



Contractor Participation

Contractors that can deliver whole-house retrofit services are essential to Home Performance with ENERGY STAR. Unfortunately, one common market barrier is a limited supply of qualified contractors with the skills to diagnose and sell whole-house energy efficiency improvements. Even if homeowners get recommendations from an energy audit to improve their home, they typically don't know who is qualified to make the improvements. A key strategy to overcome this barrier is to help develop a local network of qualified professionals.

Program administrators play a crucial role in encouraging contractors to deliver energy efficiency improvements. Offering technical training to participating home improvement trade contractors is one place to start. But there are other activities, in addition to training, that can help achieve successful contractor participation. These activities start with recruiting reputable businesses that have adopted or are prepared to adopt a whole-house approach. In addition to training, mentoring can reinforce training and help contractors transition to a new business approach. A participation agreement can help clarify expectations and ensure a contractor's commitment to follow program guidelines and outline the sponsor's obligations to the contractor. And finally, incentives can help to reward contractors that help the program reach established goals. These activities are described in more detail below.

Recruitment

Understanding what motivates contractors to adopt home performance contracting is a key to encouraging contractor participation. Some common reasons include:

- Opportunity for business growth,
- Strategy to improve quality and customer satisfaction,
- Solution to reduce down time or seasonal workload fluctuation,
- Gain a competitive edge, and
- Achieve higher profit margins.

It is also helpful to understand the key challenges to contractor participation. These challenges include:

- Not enough time – overworked and too busy managing a business,
- Reluctance to adopt products and practices with a limited track record,
- Inexperience marketing new products and services,
- Limited knowledge of home performance contracting
- Satisfaction with current success – not interested in new approaches, and
- Uncomfortable selling solutions – prefer to compete on price.

It is very important to emphasize these motivations and address these challenges in any contractor recruitment activity. Many program sponsors have found it valuable to offer an introductory class on the benefits of home performance consulting or contracting. This training



typically includes a classroom presentation of basic building science principles, demonstration of diagnostic tools, and a contractor testimony describing how adding home performance services has improved business.

Training

Contractors must meet minimum skill requirements to participate in the program and will likely need some level of technical training. Training should include classroom and field sessions and cover building science principles, diagnostic testing and installation best practices. Written exams and field testing can be used to ensure contractors are skilled to begin performing work under the program.

Two factors that typically limit contractor participation in training are: time and cost. Program administrators need to find the right balance to ensure that training is accessible to contractors that are serious about participating.

There are several sources of good technical training so program sponsors should not feel obligated to develop training. However, program administrators do play a role in facilitating training opportunities for contractors.

In addition to technical training, some program administrators have offered sales and business process training to help contractors succeed in selling and delivering quality home performance services. Training elements geared toward helping create internal procedures for quality assurance, employee training, and understanding program incentives or financing can help programs achieve quality and reach goals.

For several years, Austin Energy has been working to develop a network of home performance contractors. Benefits offered by the program have included discounted training; cooperative advertising; monthly meetings to discuss the program, new technologies and strategies for resolving problems; and public recognition awards. Austin Energy has been providing training to participating contractors for years and also encourages technicians to achieve professional certifications.

Mentoring

Establishing in-field mentoring opportunities is a valuable way to ensure that contractors are skilled to offer whole-house improvements. Mentoring provides hands-on experience performing diagnostic tests, making recommendations, developing a scope of work and installing improvements to best practice standards. Program administrators typically bring in experts to guide participating contractors through their initial projects and help them transition their business to deliver home performance.

Participation Agreements

Participating contractors should be required to sign a participation agreement that explains program policies and procedures. The agreement should cover issues such as general liability insurance, maintaining appropriate business licenses, and homeowner complaint/dispute resolution procedures.

The contractor participation agreement should require the contractor to commit to:

- Follow an approved whole-house assessment process
- Present cost-effective recommendations based on findings from visual and diagnostic inspections;
- Meet consensus-based building science standards for all work performed;
- Follow program quality assurance procedures;

- Report completed home performance projects to the program administrator;
- Train staff to respond to customer inquiries about Home Performance with ENERGY STAR; and
- Follow Home Performance with ENERGY STAR's logo use guidelines.

Note that participating contractors are not ENERGY STAR partners and are not certified or endorsed by ENERGY STAR, EPA or DOE.

Contractor Incentives

Some programs have offered discounts on training or financing to purchase equipment. Subsidizing training, certification or equipment will encourage contractor participation, but should be contingent on completing specific milestones, such as passing certification tests and reporting information about the projects completed. This will help focus contractors on accomplishing program goals. Only participating contractors will have access to a wide variety of marketing ads, brochures and sales guides that will position them in front of homeowners. Awards and public recognition are also effective incentives.

The New York State Energy Research and Development Authority has offered financial assistance to help participating contractors purchase necessary diagnostic equipment (e.g. blower doors, infrared camera) and become accredited through the Building Performance Institute. Each of these actions can help increase the number of qualified contractors and build a sustainable network of professionals who can deliver whole-house energy improvements.