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Nice work if you can get it

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE between a Housing Association and an ALMO? Who's going into partnering in a big way? It's questions like these we get asked, and all because Mike Davis said you should treat us as your research department. In a nutshell, the difference between an ALMO and a Housing Association is one had no option other than to transfer their stock, whilst the other chose to.

You'd think Maggie Thatcher was still running the country. She had all sorts of ways of getting local authorities to toe the line. New Labour have identical policies. The local authority still owns the housing stock when an ALMO is created but, all of a sudden, they have access to untold millions for improvements. Imagine being a fairly active union steward and receiving this announcement . . .

The Chief Housing Officer has applied for early retirement. He'll get a monster severance deal on the one condition that he doesn't work for a local authority again. Meanwhile the housing stock is to be transferred to a non-profit making housing association, and top of the short-list for their Chief Executive's post is - yes, you've guessed it - the Chief Housing Officer. He'll be on double his old salary plus he'll get an E-Class Merc and other fringe benefits, of course. As for the technical staff, we might need to let some of you go, to reduce the overheads, because



we'll be out-sourcing a lot of the work in future.

Partnering is all part of the out-sourcing. As a general rule, the housing associations are going for it because the Housing Corporation says they have to. Local authorities tend to stick with their standing orders that require public money to be spent after competitive tendering. It's not carved in stone but it seems to be generally true.

Once upon a time, a map of Britain's local authorities told you who was where but it's no use any more. As far as we know, Windowbase is the ONLY source of colour-coded maps that show which local authorities still have their own stock and which have been transferred. It's going to be important to know which is which. ALMOs are run like

housing associations - tenant participation in the decision-making process is the key - so it would be reasonable to expect them to head down the partnering route, too.

Windowbase has recently completed research on housing specifiers for the entire country, local authorities and housing associations. No record is more than three months old. Contacts galore? Absolutely, records for housing associations alone have been increased by over 30% **so far**. Real live people to contact. Names, job titles, addresses and phone numbers. As luck would have it, ill or otherwise, we made contact for a second time in three weeks with one ALMO, only to find that the contact had suddenly died ten days previously. R.I.P.

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If your sales force is going to keep pace with what's happening out there, either you're spending [wasting] a fortune, doing the research yourselves, or you're a user of the all-new **Windowbase Housing Specifiers**.

Looking at the maps, you'd think the north-south divide was

alive and kicking. Once you venture to Wales, Scotland and the North East, the coloured-in areas become very sparse indeed. What, at first glance, looks like Middle England embracing change while the outposts stick to the old ways, takes on a new significance when

you compare who's doing what with the political colours of the councils.

To the left of centre are councils that believe in, and happily work with, unions and it is there that adoption of new ways is least likely . . . but not out of the question. The government is

no less adamant than Maggie - you'll do it our way or you won't do it at all. Sooner or later, tenant power will almost certainly enforce changes, as news gets around that their houses could be hugely upgraded, if only the council would adopt the guidelines.

Elephants and mice

So your Business depends on House Builders, does it?... and you know who they are, of course!

Last year, Windowbase identified 3,700 of them in the UK. Now that's a few more than just the bigger ones you already know.

When you look for more business, you need to separate the elephants from the mice. That's why we ask how many houses they built in the year. Lots of companies think they have databases of house builders, only nobody's done anything about cleaning them, so they're full of defunct organisations. What are your house builders doing? Anything this year?

You need to know who's doing what, and when. You need the names of the Managing Directors **and** the senior buyers. That's why we ask for both. For many of the medium sized builders, it's the MD who decides on purchases, so they are much easier to deal with - if you have a product or service that is right for them.

You don't sell cheap products and services. You sell **value for money**. Windowbase data is the same. Some list brokers offer free extra names and addresses - you know that free offers are often worth a lot less than they cost.

Salespeople always assure you that their information is "up to date". Windowbase tells you **exactly** how up to date each and every record is.

So when you want to find another house-builder, think Windowbase. And when you finish thinking, you can:

ring: 01706 644308

fax: 01706 759898 or

e-mail: sales@winbase.co.uk

and ask for the **Windowbase Data sheet 10** - on House Builders. Or go to www.winbase.co.uk to see the regional breakdown and a sample data file.



What are your house-builders doing?

Speedwell Taxis (housing department)

How do we know our data is put to good use?

The best people to ask are Speedwell Taxis. The old (now updated) Housing Specifiers Database contained a phone number with just one digit wrong. Instead of getting through to the Town Hall, you got them. Friendly voice, nice attitude and all that. "We get a lot of calls for the Town Hall," she says. Really? In other words, she'd confirmed that users of the Specifiers database are actually users, and not merely wasting their marketing budget on something that lies, doing nothing, on C: drive.

Whose conservatory roof do they use?

A FEW YEARS AGO, this was a silly question. Chances are it was Ultraframe. There were other brands, but they had a small share of the market, and nobody shopped around.

Marketing activity went on the back-burner, and nobody saw the point of a database of companies identifying the roof they used. If you needed to know, you already knew, and if you didn't, there wasn't much you could do with the

information. The market looked as open as the market for PC operating systems. There's Windows, and ... erm Windows, and that's about it.

Competition has arrived, and new conservatory roof brands are proliferating. It can be hard to keep track of what's available, they are springing up so quickly. The market is still growing fast, so there's plenty of room for all these new names. What was once a quiet and settled market

is now noisy and volatile. A few brands have grown astonishingly in the last three to four years, shooting ahead on a rising market and taking share from established names. The most successful of the new brands are investing heavily in R&D and marketing, winning share and becoming significant players in their own right.

Interestingly, the conservatory roof sector - whether supplied with kits or bar length - is far less loyal than the window profile market. It

can take up to 18 months to get someone to switch window profile. It's a measure of the product's importance to them and the complexity of the decision, but it's also a matter of the credibility of alternative suppliers. That credibility wasn't there three to four years ago. The difference between the leading brands and the others was too great. Now the gap has narrowed, so fabricators and installers are more ready to change. More surprisingly, they are deciding to change on the spot, and

switching completely rather than giving the challenger a try before committing. Expect more changes as new and established conservatory brands jockey for position in this attractive market.

For anyone who needs to keep track of what's happening, and sell to this dynamic market an up-to-date database, detailing the roof systems fabricators and installers use, is an essential sales tool. Windowbase supplies it!

Free and worth every penny?

MARKETING GURUS INSIST there are five to ten magic promotional words that get us going.

They never fail to generate a strong response in advertising or direct mail. One of the strongest is 'free'. We all know in our heart of hearts that little in life is truly free. There's always a catch. There's no such thing as a free lunch, they say, but we live in hope. We **want** to believe in 'free', and we bite every time we are given the chance. Often it doesn't matter much, but sometimes we pay dearly for our lack of restraint.

Just as Yellow Pages and Yell seemed to offer a heaven-sent database for 'free' - just the cost of a little time and effort you might think - so the Fensa list appears to be the answer to a marketing man's dream: a **free** list of window installers for direct mail. But far from free, both end up costing a great deal if you try to use them. How do we know?

Because Windowbase uses any, and every, list that's going as the raw material, the starting point for our research. We call every name that's listed, and we keep on

calling until we confirm the details, or we discard or correct them having identified them as fax numbers; 'gone aways'; gone out of business; deceased; members of the public; plumbers who are listed in error as builders or window fabricators, and wrong numbers of every description. We also add in all those people who are missing, those who should have been on the list but weren't. Many companies, particularly smaller businesses, do their best to avoid being listed for a variety of reasons, but it's surprising who else gets left out. **And what's not there** is always harder to spot than what is there but shouldn't be.

It's a lot of work, developing a database, verifying information and getting it ready for use. The work never ends, because all lists decay. We talk about the half-life of a list. It can be as short as six months to a year. Half the records on your list or database will be out of date in some way within six months to a year. By the time you get your hands on a published list, it may be two to three years old or more. The changes - some small,

some not so small - accumulate quickly, so a large number of records become inaccurate or dud.

But hey, **it's free!** It's only your time and your sales people's time! Do you keep count of time taken and what it costs? If you do, you know to avoid the free and other apparent short-cuts / savings like the plague. Where does the time go? What are these costs?

Downloading or retyping lists - and adding your own new transcription errors (it's hard not to); setting up a suitable database format; verifying the records (usually skipped because of the enormous cost and effort), correcting / updating the information; wasted time, postage, telephone calls, mailing materials, and effort spent mailing or calling - or trying to locate those who are either not there or not what you think they are. The biggest cost - the cost of lost opportunities - goes unrecorded. While you are wasting time and opportunity, your rivals are talking to prospects and signing up new business. That's the real price of free.

Junk legislation



THE MOST RECENT legislation, introduced in December 2003, is anti-spam. ("Spam" - so called after a Monty Python sketch - is the bulk sending of e-mails advertising products and services, to e-mail addresses.)

Spam differs from post and telephone services in that it is virtually free to send. So 'spammers' can send 10 million messages advertising sexual potency aids or porn sites for much the same cost as one message. The real cost is to you and me, who have to spend valuable time looking for valid e-mails in our mailboxes,

and deleting the spam. (Note that spam must not be confused with viruses or worms - which are malicious attacks on your computer and are spread in different ways.)

The UK legislation, based on the EU regulations, now means that online marketers can only send e-mail pitches and SMS messages to consumers who have agreed beforehand to receive them, except where users are existing customers. So, for consumers at least, the UK government is applying the 'opt-in' approach to regulating spam. As we understand it, sole traders come into the same category as consumers.

Businesses and other organisations, though, can still be approached 'cold' with e-mail pitches but in these instances e-mails must have an opt-out clause. Many observers feel that an opt-out clause is a mistake, as confirming an e-mail address to which mail is unwelcome from company A, merely provides confirmation that Companies B to Z can now try, having bought a valid list from company A.

The 'Office of the Information Commissioner' will enforce the new regulations. Breaches of enforcement orders issued by the Information Commissioner will be an

offence liable to a fine of up to £5,000 in a magistrate's court, or an unlimited fine if it goes to a jury.

The weakness is that the law can only be applied in the UK or within the EU. Where the spam comes from elsewhere - the USA, Russia, China, these regulations are unenforceable, and so spam-free e-mail is probably a pipe-dream.

So remember - you can send advertising e-mails to businesses, but you must show the recipient how they can opt-out. If they choose to do so, you must no longer mail them. Or move to the States, and do what you like!

For further information,

please fill in your details and tick your area of interest below and return to:

Reader's name: _____

Company: _____

Telephone: _____

Email: _____

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