
CONSOLIDATING CONSUMER PROTECTION

BY LESLIE PETERSON

A CUTTING-EDGE CONCEPT, WITH A PROVEN TRACK record, promises to have a significant impact on B.C.'s residential homebuilding industry. Simple, but revolutionary, the Warranty Resource Homeowner Package contains everything a new home buyer might need in terms of warranties, contacts for subtrades, manufacturers, suppliers and installers as well as detailed product information. In both hard copy and on-line, virtual-access versions.

The scenario is all too familiar. Two or three years into a new home, something goes wrong. Perhaps the fridge is on the fritz or a window has begun to fog. Hardly anticipated, but there all the same, so where to turn? On move-in, the homeowner was given some kind of manual, some papers with warranties, but they're nowhere to be found.

Enter Greg Stolz and James Christensen, president and CEO respectively of Conasys (Consumer Assurance Systems Inc.) with their ground-breaking Warranty Resource Program, the best thing to happen to B.C. homeowners for a very long time.

Some builders hand out manuals to new owners, others a stack of warranties in a box, not necessarily complete, a random batch of service agreements and other papers. "The standardization is not there; in some cases the consumer is being taken care of, in others not," Stolz explains. "Information is the key to protecting yourself, and traditionally that information has not been there," Christensen adds.

Starting with a highly successful pilot program in Nanaimo last August, Conasys has already enrolled more than 40 large and small builders and has just recently moved into the Lower Mainland. Support from both government and industry has been strong, with the CHBA BC solidly behind the program.

"It makes sense for us to partner with Conasys as programs such as theirs help our association with our goal of raising levels of consumer confidence and bringing further professionalism to the building industry," says M.J. Whitemarsh, CHBA BC CEO. "I see significant need for the services and the value that the Warranty Resource program brings to the industry. It would be great to see our member builders assume a leading position in bringing these consumer-protection programs to market."

"The key things we represent to the industry are self-governance and empowerment," Stolz says. "In a nutshell, our system allows homeowners to be proactive and confident in dealing with issues because it allows them instant access to information in a consistent, formalized way. The CHBA likes the

industry to look after itself, but without the tools it becomes far more difficult. The association is constantly increasing the standards in the high level of professionalism it expects from its members, while an equally important goal is to raise the levels of consumer confidence."

Builders and realtors also stand to benefit considerably from the Warranty Resource package, the most comprehensive consumer-protection product available in the industry today. A JD Power and Associates survey showed that the largest contributing factor in a home purchase is after-sales service. "The realtor might say to the consumer, if this product is being used you can be confident. These builders are the guys who want to look after you because they're going the extra mile by using the program, so it in turn makes the home more desirable to the potential purchaser, which may increase the likelihood of the home being sold in a timely manner. It's a win-win for builders and homebuyers," Christensen notes.

A virtual access model of the program is currently being introduced to builders, demonstrating built-in maintenance alerts with, for example, quarterly product-specific manufacturers' instructions sent to homeowners instructing them to perform general and product-specific maintenance duties. Builders also have the ability to add a Warranty Resource link to their website, a powerful endorsement. And, because it's a virtual copy, future homeowners would have access to the information by simply typing in the address to learn the builder's name, the supplier, installer, whatever they require.

All too frequently, Stolz says, when homeowners are asked What's In Your Home? they have very little idea. When they need to know, builders aren't always able to share the information, so assistance with this will help to divert a nightmare scenario down the road.

The Warranty Resource Program is extremely timely, given that the Homeowner Protection Office has indicated that levels of standards with respect to builders' qualification and after-sales service tools will undergo some changes this year, dealing specifically with excluded coverage that will "apply only to maintenance requirements or procedures which have been provided to the original owner by the residential builder or warranty provider."

The Warranty Resource Program, long overdue, is proving a brilliant concept, one from which everyone benefits. ■