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## Mark A. Perlman

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By Meghan Drueding

Empeco Custom Builders

[www.empeco.com](http://www.empeco.com)

Grayslake, Ill.

Type of business: custom builder

Years in business: 23

Employees: 4

2004 volume: \$8.5 million

2004 starts: 8

Mark Perlman has spent 23 years in the home building business—23 successful years, at that. But judging from his thoughtful interaction with customers, he would have performed just as well in a communications career. “We just try and make other people feel as though they’re our only client,” he says. For example, about eight to 10 years ago his suburban Chicago company, Empeco Custom Builders, developed a tool he calls an “AVO,” for Avoid Verbal Orders. It’s a simple piece of paper that his superintendents or other employees fill out whenever the client verbally requests a change. They write down the job number, the date, and a description of the order, no matter how small, giving a copy to the relevant subcontractor. That way Empeco has a written record of every request the client has made, so it has a reference point if any questions arise later on. “So many things in the field were getting skipped over or missed,” says Perlman of his pre-AVO days. “With the AVOs we get any change the owner wants to make down on paper. It just makes communication so much better—it’s avoided potential problems.” The procedure also cuts down on office paperwork—Perlman usually waits until he’s collected six to nine AVOs on a project and then issues one change order for all of them.

He also insists on responding to his clients within an hour of their phone calls, and instructs his subcontractors to do the same. “Even if you have no answer for them, call and tell them you have no answer but that you’ll work on it,” he says. “Just don’t ignore people. There’s no excuse for it with the technology today.” And after his customers move into their houses, he allows a 20-day window for getting their punch list items completed. “I tell them 20 days and then try to get it done earlier,” he says. “We try to get everybody except the painters in there on the same day, to make it as easy as possible on the customers.” These small strategies don’t necessarily cost him extra—they’re just little courtesies his clients will remember long after their homes are complete.



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