

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

COMMUNICATION IS THE KEY TO A SUCCESSFUL LOG-HOME PROJECT



Builders aren't mind readers, so log-home owners need to communicate clearly to ensure that the home meets their expectations.

STORY BY JIM COOPER
PHOTO BY WISCONSIN LOG HOMES

Most log homes begin as someone's dream, intangible visions floating in the imagination. For many people, they remain only fantasies, like sailing around the world or scaling the world's highest peak. But for some, the dream is the first step on a path leading to the real comfort and security of living in a log home. In transforming the dream to reality, expectations arise. Realizing the dream depends on how realistic those expectations are.

The expectations of most prospective log-home owners include the appearance of their proposed dream home, its design and the quality of its construction. But

there are other expectations. The log-home company, the builder, subcontractors and the lender all expect something of the homeowner and of each other.

As long as everyone's expectations are being met, the project proceeds smoothly. But when expectations become unbalanced, the process begins to stumble. It may be just a brief stagger with little interruption in transforming the log home from dream to reality, or it may be a serious stumble that can threaten the project's success. Understanding and communicating expectations, then, is critical to realizing your log-home dream. So let's take a look at some of the common expectations in building a log home, starting with the future homeowner.

Most log-home buyers expect that the house will turn out precisely as they envision it. Since log-home company representatives, builders and subcontractors aren't usually mind readers, we have a challenge right away. Somehow the homeowners have to communicate their vision to all parties responsible for making the dream real. Usually communication starts with talks between log-home shoppers and a log-home company sales representative. The shoppers try to describe their vision; the representative tries to visualize it and set a price. This step is especially aggravating for shoppers because dreams are free, reality isn't.

The gravest error that shoppers commit is not presenting the sales rep with some tangible description of their dream

home: a detailed list of features, a collection of photographs or sketches, or a dimensioned floor plan. It isn't necessary to have all this when first sitting down to discuss a project, but before making any decisions or commitments, there should be something more real than verbal descriptions. The following scene reveals why.

Homebuyer: "I want my living room to have a cathedral ceiling."

Sales representative: "This floor plan has a cathedral over the great room. It's a standard feature."

(Months pass. Construction is under way, the roof is on, and interior framing is nearly complete.)

Homebuyer: "The great room is perfect. But when are you going to put in the wooden ceiling and the big beams?"

Sales representative (apprehensively): "You never mentioned exposed beams or wooden ceilings. They aren't included in your package."

Homebuyer (agitated): "But I said I wanted a cathedral ceiling. I thought all cathedral ceilings in log homes were wood with exposed beams."

Sales representative (becoming nervous): "No, the kind of ceiling you're talking about is an option. It's much more expensive than the type of ceiling you have here. It wouldn't have fit in the budget that you gave me,



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and you never said anything about it.”

Homebuyer (more agitated): “You never told me it wasn’t included. You should have asked. How much will adding it now cost?”

Sales representative (furiously working a calculator): “Well, the tongue-and-groove will run about \$2,200, plus installation. You’ll have to get that price from the builder. Exposed beams could run from \$800 to \$1,600, depending on the kind you want and how many, plus installation.”

Homebuyer (frustrated and angry): “That’s almost \$4,000, not counting installation!”

What happens next is anybody’s guess. They may be able to work out a solution, or this could be the first of a series of disappointments—all growing out of failure on both sides. The homebuyer failed to communicate the exact type of ceiling he expected. The sales rep failed to communicate his expectation of a complete description of the homebuyer’s desires. The homebuyer could have avoided the failure by showing the sales rep a photograph from a magazine and saying, “We want our great room to look like this.”

This is a very general example. Most company reps I know routinely ask whether a customer wants wooden ceilings or exposed beams. However, because most log homes represent unique visions, a host of similar details can be overlooked if sales rep and homebuyer don’t communicate their expectations adequately.

Communicating expectations is just as important between log-home buyers and builders or subcontractors. A classic area of miscommunication concerns how a house is trimmed. Homebuyers may visit a rep’s model home and fall in love with the sanded, highly varnished logs and custom trim around windows and doors. Unless they ask, they may not discover that the log finish was done by the rep himself, and the trim was custom-shaped by the builder from the trim stock supplied as part of the log company’s package.

Next, the homebuyer gathers bids for construction from subcontractors or gives a builder the material list for the log-home package. The builder asks about log finish and receives the response, “Just varnish them, I don’t want any stain.” What the buyer really means is, “Pressure-wash the logs, sand them smooth and use a sanding sealer before varnish.” The two carry a different price tag, and unless there is an understanding of expectations before finish work starts, another misunderstanding may be on the way. Some builders and finishers will ask detailed questions; others will bid only on what they have been specifically instructed to include as a finish coating to the logs.

Meanwhile, the trim carpenter, having built several homes for this particular manufacturer, knows that the

trim included is plain pine lumber. The customers he has worked with have preferred a rustic look obtained simply and inexpensively by applying the trim lumber as it comes from the manufacturer. So that is how he will bid the job. Meanwhile, the homebuyer is expecting a bid that includes shaping the trim with a router or shaper, cutting out knots and finish sanding before applying varnish. Again, potential conflicts can be avoided with a simple photograph or sketch, or by saying, “I’d like my trim to look like the trim you did for Fred and Betty’s house.”

These are just a few ways log-home dreams can go awry when expectations aren’t communicated clearly. A generalization that may help you understand the need for clear communication is this: Never expect a builder or subcontractor to voluntarily include something in a bid beyond what is necessary to complete the job. Building and subcontracting are competitive businesses. Assuming that a homeowner wants something done a more expensive way means presenting a higher bid with a greater possibility of losing. Although homeowners constantly talk about not wanting a “low-bid” house, most subcontractors have enough experience to know what happens when they are underbid.

Another tool to avoid miscommunicating expectations is a specification sheet. These “spec” sheets can be used to specify everything from foundations to plumbing and lighting fixtures. Professionals use them to assure that projects go smoothly and that everyone’s expectations are understood. Books on building log homes and conventional homes often carry sample specification sheets. If you are uncomfortable developing your own specifications, you might consider hiring an architect or building consultant with experience in log homes. Either one can help you recognize expectations that you might not otherwise think to communicate.

A major benefit of using spec sheets is the assurance that all potential builders or subcontractors have the same information to prepare bids. Often, log-home dreams evolve as the dreamers visit various company reps, builders and subcontractors. Without a written specification sheet, it’s sometimes impossible to tell if the plumbing bid you received from George last week covers the same things as the bid you got from Harry last month.

So, make your log-home dream realistic by analyzing and communicating expectations. Building a log home without taking this simple step is like landing an airplane at night without instruments or lights. You will certainly reach the ground; you just have to hope it’s when and where you want to.

Jim Cooper is the author of *Log Homes Made Easy* and the *Log Homes Made Easy Log Home Project Planner*.