranging from 1,600 to 2,000 square feet, and age-qualified single-level condos ranging from 1,350 to 1,700 square feet

Price range: \$340,000 to \$450,000

Total number of units at build-out: 130

Sales to date: 101

Builder/Developer: Deer Brook Development, Warwick, R.I.

Designer: Design Basics, Omaha, Neb.

Interior designer: Driftway Interiors, Casselberry, Fla.

Top Model: At 1,907 square feet, the “Exeter” plan made for a winning model home.

<http://www.builderonline.com/design/chick-pick.aspx#>