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SOAKING IN HOT IDEAS

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INNOVATION



AARON VINCENT ELKAIM FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Corey Libfeld is proud of his Home Decor Centre, where home buyers use a scan gun to get information on thousands of options and upgrades, and build a digital shopping list.

Breaking all the rules

Conservatory Group, Rogers team up to provide cutting-edge services to smaller builders

HEATHER GREENWOOD DAVIS
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Corey Libfeld is on a mission to change the dynamic between builder and buyer. And it's all thanks to technology that's exciting enough to warrant proprietary trademarks, an infrastructure partnership with

Rogers and eager acceptance among new home buyers and small home builders alike.

The youngest of the Libfeld brothers, known mostly for the Conservatory Group founded by their father, Teddy, is convinced that his pet project — the Home Decor Cen-

tre — is revolutionizing the way you will think of your builder

Goodbye, "just sign, pay and go." Hello, "let's partner on the long-term project that is your home."

"This is something I always wanted to do," says Libfeld. "I thought there was a need for consumers to have a one-stop shop where they don't have to run around to find all the different kinds of products to make their home what they want it

to be and where we could offer them that convenience."

Built in 2003, the centre was different from the outset. The typical procedure is to send clients to a backroom at their point of purchase or to a remote warehouse to choose their tiles, sinks and countertops. Instead, they built a 15,000-square-foot showcase venue with

DECOR continued on H12

One-stop shop helps buyers makes smart choices

DECOR from H1

custom millwork and architectural features worthy of a custom home in the centre of their target market at Yonge St. and Clarke Ave. in Thornhill

Along the way, they spent two years working with programmers to develop technology that gives buyers more power in understanding their options, selections and costs in the centre. Every item in the centre has a bar code. When the time comes to work with your design consultant, you're handed a scanning device about the size of a smartphone. Then you and the consultant work your way through the showroom scanning and deciding what to keep as standard and what to upgrade.

The centre then worked with Rogers to make sure that the technology worked together.

Every room in the building has a monitor where you can type in a product's code and get information on the cost, make, model and manufacturer. The computer keeps a digital shopping list of your choices from among the thousands of items in stock. When you're ready, a large monitor displays what you've chosen, item by item, adds it up and allows you to pay by credit card on the spot.

The technology is so sensitive that it won't allow you to make a mistake. For example, it knows that induction and gas ranges can't be paired with under-the-counter ovens due to installation needs.

The multi-million-dollar investment began to pay off with customer satisfaction comments and in

2007, a design award from the Ontario Home Builders' Association.

But that, says Libfeld, was only the beginning of his dreams for the centre.

A few years later, the centre expanded another 5,000 square feet. Then last year Libfeld added a retail component that meant that buyers could get everything from the coffee maker that will sit on their countertop to the fridge of their dreams in one fell swoop.

Thanks to an arrangement with Whirlpool, there are more than 60 appliances on site to choose from and a partnership with Sears allows the centre to offer an additional three years on the original year-long manufacturer's warranty on all appliances.

Another bonus is that most items purchased at the centre will be installed before you move in.

"We wanted that when they walk into the house, they have got basically everything they need," says Libfeld about the centre's customers. "We wanted them to feel like, 'This house feels complete.'"

While the size and offerings at the centre have drawn attention, Libfeld feels it his latest project that will cement the Home Decor Centre brand.

In 2010, he plans to begin offering the centre as a service vehicle for small builders across the GTA. Rogers has stepped forward to work with the centre in the effort.

"As a leader in technology innovation, Rogers takes pride in being associated with an innovative company like the Home Decor Centre," says Tom Vuksanovich, a general manager with Rogers Cable Com-



ANDREW WALLACE/TORONTO STAR

Builder Corey Libfeld, right, and Rogers' Tom Vuksanovic have partnered in Home Decor Centre in Thornhill, which makes the buying process easier.

munications Inc.

"Rogers has been a partner with the Home Decor Centre since its inception because of its recognition that telecommunications is an important part of home ownership and its commitment to integrating new technology. This is the next natural step in a great partnership."

Libfeld notes that the partnership offers a unique benefit to the small builder.

"This facility for the smaller builder market is a very fitting place for them because it's going to actually pull their image up," he says. "They may have a sales office where they only have 20, 30, 40 samples. Here they've got thousands of combinations, so when that builder's consumer walks in, they're going to go, 'Wow, this is incredible. Look at how many choices we have.'"

The need seems to be even greater

now that a turbulent economy has led to the close of several decor centre options for smaller builders, he points out.

"We want to create a whole new business model for small builders," he explains. The proprietary software has been adapted to allow smaller builders to input the measurements and product lists for their customers. Customers could then visit the decor centre, meet with the staff and know exactly which products in the room were standard and how much an upgrade might cost.

The real winner is bound to be the small home builders' consumers, who despite going to a smaller builder, still get the opportunity to choose from an extensive selection of offerings typically offered by larger builders.

"The partnership between Rogers

and the Home Decor Centre provides aggressive offerings for small to medium home builders and exposure to our products and services which in turn, is an attractive incentive to new home buyers," says Vuksanovich.

Currently the centre is open on weekends for general viewing and between 150 to 200 people come in every week to sort through the offerings, compare and take notes on what they like.

But during the week, it's by appointment only and there are only four appointments a day (two at 10 a.m. and two at 2 p.m.), with each lasting up to three hours and arranged months in advance. Once smaller builders come on board, the number of appointments will necessarily increase but the quality of service won't diminish, says Libfeld. During their appointment, consumers will still be able to expect personal service from a design consultant.

Parents with kids in tow needn't worry about being able to concentrate. While mom and dad are "discussing" which rooms in the house to invest in, the kids can watch a movie in the on-site home theatre or challenge each other on the PlayStation and Xbox machines just outside.

But this centre is about more than just selling product, says Libfeld. A large room on the top floor is called the "university" where, on any given night, you could find up to 80 new homeowners learning everything they need to know about post-purchase issues, or groups of agents and decor centre staff exchanging ideas on how to improve customer service.

"An educated consumer is your best customer," Libfeld says.

"It's important that we're all talking the same language."

• For more information visit www.myhomedecorcentre.com.