

Levack at Large
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A big splash in the newspapers earlier this month as *Which?* magazine published the findings of a consumer survey showing that 2.5 million people in the UK have had a dispute with a builder or decorator over the past three years.

Once again, our industry's image has suffered. Sadly, the reputation of responsible building firms is damaged as a consequence. I don't deny the right of consumer groups to expose shoddy workmanship and poor customer service. Indeed, I fully subscribe to their list of recommendations to consumers looking for a builder they can be confident will do a good job.

Getting several quotes for the work, having a written contract in place, seeking out a recommended trader and making sure they are members of a professional body. All extremely good advice. But based on the results of this latest survey, I am left wondering why so many consumers seem to be ignoring it and ending up with substandard work carried out by cowboys?

One possible explanation is VAT. There can be no doubt that the majority of consumers are under significant financial pressure at the moment. That makes it very tempting to seek out a builder that won't charge VAT, saving the consumer twenty pounds on every hundred pounds they spend on home improvements. Sadly, in the current economic climate, a 20% VAT rate plays directly into the hands of the cowboys. They immediately have a huge competitive advantage over legitimate VAT-registered firms. For too many consumers, the temptation seems to be to pay cash in hand, to ask too few questions and then pay the price later when the job is done badly.

Of course, this is one of the key reasons why we have continued to argue that VAT on home improvements should be cut to 5%. On its own, this measure won't resolve the cowboy builder problem. But at least it would prevent the rogues from significantly undercutting legitimate traders.

We also need to remember the progress the sector has made. It is frustrating that successive Governments have invested too little energy and effort into promoting those very good schemes that already exist to protect consumers and promote best practice within the industry.

Bodies like the Construction Licensing Executive were established to set and enforce standards and – by encouraging more firms to sign up and more consumers to use their services – to improve our industry's reputation. CLE ought to be the first port of call for any consumer seeking out a reputable and technically competent trader.

But there seems to be far too little awareness of the CLE amongst the general public. In the rush to portray the industry as a whole as failing to meet the expectations of consumers, virtually no attention is paid to what the industry has done to improve standards and promote good practice. CLE works consistently hard to build awareness of what it does. But as a charity with limited funding, it cannot be

expected to do this effectively on its own. Some of the worst offenders in failing to promote the existence of the CLE and what it does are the presenters of programmes such as Channel 5's Cowboy Builders, who frankly ought to know better.

I cannot deny that their approach makes for good television. Unfortunately, in response, our politicians fall into the trap of wringing their hands and pledging that "something must be done", forgetting all of the hard work that has already gone into tackling the issue. In reality, we already have the tools in place to stamp out the rogue traders, if only we would use them. It falls to the industry to work closely with Government and the media to promote those tools properly. That way, we will ensure that consumers know exactly where to turn and what to do to find a reputable trader and make sure they don't fall foul of the cowboys who continue to give the industry a bad name.