



LET'S TALK GENDER

What Women Bring to Home Performance

It's no secret that home performance is a male-dominated industry. Attend any industry conference and you'll quickly see that women are vastly outnumbered. That being said, there are still women in the industry—and those women certainly hold their own. As the assistant editor for Home Energy magazine, I too can claim to be a woman in home performance. Yes, a lot of my experience comes from being on the sidelines, but I do make it a point to visit job sites occasionally and see actual installation work being done.

Q What advice would you give to a woman starting out in the home performance industry?

defining itself, and its founders wanted to ensure that they were giving people who were interested

everything they wanted from this group. The answers given weren't surprising; they included to find support, to make sure women have a place at the table, to network, to receive nurturing, and to share stories.

ACI's Women in Home Performance initiative is now much more defined. It "aims to address challenges, remove barriers, and promote opportunities for women in the traditionally male-populated home performance and weatherization industry." The initiative also offers a forum for business development, education, mentoring, and networking.

But in my opinion, it's the storytelling among women in our industry that harnesses the most power to encourage and support us. The more

we share with one another, the more we can learn from one another, and the better we can all become at what we do.

With that in mind, I set out to discover what the most common gender-specific obstacles to jobs in home performance were by asking women to describe the biggest obstacles they have faced since they entered the field. I posed the question to several colleagues and posted it on Home Energy's social media sites, which include approximately 13,000 Twitter



KATHY PRICE-ROBINSON

A student learning how to use a blower door.

followers and 700 Facebook friends. There were a lot of responses and some definite trends. According to the answers I received, the three most common obstacles women face in our industry are proving themselves, meeting the physical demands of the job, and lack of support or mentorship.

Babes with Brains

Much as I'd like to believe that we've evolved as a society, the fact remains that some people simply don't trust women who are doing

what they've deemed to be a "man's job." Home performance is one of those jobs, because it involves both science and physical labor, not unlike plumbing or electrical work.

Unfortunately, this means that women in home performance still have to prove themselves to their customers before they earn their trust.

Getting Through the Door

"I've faced the situation where the customer was taken aback by a woman walking through the door," says Mary Tchamkina, program associate at Enterprise Community Partners. "It helps enormously to have information on the tech side of things. You have to prove yourself before someone says, 'Okay, this is for real.'"



IMPACT ADVERTISING

A. Tamasin Sterner making the Pure Energy Coach Zonal Pressure Diagnostics (ZPD) House video.

Nearly two years ago, I attended a regional ACI event in Sacramento and sat in a room where the Women in Home Performance initiative was in its infancy. The leaders of the discussion asked the women, and men, in the room why they had decided to attend a meeting about women in home performance. Because the initiative was new, it was still



Women in the industry listen intently during an ACI conference.



Tamasin Sterner instructing during the all-women Women's Energy Auditing Course at The Pure Energy Center.

Having knowledge in the field is one sure-fire way to exude confidence—a helpful tool to have in any situation. “Once in a while, even today, someone will answer my knock at the door and look behind me for another auditor who can help me with the audit,” says

Mickey Souza, owner/principal of Energineers. “Because I believe in myself and know how much effort I have put into learning how to be a proficient auditor, I know that I can provide a customer a unique

and new perspective on their home. Being a woman has nothing to do with how good an audit I can perform.”

By and large, having the knowledge, skills, and abilities to back up your work is the best way to quickly change a customer's mind—a customer who has preconceived notions of what an energy consultant or home performance auditor should look like. But Mina Agarabi, a mechanical engineer who recently started her own independent consulting firm, says that you have to handle your knowledge appropriately or it too can be misconstrued. “When you're asking questions, people can get a little defensive if you talk too technically and too direct, because they feel like you're

trying to be some young girl who thinks she knows everything. People think you're trying to change them in the way they do things and they get defensive. This also happens with male contractors, especially the ones who ‘have been doing this for 50 years!’” she says.

Melissa Abdo, the managing director of Pro Energy Consultants, agrees. “I would say the biggest obstacle stems from an old preconceived idea that women in general are not interested in understanding how the systems in

a home should work together for improved efficiency.” It's likely that those biased notions can only be changed with a strength-in-numbers approach. As more women enter home performance, they'll be able to change the minds of both customers and contractors. The good news, says Abdo, is that “we are seeing women play an increased role in the home performance market, both as consumers and as service providers.”

Looks Are Everything

Once women get past the customer's door, there are additional obstacles to be overcome. One of them is making sure that their physical appearance matches the professionalism and ambition they have for the

job. “I have to wear certain clothing to make sure I'm taken seriously,” says Agarabi. “I know women who don't, and they don't get taken seriously.”

This issue isn't necessarily specific to home performance; however, it does raise the question of safety for women who are entering homes, especially if they're doing so alone. “I've had numerous people flirting and asking me to go out and get coffee and being inappropriate during an audit,” says Agarabi, who handles these situations with as much professionalism as possible. When a customer doesn't treat her with the respect she deserves as a professional, she confidently explains to them her skills and maintains a dignified demeanor.

A Stand tall, speak with authority when you have something to say, don't be afraid to ask questions, seek ‘adult supervision’ when appropriate, and do what you say you'll do, when you say you'll do it.”

—Ann Edminster,
founder and principal, Design AVenues LLC

A Take every opportunity to learn more, even if it is not directly related to your current projects or expertise.

—Jackie Berger, president and cofounder,
Applied Public Policy Research Institute for
Study and Evaluation (APPRISE)

Stereotypes

Just as appearances tell your story for you, so can your attitude. “Outspoken, powerful women are viewed as bitches, pushy, out of their league, and emotional,” says A. Tamasin Sterner, president and chief coach of Pure Energy Coach LLC. But in her 33 years as an



KATHY PRICE ROBINSON

First-hand learning takes place during the Women's Energy Auditing Course.

energy auditor, Sterner has rarely felt pressure from these stereotypes—until recently.

Pure Energy Coach LLC is primarily a quality assurance/quality control firm that performs third-party inspections on completed utility low-income program residential energy retrofits. Quality control inspection reports involve reporting situations, materials, and installations that don't meet program standards. "A value-added benefit to our inspections is feedback—narrative about what the contractor could have done to meet standards, and

our thoughts on how the contractor made their decisions to do what they did that resulted in a failed job. Our intent has always been to make every inspection an opportunity to teach, and this has worked well for decades," says Sterner.

Recently, however, she came across one program manager who doesn't value her company's feedback. "He interprets our feedback as 'opinions and feelings' and actually told me that 'feelings are not appropriate in the program,'" she says. In fact, Sterner's company has received awards for its objective, factual feedback. "I honestly believe that the male utility manager is listening to Pure Energy's feedback differently because the company

is woman owned, and he must have a problem with powerful women. I can usually handle this. However, when a person's personal biases regarding gender get in the way of a contract being awarded, it's a problem."

Solutions

Yes, you are a woman. And yes, you're sometimes going to have to prove yourself because of that fact, but the best way to do that is to let your skills shine through. Prove yourself through your knowledge and training.

"I'm sure I've had to face many obstacles, but due to my determination, focus, and desire, and my love for the industry and our customers, I've either pooh-poohed the obstacle or taken it on as a challenge," says Sterner.

Comedy is another option when dealing with people who give in to gender stereotypes.

"I've learned to deal with these obstacles through humor," says Tchamkina. "It's a good way to disarm someone with a prejudice without antagonizing them." Sterner also values humor. She tells her customers, "As Bob Thaves, who drew the comic strip 'Frank and Ernest,' famously said about Fred Astaire: 'Sure,

he was great, but don't forget Ginger Rogers did everything he did, backwards . . . and in high heels.'"

Amy Beley, senior project associate at Build It Green, says she's often felt as if she can't be herself in this male-dominated industry, but she's learned to develop a tougher skin. "It's

taken me a while to recognize that many men in this industry are simply unaware about how best to interact with up-and-coming women. As I've found my bearings in the industry, I've

learned that a little education goes a long way. Some of my closest friends in the industry are men, and our ability to have candid, open conversations about the gender disparity is very heartening."

A Hang out with smart people that laugh. Listen, listen, and listen—with attention, intention, and compassion. Get good at what you do, then get better.

—Rana Belshe, owner, Conservation Connection Consulting

The Intimidation Issue

Many home performance jobs are physically demanding, which can be intimidating. While some women simply aren't able to perform the job duties required in energy audits, some just assume they won't be able to handle it.

Don Lovell, owner of Energy Upgrade Services, says that we don't see a lot of women in the field because it is brutally hard work. "The truth is that a lot of boys and men don't last either. I started out as a 14-year-old crawling around in attics installing ductwork. It was miserable," he says.

Agarabi says that when she finished her certifications to join the industry, she didn't necessarily feel qualified. "In my opinion, you aren't actually qualified to do the work if you have no hands-on experience. I think for some people that can be intimidating, especially in a boiler room with dirty, loud equipment."

Of course, there are other people who physically cannot do the work required. Jayne Windham of Housing Compliance Solutions LLC was one of them.

"It's likely related to my being a small human, not just a small woman, but my biggest obstacle has been big obstacles," she says. "The tools and equipment are

sized for larger workers, and are often heavy. The fan for the blower door was particularly problematic for me." She says that she managed to learn how to handle the equipment and

A Listen, craft ideas that solve problems, meet people and collaborate, and be aware of how others might be reacting to you. Finally, be confident when you have a reason to do so.

—Ellen Tohn, principal, Tohn Environmental Strategies

A Work hard, respect your community, and become a subject matter expert.

—Karen Butterfield, managing director of national and federal accounts, SunPower Corporation

demonstrate it, but she would not have been able to meet the physical demands of the job on a long-term basis. "But being small has its advantages too," says Sterner. "Getting into attics and other small spaces often takes a small person."

The science behind home performance can be equally overwhelming. "Engineering, math, and science seem intimidating to some women, especially the ones who studied humanities or something else, but it's not," says Karen Butterfield, managing director of national and federal accounts at SunPower Corporation. "Engineers need people who can explain things. If you ask 100 questions, you will get it in a way that the engineer may not even get. This is powerful."

Overcoming Intimidation

There's no doubt that climbing into crawl spaces and carrying heavy tools isn't for every woman. But if home performance is where your heart is, then the determined woman can make it happen. You have to want to do the job, and if it's not for you, you can also be involved in other areas, such as research or administration, for example. "Of course, one needs to be physically fit to climb around in attics and crawl spaces, but even today, I can outlast some men who are half my age," says Souza. Sterner adds, "Loving what you do gives you the energy and power to do it."

Mentorship

Lack of support and mentorship is another common obstacle for women in home performance. While groups, such as ACI's Women in Home Performance initiative, have been formed in recent years, it's an industry that's been around for decades without any outright support for women.

"There's limited support networks for this work and no mentor/mentee setups that I know of," says Agarabi. For her, "finding a mentor has been challenging and slow." Agarabi has had so much trouble finding a home performance mentor, in fact, that she's sought out



Jennifer Carter sets up a blower door.

advice and mentorship from a businesswoman in another industry. Since she's thinking of starting her own business, it's been helpful, but it doesn't bode well for our industry if women can't find other women, or men for that matter, to mentor them and help them along the way. (See the Q&A boxes for advice from established women in the industry.)

Finding Support

It may not be easy, but if you crave mentorship, then don't give up. There are people out there who can and want to help. Reach out to professional organizations and communicate with peers via social networks such as Home Energy Pros and ACI's Women in Home Performance LinkedIn Group.

Mentorship may be easier to find in some states than in others. "I feel like I have been fortunate to have tapped into a great community of green-building aficionados in New York City," says Tchamkina.

"Through volunteering

and becoming involved with professional organizations, I have been able to find amazing mentors—mostly men—who have guided me, tutored me in technical matters, and helped me make the right connections. I also found a community of women who find themselves in similar roles, and similar points in their career.

A Be natural. This profession requires someone who cares about the environment and who is nurturing to the people around them. Who better than a woman to fit the bill?

—Mickey Souza,
owner/principal, Energineers



Ann Edminster receiving ACI's Woman of the Year award in 2013.



Hands-on instruction.

I would say in New York City in particular, organizations like NESEA [Northeast Sustainable Energy Association] and GreenHomeNYC are instrumental in promoting the role of women in the green-building industry."

No matter what level of support you feel you need, it's important to network with peers. "Above all, don't try this on your own. Most successful people want to help others succeed because they had help along the way," says Souza. "Let people know your dreams and how they can help be a part of them." *(ENE)*

—Macie Melendez

Macie Melendez is Home Energy's assistant editor.

>> learn more

For information on ACI's Women in Home Performance initiative, including a link to the group's online LinkedIn discussion forum, go to www.afordablecomfort.org/women.

For more information on the Home Energy Pros discussion forum, visit www.homeenergypros.lbl.gov. Learn more about NESEA at www.nesae.org.

For more information about GreenHomeNYC, visit www.greenhomenyc.org.