



Energy efficiency continues its evolution



Jim Caruk

By now, we should all know that energy-efficient home renovations are a good idea. Heating and cooling our homes accounts for about 15 per cent of the country's total greenhouse gas emissions.

So conserving energy is not only good for the planet, but you save money while doing it. In many cases, these efficiency renovations more than pay for themselves over the lifetime of the products used.

This week's column is about houses that are being designed and built to be completely energy neutral from day one.

Evolving energy efficiency: Most homeowners have likely heard about R-2000 homes. R-2000 is a federal government program designed to help builders develop cost-effective energy efficient homes. Another program, Energy Star, can be used to rate new homes that are 20 per cent more energy efficient than the building code calls for. Both are better than the average, but still consume a fair bit of energy.

For many builders and building scientists, the ultimate goal is to produce a house that produces more energy than it consumes. The term they've developed for that is "net-zero energy" housing, or net-zero for short. As futuristic as that sounds, the great news is that net-zero houses already exist in Canada, albeit on a pilot project basis.

Market leaders: Owens Corning is leading a pilot project working with five different builders in five cities — Halifax; Laval, Que.; Kanata, Ont.; Guelph, Ont.; and Calgary — to build at least 25 net-zero houses across the country. (Full disclosure: I'm a brand ambassador for Owens Corning.)

The Minto Group, a large construction and property management company, recently unveiled its model home for a net-zero house as part of a development in Kanata, a suburb of Ottawa, that will use 65-per-cent less energy compared to a standard house. When coupled with sufficient solar energy panels, the home will produce enough energy to supply all its owners' needs. How do they do it? A combination of energy-efficient equipment, well-sealed insulation and solar panels to provide power.

Energy smart: Net-zero homes are extremely frugal with the power



MARCUS OLENIUK/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

The ultimate goal is to build a house that produces more energy than it consumes.



This Minto home will use 65-per-cent less energy. On hand at the ribbon cutting were, from left, Salvatore Ciarlo of Owens Corning, Kevin Lee of Canadian Home Builders' Association, Marianne Wilkinson of the city of Ottawa, Andy Goyda of Owens Corning, Brent Strachan of Minto, Mark Taylor of Ottawa and Derek Hickson of Minto.

they consume. By now, we've all gotten used to swapping out the old energy-wasting incandescent light bulbs for CFLs. But now there are LED lights that are even more efficient than CFL bulbs that are available in a number of stylish designs. Kitchen appliances are Energy Star-rated, and use far less energy than conventional models.

Homeowners can also use home energy monitors to track where they're using the most energy to determine ways to further reduce the load. In some cases, that may just mean unplugging a few things. Many small electronics, from DVD players to toasters, consume small amounts of energy known as a "phantom load" even when they're

not in use simply to keep the clock running.

And, of course, the high-efficiency heating and cooling equipment is connected to a smart thermostat that conserves energy when no one is home.

Working on the "every drop counts" principle, these houses also use something called a drain-water

recovery (DWHR) system that extracts heat from the waste water heading to the sewer to preheat water coming in to your home before it goes into your hot-water tank. A DWHR, such as the made-in-Canada Power-Pipe, can save up to 40 per cent on water heating costs.

Heat wrap: Do you remember those ads where David Suzuki poked his head through a basketball-sized hole in the exterior walls of people's homes. It was a great way to visually show how much all the gaps in a drafty old home add up to.

Net-zero homes are completely air sealed, and insulated above-and-beyond what's currently called for in the building code. A well-insulated house not only keeps the heat in during the winter months, it keeps it out in summer — and helps your air conditioner work optimally.

The openings in the wall cavity for windows and doors are also filled with the most energy efficient models possible. At the Minto development in Kanata, the windows are all triple-paned glass.

Power plants: Of course, energy conservation is only part of the equation. To achieve net-zero status, a home has to create its own power. Unless you have a very large lot where you can install multiple turbines, wind power isn't really practical for supporting an entire house's needs.

Solar is the primary means of generating power. And as with computers, phones, and all the other technology in our lives, the cost of solar panels keeps going down while their ability to produce energy keeps going up.

I recently read about a company called SolarCity (co-founded by billionaire inventor Elon Musk, the guy behind the Tesla electric cars) that has developed a new solar panel that is cheaper to install but produces 30 per cent more energy than anything else on the market. (And if you're into the "shop local" movement, they're making them relatively close to home in Buffalo, N.Y.)

When you combine energy reduction, energy savings and energy production, it truly is possible to have a net-zero home.

Jim Caruk's column runs every two weeks in New in Homes & Condos. He's a master contractor, editor-in-chief of Renovation Contractor magazine, renovation editor for Reno & Decor magazine, and founder of the Renos for Heroes program and Build It Yourself Learning Centres in the GTA. Sign up for his e-newsletter at renocontractor.ca.

> ASK JOE

Real estate advertising must be clear and accurate



Joe Richer

Many real estate ads and flyers seem to suggest that a particular salesperson is "No. 1," or has the "most sales." They can't all be true. What's going on?

Real estate sales is a very competitive industry and the services and experience offered from one salesperson to another may vary significantly.

Flyers are one way salespersons

can differentiate themselves from the competition, but if the claims they make all seem very similar, it can be confusing.

The legislation governing real estate professionals provides several rules for advertising. In general, the rules prohibit advertising that is false, misleading, deceptive or inaccurate.

As you noted in your question, a common advertising claim is that the person is No. 1 in sales.

As with any claim, the starting point is that, if it's true, then it can be included in an advertisement. Of

course, something may be true but only over a certain time, in a certain location or for a certain type of real estate.

The claim that the salesperson is No. 1 in sales could be considered false if it cannot be backed up by data from an authoritative source, such as monthly or yearly statistics compiled by the brokerage or a real estate board.

It could also be considered a misleading statement if the ad leaves the wrong impression with the reader because it doesn't provide enough detail about the claim.

Is the salesperson No. 1 within the brokerage where they work, or within a specified neighbourhood? And during what time frame? If the claim is not specific, then the ad could inadvertently lead the reader to believe something other than what is true.

A deceptive statement takes that one step further, because it deliberately tries to mislead the reader by excluding context or facts required to verify the claim.

One form of an inaccurate statement in an ad is one that is imprecise.

An example of this could be the promise of a "\$1,000 cash-back" rebate without providing information about any limiting conditions attached to that rebate.

The general rule of thumb is that information to back up claims or promises has to appear clearly in the advertisement or in some other place (such as a website) to which the reader can be easily directed.

If, on the other hand, the claim is an obvious promotional catchphrase — such as, "the world's best-looking agent" — then that rule does not apply.

A salesperson might be the No. 1 salesperson in Bigtown, in 2012, according to a local newspaper poll

or according to their mother. Either way, it has to be clear in the ad.

Everything I have said about advertising professional services applies to advertisements about properties as well. You should be able to take what is said at face value based on the plain meaning of the words and phrases in the advertisement.

If you believe an advertisement is unclear, before filing a complaint with RECO, we encourage you to contact the brokerage for an explanation.

Advertisements are a convenient way to become aware of the real estate professionals who work in your neighbourhood, but your decision to enter into a representation agreement should not be based on an advertisement alone.

Interview a few candidates and ask probing questions about their experience, the services they offer and any claims made in their advertising — and check references before making a decision.

Joseph Richer is registrar of the Real Estate Council of Ontario (RECO). He oversees and enforces all rules governing real estate professionals in Ontario. Email questions to askjoe@reco.on.ca. Find more tips at reco.on.ca, follow on Twitter @RECOhelps or on YouTube at youtube.com/RECOhelps.

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