

Participating in Your Own Revolution

by Bob Mang

Ideas for progressively expanding framing component services.

Open almost any homebuilding magazine and you'll see a story on a purported construction revolution—pre-manufactured components. While many articles imply this is something new, component manufacturers have been leading the charge for decades.

As the housing market consolidates and builders are under increasing pressure to build more efficiently, the potential market for selling pre-manufactured components is growing.

A 2006 study by the Harvard University Joint Center for Housing Studies identifies “component preassembly” as one of four key ways production builders can improve their operations. Many large building companies prefer to work as land developers or project managers than hands-on contractors. This trend provides component fabricators with numerous opportunities.

While your company may be considering expanding beyond trusses, you may wonder how to proceed. Fortunately, newly available software and other tools can supplement your existing equipment, marketing expertise, and builder relationships, allowing you to grow your services. The results? More jobs, greater profits, and a way of building support with your customers while expanding your market share.

Scaling Services

The growing demand for more efficient ways to build structural framing isn't limited to full-on panelization. Fabricators have additional opportunities to capture business by expanding capabilities incrementally. This approach reduces risk, and provides a way to train your staff on new skills.

A simple, three-step service expansion plan includes:

1. Precision-cut and labeled framing kits
2. Complete panelized systems
3. Installed framing services

Framing Material Kits

Some builder customers may not be ready to change from stick-built to panelized construction. Working with them on an intermediate step can help.

For fabricators, the opportunity is providing precision-cut and labeled floor members. As with trusses, such materials benefit builders by reducing construction cycle

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Fabricators can simplify construction for builders by delivering pre-built floor components for rapid installation.



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time, call-backs and jobsite waste, while improving quality. Pre-cut materials don't require builders to make a radical departure from their current methods.

Structural framing design software available from material suppliers can quickly and accurately transform builders' drawings into detailed framing layouts for precision engineered floors. Such software specifies recommended materials for the floor and how they are assembled on site. These software packages have the ability to create more efficient designs without adversely affecting performance, resulting in material savings for the builder.

Similar to truss manufacturing, structural framing design software can interface directly with fabrication software. Such software allows batching of multiple jobs and optimizing material cuts from available inventory. Fabrication software guides saws and other equipment to precision end-cut joists (to 1/16"), including angles and bevel cuts, and to pre-drill holes for pipes, wires and conduits. Fabricators can also use the software to mark each floor member for proper placement in the structure, and to provide builders with printed materials lists and framing layouts. Crews can then bundle, load and deliver the material kits for easy installation on the jobsite.

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Implementing panelized floor systems builds upon existing capabilities. As builders outsource more construction activities, your opportunities for expanding services increase further. A natural evolution in the market is from panelized component fabricator to component installer.



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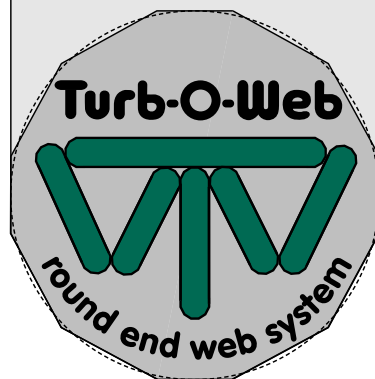
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Panelized Systems

Implementing panelized floor systems builds upon existing capabilities and from offering framing material kits. The key is to find tools and support that expand your crews' existing design and fabrication skills. It can also mean working with additional material types, such as oriented strand board (OSB) panels and laminated strand lumber (LSL).

At this step, fabricators can use framing design software for the whole house or for floor systems in conjunction with panel design software. Panel designers can create multiple fabrication drawings from a single floor layout quickly and easily. Software can also be used to manage material stacking, staging and carting.

Some material suppliers will support you in determining efficient fabrication equipment layouts, streamlined process management and crew training.

Installed Services

As builders outsource more construction activities, your opportunities for expanding services increase further. A natural evolution in the market is from panelized component fabricator to component installer.

At this stage, the required management and crew skill sets differ from a traditional fabrication operation. Training is critical, from the production staff through marketing and sales. Everybody in the organization needs to understand where the business is headed and why. And, precise scheduling—from design through fabrication to field installation—becomes paramount.

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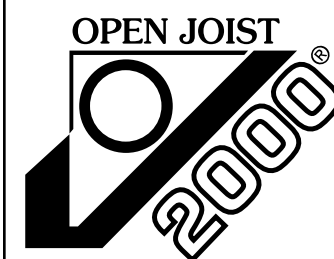
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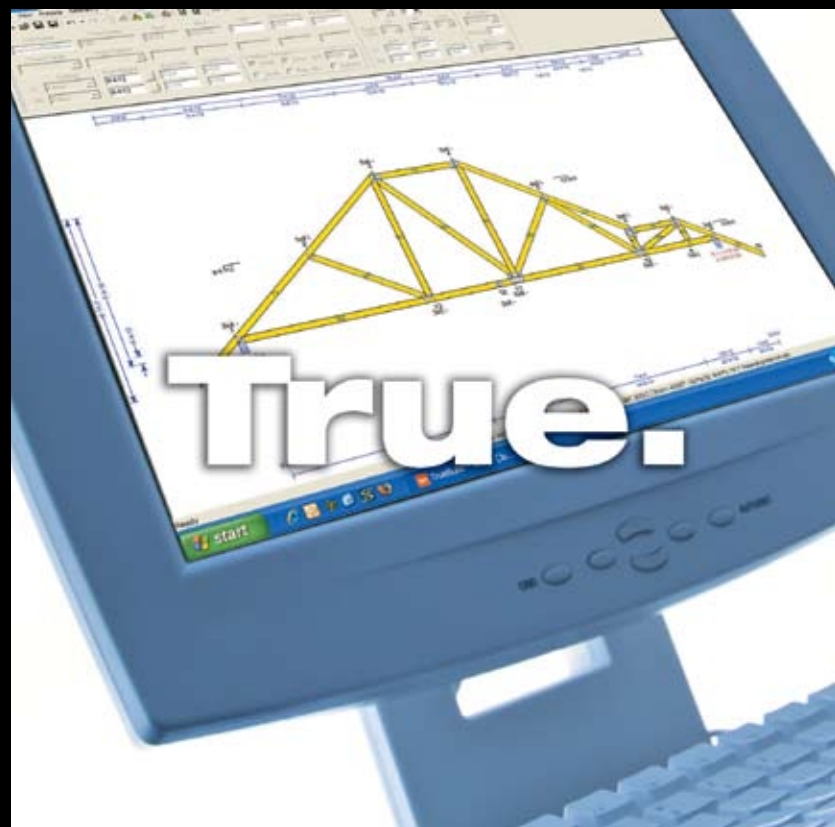
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Several approaches to installed services are possible: train existing crews, hire new crewmembers experienced with on-site framing, or use subcontractors. Whichever approach you use, active oversight is critical to ensure high finished quality in the home.

In addition to an existing operations manager, you may wish to hire an installed sales manager. This person plays a major role in bridging from existing business into the new services.

Beyond obtaining fast and high-quality framing, with installed services builders benefit by having one contact for a major part of home construction, as well as simplified management and accounting. You become a true partner in the building process.

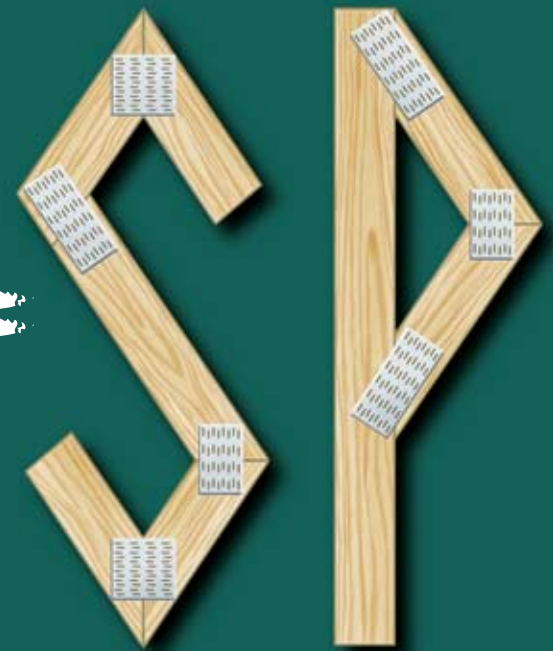
Expanded Marketing Opportunities

If you're not already doing so, communicating the green building benefits of your services lets you tap into a growing part of the housing market. In May, a McGraw-Hill Construction and National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) survey found:

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- Green building is anticipated to account for up to 10 percent of the residential market in 2008.
- By 2012, the green market is projected to double, reaching up to 20 percent of new homes.
- In today's down market, 40 percent of builders report that green building helps them market their homes.

Pre-cut and panelized components provide a way to start—or build upon—your green marketing messages. Waste reduction is the bottom line. The design and fabrication software that enable you to offer expanded framing services also allow you to help builders avoid overbuilding and jobsite scrap.

Many builders may not think of the structural frame as an area for green building, but you can educate them. By some accounts, stick-built framing uses up to 15 to 20 percent more materials than are structurally needed (U.S. Green Building Council's LEED Homes Reference Guide, First Edition, 2008). Reducing materials is a major part of any credible green building program. By using pre-cut or pre-assembled components, builders can potentially earn up to 12 green building rating points under the National Association of Home Builders' (NAHB) National Green Building Program™ and between two to four points under the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC)'s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED®) Green Building Rating System™. (You can find more information about the rating systems at www.sbcindustry.com/green.)

Getting Started

Expanding your service offerings requires careful planning, but is readily achievable. Consult with your material supplier, speak to other fabricators, or conduct research through SBICA, which represents the structural building components industry. They can advise you on the types of software and consulting expertise available. **SBC**

Bob Mang is Vice President of Residential Strategic Marketing for iLevel by Weyerhaeuser. He is instrumental in the company's NextPhase® Site Solutions—a suite of products, software and services enabling pre-cut and panelized framing. www.iLevel.com, 888-453-8358.

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