

PLAYBOOK

Custom Home Builders & Modern Prefab

Handshake Outreach email sequence, adapted.

Four messages, one sequence. Mail-merge ready.

ADAPTATION 16

Category notes

Custom home building is the highest-ticket consumer purchase most people will ever make, and the trust deficit is structural. Unlike buying an existing home, the buyer is paying for something that doesn't exist yet, based on renderings and promises. The builder controls the timeline, the budget, and the subcontractors — and the client has almost no leverage once construction begins. Horror stories are abundant and well-publicized: cost overruns of 20–40% are common, timelines slip by months, and change-order pricing is often opaque. The modern prefab market adds a layer of confusion: factory-built doesn't mean cheap, and "turnkey" rarely means what buyers think it means (site work, foundation, utility connections, and permits are almost always excluded). The costly signal is showing the client exactly what happens when things go wrong — because they will — and how the builder handles it.

Insider terms: cost-per-square-foot (the most misleading number in home building — it varies wildly based on what's included), fixed-price contract vs. cost-plus (the most important decision a buyer makes before construction starts), allowances (budgeted amounts for finishes the buyer hasn't selected yet — almost always too low), change order (any modification after contract signing — and the mechanism by which most budgets explode), draw schedule (the payment structure tied to construction milestones), punch list (the final walkthrough deficiency list), certificate of occupancy, builder's warranty (typically one year workmanship, two years mechanical, ten years structural — but varies by state), modular vs. panelized vs. manufactured (three different things in

MESSAGE 1 OF 4 / SEND WITHIN 4-24 HOURS

Message 1: The Honest Hello

Acknowledge the cold contact. Talk contract structure before floor plans. Give one useful warning.

Subject: A note from [First Name] at [Company] – before you start comparing floor plans

Hi –

You stopped by [Company]'s website recently. If you're in the early stages of thinking about building a home – custom or [prefab/modular] – you're probably spending a lot of time looking at floor plans and galleries. That's the fun part. I want to tell you about the part that isn't fun, because it's the part that decides whether your build goes well.

I'm [Name], [role] at [Company]. We've been building in [region] since [year].

One useful thing for someone in the research phase: the single most important question in home building isn't about design. It's about contract structure. Specifically: is the contract fixed-price or cost-plus? In a fixed-price contract, the builder quotes a total and absorbs overruns. In a cost-plus contract, the builder charges actual costs plus a percentage fee – and you absorb every overrun. Both are legitimate, but they create completely different incentive structures. On a fixed-price contract, the builder is incentivized to control costs. On cost-plus, the builder earns more when costs go up. If you don't understand which structure you're signing, the floor plan doesn't matter.

I'll send two more notes – short, focused on the things worth knowing whether you ever build with [Company] or not. Easy unsubscribe.

– [Name]

[License #, direct line, reply-to]

MESSAGE 2 OF 4 / SEND 3-4 DAYS LATER

Message 2: The Inside Knowledge

The costly signal: how allowances blow budgets — and how to protect yourself before signing.

Subject: The number that ruins more custom builds than bad design

[Name],

Following up. The number that causes the most damage in custom home building is the allowance.

Here's how it works. When you sign a build contract, the final finishes — countertops, cabinetry, flooring, fixtures, appliances — usually aren't fully specified yet. The builder includes an "allowance" for each category: \$8,000 for kitchen countertops, \$15,000 for cabinetry, \$5,000 for lighting fixtures. These numbers look reasonable in the contract. The problem is they're almost always too low — not by accident, but because low allowances make the total contract price look competitive.

When you actually start selecting finishes, you discover that the countertop you want costs \$14,000, not \$8,000. The cabinets cost \$28,000, not \$15,000. Each overage becomes a change order. Change orders are the mechanism by which most custom builds exceed budget by 20 to 40 percent, and they happen after you're committed — foundation poured, framing up, no turning back.

The fix: before signing any contract, ask the builder for a fully specified allowance comparison. Take the allowance numbers from the contract and go price-shop the actual materials at the quality level you want. If your countertop taste runs to quartzite, don't accept a \$40-per-square-foot allowance based on laminate. The gap between the allowance and reality is your real budget exposure. A builder who helps you do this exercise before you sign is one who wants you to succeed. A builder who says "we'll figure out finishes later" is one who benefits from your surprise.

[Company]'s sample build budget — with every allowance category shown at three quality tiers (good, better, best) and real pricing from our last six projects — is at [link]. No form.

— [Name]

MESSAGE 3 OF 4 / SEND 5-7 DAYS LATER

Message 3: The Story

One real build that went \$47K over. Fixed-price means the builder absorbs it.

Subject: The build that went \$47,000 over budget – and why the clients came back

[Name],

Wanted to share a story.

About three years ago, a couple I'll call the Nguyens hired us to build a 2,400-square-foot custom home. Fixed-price contract. We'd agreed on a total of \$520,000, which included everything – site work, foundation through finishes, permits, and a reasonable contingency.

Six weeks into framing, the excavation crew hit ledge rock eighteen inches below the foundation. Nobody could have predicted it from the soil test. Removing it added \$31,000 to the foundation cost. Then, during the rough-in, the county revised the stormwater management code mid-project. Compliance required a different drainage system: \$16,000. Total unanticipated cost: \$47,000.

Here's what happened next, and it's the part that matters. Because it was a fixed-price contract, those overruns were our problem, not the Nguyens'. We absorbed them. The Nguyens paid \$520,000 – the number we'd agreed to. We lost money on the project. That's what a fixed-price contract means, and that's why we use them: because the builder is the one with the expertise to price the risk, and the client shouldn't pay for the builder's inability to predict it.

I'm telling you this story not because it was pleasant – it wasn't – but because it's the story that proves whether a builder means what they say. Any builder can promise budget certainty when nothing goes wrong. The ones worth trusting are the ones who absorb the hit when something does.

The Nguyens referred their neighbors to us the following year. We built that house too. No ledge rock.

If you want to see what a fixed-price contract actually looks like – including how we handle allowances, change orders, and unforeseen conditions – reply or call [number]. One more note and I'll leave you alone.

– [Name]

MESSAGE 4 OF 4 / SEND 5-7 DAYS LATER

Message 4: The Clean Close

Three options. The exit is graceful. The questions are theirs to use — with anyone.

Subject: Last note from me

[Name],

Last email unless you want to stay in touch. Three options:

If you want to talk about a build: Reply or call [number]. The first conversation is about your land, your budget, your timeline, and what kind of home you're imagining — not about selling you a floor plan. If your site, budget, or timeline don't fit what [Company] does well, we'll tell you that and suggest builders who might be a better match.

If you want to keep learning: [Company] publishes a [monthly/quarterly] owner-builder guide — not marketing, but real content on topics like reading a draw schedule, understanding builder's risk insurance, what "turnkey" does and doesn't include in prefab, and how to evaluate a builder's warranty. [link] to subscribe.

If [Company] isn't the right builder: Whoever you build with, five questions will protect you: (1) Is this a fixed-price or cost-plus contract — and what exactly is included in the price? (2) What are the allowance amounts for each finish category, and what quality level do they reflect? (3) How are change orders priced — is there a markup, and is it capped? (4) What happens when you hit something unforeseen — rock, code changes, supply disruptions — who absorbs that cost? (5) Can I talk to the last three clients whose builds went over budget or over schedule? The builders who welcome that last question are the ones worth hiring.

Either way, good luck with the build.

— [Name]

How to ship this

- **Replace the brackets.** [Company], [Name], [role], [number], [link], [region] — every placeholder filled, nothing left in template form.
- **Pick a real owner or project lead as the sender.** Not a sales rep. Use the actual builder's direct line and reply-to.
- **Render the body as plain text.** HTML email part, slightly large font (~16-17px), warmer-than-white background. Looks typed. Reads typed. People scan plain text differently.
- **Mind the cadence.** Message 1 within 4-24 hours of the visit. Message 2 three to four days later. Message 3 five to seven days after that. Message 4 five to seven days after that. Then stop.
- **Honor the promise.** If you said “last email,” it's the last email. Reactance kills the relationship faster than silence.