

# Selling Windows—Virtually

WHILE A FEW HOME IMPROVEMENT COMPANIES LOOK TO FIND A WAY TO BYPASS THE IN-HOME SALES APPOINTMENT, ONE COMPANY ALREADY HAS

BY JIM CORY / SENIOR CONTRIBUTING EDITOR



Zen Windows franchisees Brandon Mackie (foreground), Mak Sato (center), and Matt Rotondi, check on their leads while attending the Angie's List Festival of Service event in Indianapolis. Angie's List is a major lead source for the company, which sells most of its jobs online.

**W**hen Helene Slutsky, of Columbus, Ohio, looks for a product or service, she does what most people do; she turns to the internet. So, when a few years ago she began preparing her house for sale and realized she needed to replace some windows, she typed “window replacement” and her ZIP code into Google’s search bar. A company called Zen Windows came up in the results. Slutsky went first to the company’s website, then read some reviews. She was particularly intrigued by the idea that an in-home salesperson would not be involved in the transaction and that the sale would take place online.

Whether or not she realized it, Slutsky was the ideal Zen customer. She was tech savvy, regularly bought products online, and had had less-than-positive experiences with home improvement salespeople. Fifteen years before, she’d set out to replace some windows in a home in Kansas City that she owned and had contacted a local company there. “A guy rolls up, opens this pitch book, and starts right in on the hard sell,” she recalls. “It was intimidating.”

## We Want a Bid

When Zen Windows was founded in 1998, owner Dan Wolt decided to build his brand around the idea of minimal sales contact. Instead of the “five-hour sales presentation” some home improvement companies were infamous for, Wolt’s would take five minutes. It worked.

But eight years ago, when Wolt’s family grew with the addition of triplets, he had an epiphany: “I was working in my house, watching all these UPS and FedEx trucks deliver products to people. I thought: If that’s the direction things are going in, why not windows?” The same day, Wolt got an email from a homeowner in Lebanon, Pa.—eight hours from Columbus—who’d read an online article about Zen and wanted a bid on 27 windows. Wolt calculated what it would cost for the project manager and installers to get to Lebanon and back. He worked that into the pricing and sent the bid by email.

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"Forty-eight seconds later, bid accepted," Wolt recalls. From that point on, virtual became part of the Zen business model.

### Going Franchise

Moving to an online model simplified Zen to the point where Wolt was convinced it could be franchised. He launched the franchise operation three years ago, working with Scott Groves, Zen's first franchisee and former Clear Choice Windows executive, whose title is President of National Expansion. The first year, they signed six dealers. This year there are 31 franchises.

"I liked that I didn't have to be a salesman," says Denver franchisee and one-time window installer Brandon Mackie, whose wife found Zen in a magazine.

Matt Rotondi, a former home improvement company salesperson who owns the Boston franchise, says he found out about Zen when a friend, also in the home improvement business, called to tell him: There's a company that does this online. To which Rotondi responded, "There's no way you can do this online." What he found out, he says, is that there is an abundance of prospects prepared to buy windows from a company offering "low pressure and plenty of information," and they will do so online.

### Not Playing That Game

Fast forward to 2016 and two things make the idea of selling a job online more appealing. One is technology.

Smartphones make electronic communication a near constant for many people, particularly younger consumers. In addition, technology has evolved on the estimating end as well. Software that can map the dimensions of every square inch of a roof or walls from digital images now makes highly accurate pricing possible without anyone having to whip out a measuring tape.

The other change is in consumer awareness. Review sites and social media can often provide homeowners with all of the information they want or need to choose a contractor. Those sites have also blown the whistle on high-pressure sales tactics. Take, for instance, Atlanta homeowner Patrick Scullin. Not long ago, Scullin answered a knock on the door. Canvassers from a home improvement company said the company was working in the area and asked if Scullin would be interested in a price on new windows? Scullin agreed to a sales appointment the following morning. Then he went online to research the company. Within an hour, he canceled the appointment. "I could see from their reviews that all these people [they'd done work for] hated them," Scullin says. "They put you in a pressure-cooker scenario, and then, once you buy, the follow-through is nonexistent."

From there, Scullin went back online and contacted another replacement window company. The sales reps went through "an incredible sales presentation," he recalls. "After two hours, they spring the price. Our jaws were on the floor." Another hour, and two

Homeowners who are used to installers coming to do the job, finding unforeseen conditions, and being hit with a price adjustment, are pleasantly surprised by Zen Windows: The initial quoted price is *the* price, and you only pay when the job is done and you're completely satisfied.

or three price drops later, “we told them that this is a significant investment and we’re not going to buy today. I’m not playing that game.” Instead, Scullin emailed the local Zen Windows franchise a list of windows and measurements, plus photos of some of the custom windows in his house. Within an hour he had a price, which he accepted.

**How It Works**

Interested homeowners either call the local Zen office or email ZenWindows.com. The company requests basic information—size and number of openings—and emails the homeowner PDFs of detailed product information. Zen or one of its franchises can then email a bid to the homeowner within five minutes, follow up to answer any questions and, if the bid is acceptable, schedule a visit by the company’s installation manager.

Window prices, Wolt points out, are standardized, so the company knows what materials will cost and can calculate per-opening installation costs based on its relationships with subcontracted installers. “We might Google the address,” Rotondi says. “You need to know how many windows and the color, but it’s pretty basic after that. Nine times out of 10, you can give them a price quickly.”

When the Zen production manager arrives at the house, he remeasures and inspects the openings. But




06/2016

“... Ordering was extremely easy and the owner’s responses to my emails were almost immediate. Within minutes he gave me a price per window, and based on that price, all I had to do was tell him how many I could afford ... upon receipt of the final quote (another whole 5 minutes). I accepted it and waited until the windows arrived. ... This company is efficient! The only visits to my house were by Bruce for measuring. He was also very responsive. ... I know nothing about windows but [Zen’s] online videos explained details and helped me decide what was best for me. So, so easy! And you don’t pay until after the installation! That’s integrity. ... No salesperson in my home was probably the clincher for my purchase. I did my own research and I like that. I am one happy customer!

Excerpt from customer review of Zen Windows posted on Angie’s List

the price doesn’t change. The initial price given is *the* price—even if the production manager finds rotting wood or other unforeseen conditions, which Wolt says only occurs on about 5 percent of Zen’s jobs.

The appeal to homeowners is not so much the product as it is the process. It’s “simple and seamless,” says Zen franchisee Brad Blavat, in Milwaukee. “We make it apparent that we’re not going to waste [the homeowner’s] time.” 

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**INTO THE FUTURE**

While the old knock-on-the-door sales model may remain effective for some companies selling to certain demographic segments, it’s clear that there are plenty of homeowners who will buy differently, given an online option.

“We know that there is a larger and larger segment of the consumer base that is more educated and tired of games, gimmicks, and tricks,” says Scott Groves, Zen Windows’ first franchisee and a former Clear Choice Windows executive. “They want the price, they want information, and they want to do their own research and look at reviews. Those are the people we target.”

Asked why more companies haven’t followed suit, he cites “the traditionalism of the home improvement industry, of people who say, ‘I’ve done it this way for 35 years, so it will always work.’”

The reality, he adds, is that “the technology is there and it makes the purchasing process so much simpler.”

Others have noticed. Online retail giant Amazon, for instance, is already offering an array of pre-priced services such as toilet replacement (\$185.95) through its Amazon Home Services.

Ultimately, home improvement companies that want to stay competitive may not have a choice in the matter.

Consumers who buy online once are inclined to want to buy that way again. Homeowner and Zen Windows customer Helene Slutsky, who says she orders “everything from diapers to gluten-free cake mix and softball helmets” from Amazon Prime, would be more than open to doing business with contractors in a similar fashion if the project didn’t involve décor. Buying a new roof, say, would be just fine. “I absolutely would get an online quote from someone,” she says. “I would look at referrals and do my own due diligence.” —*JC*