



CREATING SALES CENTERS THAT SELL

A GREAT SALES CENTER can motivate potential buyers to become homeowners through a balanced mix of sales tactics and development details. From what a visitor sees when entering the center to the sights, sounds and smells encountered throughout, every detail needs to be carefully arranged to make prospective buyers feel at home. **By Meghan Boyer**

“A great sales center must allow the buyer to envision their future life in the space and perceive it as an integral piece in creating a better quality of life.”

CASIMIR KUJAWA,
PRINCIPLE AND OWNER,
CASIMIR KUJAWA/ARCHITECT

Capturing the interest of potential buyers is the goal of every sales center, but doing so requires presenting the right mix of sales savvy and project details. No matter the amount of money invested in a center, a skilled designer, a motivated developer, an informed sales team and a lot of forethought are necessary to emotionally affect buyers and make a positive difference in sales.

A sales center is a representation of the greater project, and visitors can find scale models, fully-furnished room vignettes and floor plans in most centers. This means centers that stand out and motivate purchases have to accurately represent the project while creating something greater – a residential environment that makes buyers feel at home.

“A good sales center creates a focused image and eliminates unnecessary information,” says Casimir Kujawa, principle and owner of Casimir Kujawa/Architect, and the mind behind the South Loop’s Opera Lofts sales center. “A great sales center must allow the buyer to envision their future life in the space and perceive it as an integral piece in creating a better quality of life.” To achieve this, every detail must be considered when planning a sales center, from client demographics to the region’s lifestyle to what a buyer sees when entering the center, agree industry experts.

SPEND IT TO MAKE IT

A sales center can tremendously increase or decrease sales, agree the experts. In fact, it can be the deciding factor in whether or not a consumer purchases a unit, says Michael Fritkin, president of Fritkin-Jones Design Group, the firm that created the sales center for Hyde Park’s Solstice on the Park. But while a high-end, top-of-the-line sales center is impressive, it does not fit every project or budget. “If the community itself is designed for buyers in a lower price



1-2: Ultima by Kimball Hill Homes
3-4: Opera Lofts model and sales center

range, you don't want a sales center showing designs that are simply out of the established budget," cautions Ruth Steff, sales manager at Kimball Hill Homes. "You want to show buyers something that could be theirs just as it is for the price they have to spend."

Developers also should keep in mind that sales centers are temporary installations meant to generate project sales. "It is a waste of resources to put more into a sales center than is necessary to produce the desired effect," says Kujawa. A high-budget sales center does not guarantee success, especially if the money is spent on details that don't sway buyers, he adds. Developers should spend only the amount necessary to attract and entice home shoppers within the scale of their project. "Sales center cost is related to the cost of the project," says Kenneth Riha, president and director of design with Riha Design Group Inc., who has created sales centers such as Park Monroe, X|O Condominiums and Walton on The Park.

An average sales center costs between \$150,000 and \$200,000, with 1 percent to 2 percent of the overall project development budget allocated for the sales center, says Christine Kempfer, sales manager at River Park Place in Elgin. The price for a high-end sales center can spike up to \$350,000, adds Riha, who estimates the average sales center costs roughly \$100,000.

A small sales center budget or a lower project price range, however, is no excuse for sacrificing quality. Sales centers positively affect sales if they display quality, from the builder's work to the products in the room vignettes, says Kempfer. "If you display a high-quality sales center, the options selected by buyers tend to go up," she says, adding that a buyer tends to put an average of 10 percent to 15 percent of the cost in options and upgrades.

Unfortunately, real estate and mortgage market setbacks have led to developers spending less on their sales centers, says Riha. "Everyone I talk to asks, 'How inexpensive can I do [a sales center]?' " In response to this trend, Riha has developed pre-designed sales centers that can cost less than \$29,000. The cost-conscious centers are prepackaged and semi-customizable, with developers able to choose from among three different styles and two versions of each.

CITY VERSUS SUBURBAN CENTERS

The goal of every sales center is the same no matter if it is located in the heart of downtown or in a suburb on the outskirts of Chicagoland. Both are selling the same product: living spaces. The difference is in the mindset of the market, Riha says. "You are talking about who lives in the city and who lives in the suburbs." To achieve the right focus in a sales center, it is imperative that each developer understands his or her respective market and reflects it in the sales center, says Riha.

City buyers in general tend to focus on location and amenities, whereas suburban shoppers are searching not only for a home, but also for a community, Steff says. Sandesh Bilgi, sales manager and director of training and recruitment for

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Century 21 Sussex and Reilly, agrees. "Suburban sales centers cater to the neighborhood," says Bilgi, "while the city sales centers need to be very diverse and cater to a wide demographic of potential buyers." Sales centers in the suburbs are focused on a single, specific demographic, and in the city, with its diverse market of more than 3 million people, it's more about understanding the global atmosphere, he adds.

Appealing to a range of buyers means city centers tend to focus on the assets of the neighborhood the project is located in and the building's proximity to transportation and activities, says Kempfer. "Suburban sales centers need to focus on creating an environment where you can work, relax and entertain without leaving your home," she says. There also is more innovation in city sales centers, says Fritkin. "The city sales centers need to be different and exciting while suburban sales centers can just display what they offer and still sell," he says.

FEELS LIKE HOME

All sales centers, regardless of price or location, require a few necessities, including the all-important homey feel. Buyers need to feel at home and comfortable the moment they enter a sales center, or that sale just won't happen, agree industry experts. A successful sales center creates a "warm, inviting atmosphere where customers feel at ease to share their reasons for looking at a new home," says Kempfer. Creating a comfortable space means presenting project details in a pleasing manner, and a sales center's layout contributes greatly to potential buyers' experiences and feelings about a project.

Sales center staff should create a project "story" and lead consumers deliberately through each area in the center in a specific sequence. "There is actually a process behind what order information is presented," says Steff. It is important to convey the aura or atmosphere initially and then follow up with project specifics, adds Kujawa. Initial impressions are important, notes Kujawa, and all aspects need to be considered, such as how people find the center, when staff greets the buyers and what order the information is delivered, he says.

"Our sales office is effective because it flows from area to area," says Kempfer. At River Park Place, buyers enter, receive information, view a scale model and see the design center, she says, adding that a private office area is nearby for finance discussions.

Service is another key factor in welcoming shoppers properly and fostering that homey feel. Steff picks the sales



5-6: River Park Place sales center; 7-8: Solstice on the Park sales center

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center staff as the most important ingredient to a successful center. “You can have the nicest brochure, a terrific map and an appealing model, but if the associate isn’t doing a great job and being a true asset to the buyers and their Realtor, the rest really doesn’t matter,” she says.

APPEAL TO BUYERS’ SENSES

Stimulating potential buyers’ senses can help them become emotionally attached to a development and foster the all-important homey feel, agree industry experts. “There needs to be an interactive component where the consumer can utilize all five senses,” says Bilgi. A sales center needs to give buyers the experience of being at home, from touching the walls to smelling food in the oven, he says.

Adding scent to different areas in a sales center is a good way to evoke a sense of home among potential buyers. If the center has a working kitchen vignette, the staff can bake cookies throughout the day to fill the area with a fresh-baked aroma. The cookies can enliven buyers’ taste buds as well. Scent machines also are available, says Riha. “You can have a different smell for each room in a sales center,” he says.

Homebuyers can see the color displays, photographs and scale models in a sales center, all of which should be accented with special lighting, says Kempher. “Having quality visual

aids allows buyers to touch and create the home of their dreams,” she says.

When a development is under construction and units are not ready for viewing, a sales center is paramount in demonstrating the look, feel and emotion of a project, agree the experts. “People don’t understand numbers and dimensions” on floor plans, says Bilgi. Sales centers need to bring a project to life so consumers can understand, he adds. To accomplish this, developers should focus on mock-ups and presenting a finished space that represents the dimensions, volume and finishes of the units, says Kujawa.

“There are two aspects of an excellent sales center,” says Riha. “Communicating every detail of your product to your market and understanding who your market is. The closer you relate your product to your market, the greater success you will have in making the sale.” Developers should consider every detail of a project, from the types of magazines arranged on a table to the genre of music playing in the room vignettes. No detail is too small when attempting to stimulate all the senses, says Riha.

TRENDS TO COME

The future of sales centers is firmly rooted in new technology, agree the experts. “Sales centers will become more technologi-

WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET

Darcy Bonner targets high-end buyers with a luxury sales center



Potential buyers got a dose of reality when they visited Lincoln Park 2520’s sales center. That’s because it occupied the 11th floor of the luxury condominium site’s existing structure, Columbus Hospital. Though it was scheduled for eventual demolition, the hospital overlooked Lincoln Park and Lake Michigan – as would its successor. By placing the sales center in the

hospital, buyers got the chance to experience the views they’d command as owners.

“It was a unique opportunity to elevate the buyer,” says interior architect Darcy Bonner, who designed the sales center, model unit and the project’s public areas. And what made the sales center so successful, according to Bonner, is that along with showcasing the project’s

brehtaking views, it captured the essence of living at Lincoln Park 2520. “As soon as you got off the elevator it had a very residential feel,” he says. To sustain the effect, Bonner designed a 2,664-square-foot, three-bedroom, three-and-one-half-bathroom unit that provided views to the east, south and west. “We wanted to mock up a full unit so buyers would experience exactly what they were getting and feel the proportion of the space,” says Bonner.

Acutely aware of the buyer profile for the high-end project, Bonner took the level of finishes to the highest degree. “Throughout the commercial side of the sales center, paneling and millwork made it feel much more residential,” he says. “There were beautiful antique rugs and all the furniture was custom designed to be used in the building once it’s finished.”

Additionally, the model was decorated and finished to present a realistic picture of life at 2520. “This buyer has seen a lot and knows what quality is,” says Bonner. “We felt the furniture and finishes should

mirror the quality furnishings that buyers of these units would want.” To that end, wall coverings by Kneeder Fauchere created a floor-to-ceiling tactile experience, the marble bathrooms were appointed with Waterworks fixtures and the custom millwork throughout the unit received a uniquely soft oak ceruse finish.

Furniture and fabrics came from Holly Hunt, Baker Knapp & Tubbs and Claremont Fabrics, while the contemporary kitchen was decked out with Poggenpohl cabinetry, charcoal stone countertops, a glass tile backsplash and an array of Sub-Zero, Wolf and Miele appliances.

The painstaking attention to the details that buyers want have paid off. Bonner recognized his audience and created a masterpiece that luxury buyers would desire. Demolition of Columbus Hospital is scheduled for the summer of 2008 to make room for Lincoln Park 2520, and the sales center has moved to the Hancock Tower.

cally advanced,” predicts Stefl. New innovations will streamline the selling process, and the Internet will play a large role in how consumers learn project information.

Kemper believes sales centers increasingly will utilize computer programs that make floor plans come alive for customers, allowing the potential buyers to incorporate color schemes and furniture. They could even see a possible renovation or expansion of the property, she says.

Sales centers with immersive Web presences also will have a large impact on buyers in the future, says Kujawa. Modern buyers often don’t visit sales centers until they’ve already completed hours of Internet research. “Ultimately, the sales center may be more like a closing center where the buyer goes physically to confirm the information previously presented on the Web,” he says.

But no matter the technology used in or the amount of funds spent on a center, success ultimately will depend on the consumer experience. A start-to-finish presentation “that makes them feel they are making a wise investment in an area with growth potential that meets all their needs” will turn a shopper into a buyer, says Kempher. **C.A.**

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