

A Coherent Customer-Care Message

Industry jargon doesn't translate into customer care. That's what Steve McKay, CEO of Sharp Propane (Bastrop, Texas), thinks, and he is working to change the way his company translates what it does into language its customers understand.

"Every industry has its own acronyms and [its] own jargon, all of which confuse customers," McKay said. "As we have made investments in technology, service technicians, safety and service center staff—all to provide a better service and experience for our customers—addressing how we tell that story to our customers was equally important."

McKay, who has led Sharp Propane since 2004, feels that the propane industry uses its own language, which often doesn't register with customers. The term GAS Check, for example, carries a unique meaning to the propane industry.

"But the average homeowners we deal with, their eyes would glaze over if you say GAS Check," he noted. "We tend to say things in 'our-speak,' not in 'consumer-speak.'" That became even more apparent to McKay after Sharp Propane conducted some customer focus group discussions.

His company hired The Mitchell Group Consulting (Austin, Texas) to build a public communications strategy.

"We asked them to explain to the public in their language what it is we do," McKay remarked. Sharp Propane, which has been in business for 61 years, is a retail propane marketer, with about 85% residential business. The company's four Texas customer service locations are in Austin, Fort Worth, LaGrange, and Bryan.

CompleteCare and BuilderCare are the first two programs to come out of those discussions. CompleteCare launched in March 2010, and BuilderCare started in September of that same year.

"CompleteCare and BuilderCare represent what we've been doing all those years. We've finally put it into language that the consumer can understand."

CompleteCare

"We launched Complete Care first to focus on the residential market," McKay explained. The "Always There Guarantee" is the first component of CompleteCare. That means Sharp Propane will not let a customer run out of gas.

"If you have any type of service emergency, we're going to be there 24/7, 365, no hassles, no fees," McKay stated.

"Smart monitoring" is the second component. Sharp Propane's central Texas service area can experience around 1600 heating degree days in the winter. The company has used Energy Force software from K&K Management (Danville, Ind.) to monitor customer tanks since 2005.

"We're watching the tank for you. We've got you covered," McKay noted. "Customers don't need to look at the tank gauge. We'll look at it for them." The technology calculates customer use and measures it against heating degree days and other factors.

"For most of our customers, after two or three deliveries, it's pretty well set. It memorizes them."

That leads to the third component of CompleteCare, which is auto-fill. Sharp's customers have said they don't want to worry about their tank levels. They want delivery drivers to deliver based on the tank level according to the monitor. The company will route a truck to fill a customer's tank only when the tank is getting low, usually



Sharp Propane makes a delivery to a CompleteCare customer.



The company works to make the homebuilder's job easier and make him look good to the ultimate homeowner.

when the tank is about 20% to 30% full.

Safety Check is the fourth element. When starting a customer on the Complete Care package, Sharp conducts a safety inspection of the customer's system. Each subsequent delivery includes a visual inspection of all the aboveground components and a follow up on any components needing attention.

Easy Pay is the fifth component, which is a billing feature that provides customers with a predictable propane bill, McKay remarked. It's a payment arrangement plan, with Sharp calculating the customer's propane use over a 12-month period from June 1 to May 31, and dividing that by 12 for the customer's monthly payment. "When we get to the end of the year, we simply roll whatever balance is owed to them or that they owe us in the next year's Easy Pay monthly amount," he said. "To enroll in CompleteCare is completely free, and is a unique part of our service offering."

BuilderCare

The current slump in the U.S. real estate market has affected most areas of the country, but some areas are faring better than others. He notes that Texas is still a "net growth" state, meaning more people are moving into Texas each year than are moving out. "We're still seeing home building and new construction in all of our locations."

Like the CompleteCare program, Sharp's BuilderCare program builds on things the company was already doing. But McKay pointed out that the program puts out a more coherent message to builders, "so they understand we're doing more than just a tank set." BuilderCare is designed to make the homebuilder's job easier and make him look good to the ultimate homeowner.

"When working with these builders, we hear that there are thousands of details in building that house," McKay stated. "BuilderCare provides our builder customers with assurance that the propane system in that house is not one of those thousands you have to worry about. We are simply going to take care of it."

Also like the CompleteCare program, BuilderCare is made up of several components. The first is propane system design. Sharp reviews the blueprints before the home is built to help the homebuilder design the system. It also helps the builder review the various appliance options to determine the appropriate tank size and location. "We help recommend ways to help builders reduce construction costs and make this a more efficient project for them."

Visiting the site where the home is going to be built is the next component of the program. The building plans provide an idea about the layout of the site, but until you actually visit the site, you can't appreciate the uniqueness

of each location, McKay stated. The company examines soil quality and depth to identify potential excavation requirements; identifies land elevation and drainage patterns to avoid pooling around the tank; ensures that the tank location is a safe distance from any structures or property lines; and evaluates tank access to ensure that regular gas deliveries can be completed safely. Information gathered at that visit helps Sharp make a firm proposal to the builder. "We make the proposal, tell you it's going to cost 'x,' and we're going to come in at 'x.' No surprises after that point."

Coordinating the Subcontractors

Professional installation is the next step in BuilderCare. Sharp coordinates timing with the builder and other subcontractors that are dependent on the gas system, completing the tank site excavation, setting the tank, and running the line to the house. The company then buries the tank and the line and performs an initial fill of the tank.

Inspection and activation is next. The builder will call Sharp once he's gotten final approval on plumbing and other installations. "We then install the regulators, connect that ground line that we had already put in the ground to the house, inspect all the appliances and connections, do our Safety Check, and sign off to the builder that the home is ready to go," McKay explained.

The last step is the transition of the home to the homeowner. Sharp helps the homeowner fill out the paperwork to receive any propane rebates from the Railroad Commission of Texas.

Sharp Propane will also do a walkthrough with the homeowner. "We see in all of our markets that many of these people are coming from areas where they've never had propane service," McKay remarked. "We're going to walk those homeowners through the home, show them where the shut-offs are, what appliances they have, and make sure they understand and have confidence in the system they just bought."

The company will also discuss the benefits of CompleteCare with the homeowner. "It sounds trivial, but we have had calls from people who have a new home and don't know who to call for propane," he noted. "That's not going to be a problem for our builders. We're going to take care of making them look good from start to finish."

"The home builder doesn't get paid until he builds the house," he continued. "He wants to build

it and do his work efficiently. Builder Care makes a commitment that the propane system won't be a cog in that wheel. Furthermore, after that home is sold and transitioned to the ultimate homeowner, we're going to make that builder look good with a long-term relationship with that homeowner, which hopefully will translate into repeat business for that homebuilder." —Daryl Lubinsky



Steve McKay is CEO of Sharp Propane, which has been in business for 61 years.