

# GREEN MARKETING IN HOUSING: REALITY OR RHETORIC?

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All new homes in the UK will be required to be zero carbon from 2016. Housing sector bodies and individual housing developers are championing a transition from traditional marketing to green marketing approaches to raise consumer awareness of the benefits of low and zero carbon homes. On-site sales teams on housing developments form a central interface between the developer and potential buyers. These teams, then, have a critical role in the success or otherwise of the developers' green marketing strategies. However, there is a dearth of empirical research that explores the actual attitudes and practices of these teams. An exploratory case study approach was adopted. The data collection consisted of reviewing relevant company documentation and semi-structure interviews with the on-site sales teams from six housing developments. The findings from two case studies suggest that the sales teams do have potential to forge a bridge between the design / production and consumption spheres in the way that consumers understand and appreciate, but further work is required. The sales teams' practices were constrained by the incumbent, traditional marketing logic that rotates around issues such as location and selling price. The sales teams appeared to adopt a strategy of a restriction of information about the benefits of low and zero carbon homes to not disturb the prevailing logic. Further, the sales teams justify this insulating mechanism by the argument that consumers are not interested in those benefits. This rhetoric may be driving a real wedge between the design / production and consumption spheres to the detriment of the consumer and, in the longer term, the house builder itself.

Keywords: zero carbon homes, green marketing, on-site sales.

## INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom (UK) Government has set out in the Code for the Sustainable Homes (hereafter the Code) that all new homes should be 'zero carbon' from 2016 (CLG, 2010). This requirement will, it is anticipated, be reflected in the 2016 Building Regulations Part L 'Conservation of Fuel and Power.' This ambitious 'zero-carbon target' potentially poses many challenges for both the new build housing industry and consumers (e.g. NHBC Foundation, 2012b; ZCH, 2010). For the industry, the target may significantly alter the way homes are built (e.g. NHBC Foundation, 2012b). For the consumers, the zero-carbon agenda may change "the design of the homes they will buy and in the way they will live day-to-day in these homes" (ZCH, 2010: 4).

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The industry and academic engagement in the zero-carbon agenda has followed a broad chronology of enquiry: design / production and consumption. In terms of design / production, research provides ample evidence of the implications of the zero carbon target for housing developers' business models, design and production templates (e.g. Lees and Sexton, forthcoming). In terms of consumption - a number of studies conclude that it is vital to engage with consumers in order to better understand their appetite for low and zero-carbon housing and the impact of occupant behaviour on the energy efficiency of a home (NHBC Foundation, 2012c; 2012a; 2011b; ZCH, 2010).

The proposition we make in this paper is twofold. First, we argue that the extant literature treats design/production and consumption as discrete spheres of logics and interests. The separation of these spheres has resulted in a lack of systemic understanding of their connectiveness and mutual shaping. Second, we suggest that a fruitful conduit to bring these spheres together is the discourse of green marketing. Anecdotal evidence suggests that consumers are not receptive to current 'green' marketing approaches being deployed by housing developers and that consumers' purchasing decisions are still driven by traditional criteria, for example, location (e.g. NHBC Foundation, 2012c; Kriese, 2009). The prescription to overcome this malaise that appears to be advocated by housing developers and academics is either carry on as before, under the assumption that the louder the marketing message of low and zero carbon homes the greater the chance that potential buyers will hear (e.g. NHBC Foundation, 2012c; ZCH, 2010; NESTA, 2008); or, to modify the marketing message to emphasise hedonistic benefits, especially lower energy bills (e.g. ZCH, 2010). Both prescriptions appear not to be working. We argue that if green marketing is to be effective in closing the gap between production and consumption, there needs to be a shift from generic corporate approaches to a more local, nuanced understanding of the complex 'interaction spaces' of house builders and potential buyers on specific housing developments.

Reframed in this problematic, a new actor group that takes central importance is the on-site marketing and sales teams on housing developments. Empirical research into the interests and practices of this actor group is surprisingly quiet in the relevant literature. Research conducted by the NHBC Foundation (2011a: 18) into the handover practices of home builders show that 43 % of site sales staff undertakes / are involved in the handover process, followed by 31% of the site manager or someone in the build team, 11 % of customer care or after sales staff, 4 % contractors and 10 % others (project managers or surveyors). The results indicate that the on-site marketing and sales teams have a critical role in communicating (or failing to communicate) the benefits of low and zero carbon homes to consumers. The sales teams also form a potentially powerful feedback mechanism to convey to consumers' low-carbon requirements and preferences back to the design teams within housing developers.

This paper presents case study findings that give insight into "do on-site sales and marketing teams have a role in bridging the design / production and consumption spheres in the way that consumers understand and appreciate?" The structure of this paper is as follows. First, key literature will be reviewed which illuminates, to iterate the polarised treatment that renders design / production and consumption as discrete spheres, and that the conduit between the two takes the form of new corporate 'green marketing' approaches. Second, the research methodology for the case studies is presented. Third, interim findings from these studies are given. Finally, conclusions are drawn.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Design / production and consumption perspectives**

There is growing body of literature that emphasises the potential impact of low and zero carbon homes on house builders. The Energy Saving Trust (2011), for example, identify that the biggest challenge faced by housing developers in the construction of ten zero carbon homes was to reduce heat loss from the properties and that the housing developers needed to change their standard designs and construction methods, such as increasing the levels of insulation and the use of different materials [1]. Lees and Sexton (forthcoming), for instance, provide survey data that show the selection of low and zero carbon (LZC) technologies [2] by volume house builders to meet the desired Code level is based on a logic of minimisation of disruption to their standard design and production templates.

The limitations of such a design / production loci are beginning to be noted by a broad range of commentators that concentrate on a variety of perspectives and levels of resolution. Boardman et al. (2005) provide a normative context that consumers have become more environmentally aware and have a desire for more energy efficient / low carbon homes. The precise form of this consumer awareness and motivation is given hedonistic shape by the work of commentators such as Caird et al. (2007) and Ginsberg and Bloom (2004) that emphasise that consumers are driven by the allure of energy savings and enhanced comfort levels.

This part of the literature landscape, then, is cleaved by two loci: the commercial and technical considerations of the house builders and the potential hedonistic benefits to the consumers. The gulf between the two loci is eluded to, and given substance by, a number of different concerns. Research has stressed the role of occupant behaviour in determining whether or not the potentiality of energy efficient homes are realised. Gill et al. (2011), for example, lay bare the reality that all consumers are different in terms of energy use and, as a consequence, occupant behaviour may undermine overall building performance. Similarly, Bell et al. (2010) report findings that where LZC technologies were installed, residents did not understand and were unable to use the system. Further, case study research has stressed that house builders are not adequately engaging with consumers to understand their interests and behaviours. A study by Lees and Sexton (2012) indicate that a lack of engagement with consumers around the LZC technologies installed in new build developments caused tensions and misunderstandings of the system. The vagaries of consumer behaviours has led to a growing call by housing sector bodies, in particular, for house builders to recognise the significant impact on the 'as designed' energy performance of new homes (NHBC Foundation, 2012a; 2011b).

The need to knit together the design / production and consumption aspects of low and zero carbon homes is coming into the focus in the relevant literature. The means to achieve this integration is not so clear, but one growing solution being driven by the house builders themselves is to deploy effective green marketing strategies.

### **Marketing of low and zero carbon homes**

Green marketing of low and zero carbon homes to consumers has recently taken centre stage in the eyes of the housing development sector itself. We understand green marketing as “the application of marketing tools to facilitate exchanges that satisfy organisational and individual goals in such a way that the preservation, protection and conservation of the natural environment is upheld” (Mintu and Lozada,

1993: 2); and, “the holistic management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying the requirements of customers and society, in a profitable and sustainable way” (Peattie, 1995: 28).

There are two key publications that set out the general terrain and characteristics of this gathering interest. The first one is the ‘marketing tomorrow’s new homes’ report which aims to explore marketing opportunities for low and zero home homes, and by doing so, offers to “inform the development of marketing plans and help accelerate the generation of the market for low and zero home homes” (ZCH, 2010: 3). The polarisation between the developer and consumer view on low and zero home homes in the current marketing context was highlighted, stating that: “developers will currently engage if it’s right for their business. Consumers will only engage if it’s right for their lifestyle” (ZCH, 2010: 3). This report further argues that “the re-framing of the argument towards a customer-centric perspective in which there is clear, beneficial and recognisably secure sales proposition, reflecting innovation rather than risk, is considered central to successful market development” (ZCH, 2010: 3). The second one is ‘today’s attitudes to low and carbon zero homes’ report which reveals the current thoughts, awareness and understanding towards issues such as climate change, the Code, the 2016 zero carbon definition, airtightness and renewable technologies” (NHBC Foundation, 2012c). Underpinning these two reports, the key theme that can be discerned is that low and zero carbon home marketing endeavours made by housing developers need to be directly relevant to individuals’ concerns / interests.

These influential reports begin to sketch out the need for more effective green marketing but also detail some of the significant problems that need to be addressed to deliver against this goal; particularly the polarised design / production perspective of the house builders and the consumption interest of consumers.

To reiterate, the prescription to overcome this malaise that appears to be advocated by housing developers and academics is to either carry on as before, under the assumption that the louder the marketing message of low and zero carbon homes the greater the chance that potential buyers will hear; or, to modify the marketing message to emphasise hedonistic benefits, especially lower energy bills. Both prescriptions appear not to be working. To further iterate, the proposition that guides the research reported in this paper is whether or not on-site sales and marketing teams have a role in green marketing that mobilises and brings together both the design / production and consumption spheres of interest. More specifically, the research question for this paper is "do on-site sales and marketing teams have a role in bridging the design / production and consumption spheres in the way that consumers understand and appreciate?"

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

An exploratory case study approach was adopted (Yin, 2009). As the new housing is a concentrated sector and is dominated by a number of volume house builders, six housing developments from one large volume house builder were selected. Selection criteria for each of the case studies included type of unit (housing, apartments, mixed), type of housing (social, private, mixed housing), type of site (greenfield, brownfield, mixed), the desired code level being achieved (e.g. Code level 3), type of low and zero carbon technology (e.g. solar thermal) and project progress (e.g. completed).

The data collection consisted of the review of relevant company documentation (e.g. site plans) and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were carried out through face-to-face with the on-site sales and marketing team representatives from each of the six new housing developments. Before starting the interviews, a generic semi-structured interview protocol was prepared and pretested. All of the interviews were carried out at site offices and by doing so, giving the researcher a direct insight into each development. Each interview was around one hour in length. The interview data was captured by note-taking and audio-tape recording and then was transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were made anonymous before being analysed.

Interview transcripts were analysed using the 'pattern matching technique' (Yin, 2009: 136). We looked for similar or contrasting discussions of the theoretical propositions. Our pattern matching started with the notion of interest / no interest of customers in the benefits of low and zero carbon homes. We further explored the different rationales of their interests (e.g. consumers are more interested in location or budget of the house).

## **INTERIM FINDINGS**

### **Corporate green marketing messages**

One large volume house builder was selected for this research. The central corporate green marketing messages that the house builder conveys are as follows. First, the developer recognises that building homes has a significant impact on the environment. In response, the company has implemented a number of initiatives to minimise waste and reduce energy and to ensure their homes meet Level 4 of the Code. Second, the developer advertises its new homes as being more eco-friendly than older properties and this is through the installation of the latest energy saving devices and insulation. Finally, the developer emphasises that their homes will reduce consumers' energy bills.

### **Description of the case studies**

This paper will report on the interim results emerging from two out of the six case studies. The first chosen case study (Case 1) is a large urban mixed used redevelopment located within a city in Southern England. The site consists of 129 houses and apartments. The site is brownfield and has achieved a Code Level 4 standard. The low and zero carbon (LZC) technologies being installed are air source heat pumps (ASHP), solar photovoltaics (PV), mechanical ventilation heat recovery (MVHR) and solar thermal. One sales advisor was interviewed and his job was to offer information to potential buyers and sell the apartments. The second chosen case study (Case 2), sitting in a greenfield site, is a large two phased development for both private and social housing, located in a county in the East of England. The development consists of 59 social houses and apartments, and 90 private houses. The development is built to a Code Level 3 standard and is expected to be completed in June 2013. The LZC technologies adopted include solar thermal (private and social units), solar PV (social units only) and MVHR (social units only). One sales manager was interviewed and her responsibility was to oversee the development and put together the specification brochures.

### **Are consumers interested in low and zero carbon homes?**

A recurring theme from the on-site sales and marketing teams was that consumers were not interested in the benefits of low and zero carbon homes. The sales manager of Case 2 expressed the view that:

"... very, very rarely does anybody actually ask us about energy efficiency ... Not at the point of viewing the houses, even at the point of actually going through the legal process with solicitors ... solicitors don't even actually ask questions ... about anything energy efficient ... Nobody ever actually comes in and says to us, oh, we're so pleased with how the solar water panel's working. It's not something anybody actually ever mentions ... I mean, realistically they do save money on their gas bills because of it..."

The rationale for this position expounded by the sales manager of Case 2 was that consumers took the energy efficient benefits as a 'given' and were more interested in other features:

"... I think in general, people who are coming to look at a new house appreciate that a new house is going to be more energy efficient than an old house. I think that's why a lot of people want to buy new, because they know they haven't got any work to do, they won't have any maintenance to do for quite some time. And I think they appreciate, I think they do realise that as builders we're obviously using all the latest technology and everything we need to use to make it as energy efficient as possible ... I don't think that's maybe why they actually raise it as a particular question. I think they already take onboard that it's a new house, it's going to be warmer, it's all built with modern technology, so it's going to be as it should be. And I think maybe that's why people don't question it maybe."

When consumers were interested in the benefits of the low and zero carbon homes, the interest tended to be narrowly defined in terms of saving money, but, again, were not interested in the detail of the technologies to achieve this. The sales advisor of Case 1, for example, pointed out that they did not believe that the buyers wanted to know about the technologies incorporated, but instead their primary interest was the money saving potential of the new homes by stating that:

"... especially with what's happening in the press where all the energy companies have just put their prices up, and of course customers have spent a lot of money on their new home, if we've already incorporated it [the technology] the customer is much more happy to have that rather than pay extra in years to come to have solar panels installed or to have, specific installation installed, we've already got it in situ... They [customers] are pleased, they've got it as a peace of mind and it's all in their new home without an initial expense from them"

The 'peace of mind' (but technology out of mind!) benefit was further pushed by the sales teams by using the five year warranty as a means to pacify potential concerns. The sales manager of Case 2, for example, expressed that:

"... low maintenance is probably the biggest selling point that most people would latch onto that we talk about. Because it is, I mean, if you move into a new home, there is no maintenance, it's all, you've obviously got a five year warranty with HD42's [the developer], so they have peace of mind with that."

### **So what are consumers more interested in according to the sales teams?**

The results indicate that the sales team believed that the consumers' principal interest was in house price (budget), followed by location - not in energy efficiency. The observation of 'budget' being the most crucial thing for potential buyers is captured by the sales manager of Case 2 who noted that:

"... obviously what happens is, when we launch a development ... People would come into the office, or they'll phone up to make an appointment. We would sit them down, go through their details, find out what they were looking for, size, type, whether they wanted terraced, semi-detached, detached, an apartment, depending on what their budgets were. Budget is obviously the most important thing, and the most crucial thing. And that's really which is the, probably the most important thing that leads all our purchasers. In the main, it's budget."

Further, it was found that the location of a new housing development (in particular its proximity to services and facilities) influence consumer choice. The sales manager of Case 2, for example, explained that:

"... Location, without a doubt has been here because of the schools. We've had a very good mix of properties here, we've got everything from a two bedroom apartment up to a five bedroom house. So it has been about location, it's been about a particular property type. And it's been about budget ... what they can buy for their money ... What was included in the price, in terms of incentives? Who was next door? Was it next to affordable? Could you hear the train station? All that sort of thing. But, there was no mention of energy efficiency."

### **Consumer differentiation?**

It was found that the sale teams 'classified' consumers and altered the message depending on the consumer-type: those that were receptive to technology (the minority of people) and those that were not interested / resisted technology (the majority of people). This observation was captured by the sales advisor of Case 1 who noted that:

"It's split in to two categories. Yes, you've got the scientist type of person that wants to fiddle with everything and see how it works, wants to know the ins and outs of it and then you've got the other people that are technophobes that haven't got a clue how it works."

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The results can be read in two different ways. On the surface, the on-site sales and marketing teams appear to be justifying not communicating and translating the benefits of low and zero carbon homes with the argument that the consumers themselves were not interested in these features. But is this justification warranted or a convenient rhetoric to insulate the sales teams themselves from having to actively engage with the consumers on this topic? This is an empirical question that requires on-going fieldwork.

What is clear, though, is that there is a definite gap between the rhetoric of the corporate green marketing advocating the benefits of low and zero carbon homes and the translation of this message by on-site sales teams. In reality, there is evidence that the sales teams are reproducing the divide between the design / production benefits and the consumption benefits from the perspective of the consumer. Indeed, the sales

teams are implicitly placing the responsibility on the consumer to seek and calibrate the benefits. The ZCH (2010) lament a polarisation between the developer's and consumer's view of low and zero carbon homes is evident.

The underpinning research question for this paper was: "do on-site sales and marketing teams have a role in bridging the design / production and consumption spheres in the way that consumers understand and appreciate?" The interim findings from two case studies suggest that the sales teams do have potential to forge a bridge, but further work is required. We can speculate that their practices were constrained by the incumbent, traditional marketing logic that rotates around issues such as location and selling price. The results indicate that the sales teams adopt a strategy of a restriction of information about the benefits of low and zero carbon homes to not disturb the prevailing logic. Further, the sales teams justify this insulating mechanism by the argument that consumers are not interested in those benefits. This rhetoric may be driving a real wedge between the design / production and consumption spheres to the detriment of the consumer and, in the longer term, the house builder itself.

## NOTES

[1] In the UK, Building Regulations Part L on energy efficiency requires housing developers to meet certain standard which covers energy used in home for heating, hot water and lighting (Broer and Titheridge, 2010). There is significant potential for achieving such requirement through technological measures such as fabric solution (ZCH, 2009), use of high-performance glazing, efficient heating systems and low and zero carbon technologies (CLG, 2010; Boardman, 2007).

[2] A LZC technology is defined as "a technology that can provide heating, cooling or power (or a combination of outputs) and will be powered solely by renewable energy (zero carbon) or powered in part by fossil fuels (low carbon)" (Bevan and Lu, 2012). Examples of LZC technologies include, but are not strictly limited to: solar PV, solar thermal, wind power, hydro power, heat pumps (ground/air/water), combined heat and power, biomass boiler, MVHR and fuel cells.

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