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The President's Perspective: September 2026

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Two Chairs, One Industry

I get to look at our industry from two chairs at the same time.

One is at our hearth store in Kansas City, where the economy isn't a headline—it's foot traffic, quote follow-ups, and what customers are actually willing to spend on an install this month.

The other is at the National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI). As the national president of that organization, I sit in rooms with remodelers from nearly every market in the country and hear what they're seeing well before it reaches the trade press.

Those two chairs don't always tell me the same thing, and the gap between them is usually where I

find the most useful information. The NARI chair shows me a side of the remodeling industry that no single store owner sees on his own—and the store chair keeps that view honest, simply because I still have to go sell something.

With that in mind, here's what both chairs are telling me about where we've been, where we are, and where (I hope) we're going.

Where We've Been

Let's start with the store chair. We were up in the first quarter compared to last year, but we've been flat since, and foot traffic is slow.

From the NARI chair, the picture is different in every market. What's true in one metro isn't true two states over, and anyone building a plan off a single national headline is going to be wrong somewhere.

What I've been learning is how we got here. According to *The State of the Nation's Housing 2026* from Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies, home prices are up over 50% since 2020, and the people who locked in low interest rates then are staying put now—so existing home sales are at a 30-year low. Meanwhile, the houses themselves have been getting older: As of 2024, the median age of an owner-occupied home is 42 years, up from 33 in 2010. What's more, the people in them are getting older, and households headed by someone 65 and over are projected to grow 26% between 2025 and 2045.

Read those numbers as a hearth retailer rather than as an economist, and the last few years tell a simple story: Few people are moving, so they're improving what they already own—and what they already own is old. A 42-year-old house often has a 42-year-old fireplace. And the fastest-growing group of homeowners in the country is the one that most wants to stay put and make the house work for another 20 years.

Where We Are

The best retailers I know aren't waiting for the housing market to loosen up. Instead, they're changing how they run their shops—and the thing they're doing that others aren't is developing processes with AI.

I've had the chance to talk to AI developers, and their advice has been helpful. The most important thing I've learned is that AI isn't *a tool*. Rather, it's *a*

truckload of tools—and the judgment about how those tools should be used is still yours, not AI's.

That said, these tools can do amazing things when used well, and you don't have to spend a lot of money to see real results. For example, I use multiple models, but I only pay \$20 a month for the one that codes better than the others.

Start your AI integrations by asking your staff, "What are the top things you hate to do day in and day out?" (Updating pricing, anyone?) Once you build scripts and functions for those, we've found that staff start coming back to ask what else AI can help them with.

AI is really good at remembering your processes and executing them at 2 a.m. while your team is resting. It's also letting small businesses catch up to larger ones, because it can perform what used to be very expensive programming, procedures, and analysis. If you're a smaller company that isn't taking advantage of it, I feel you're being left behind.

The through-line in all of this is that the information and the tools are already out there, and most of them are cheap or free. The Harvard studies are free. The AI tools are cheap. And the best operator you know will tell you exactly what he's doing if you sit down next to him at a trade show and ask. What we owe each other—and what I'd ask of every reader of this magazine—is to pass it along. Take what you've learned about where the housing market is headed and how to use AI, and share it with the people around you for the benefit of everyone in our industry.

"A 42-year-old house often has a 42-year-old fireplace."

Where We're Going

At some point, I'm sure you've heard this misquoted line: "Money is the root of all evil." But the verse

actually says, "The love of money is the root of all evil" (1 Timothy 6:10). The difference matters. Money is how we make payroll and put a roof over a family.

What corrupts is loving it more than the work and the people we serve.

I didn't see much of that in this industry when I first started—and I hope that doesn't change. What I hope we see across hearth, barbecue, and remodeling is a group of people who continue to truly love what they do.

I believe in the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have done to you." It has been my guiding principle in life. Some days, it's still a work in progress, but it has never steered me wrong in business.

I didn't get where I am today on my own. I had people pour into me when I was young. Thank you, Steve Sweet. What he gave me was not a sales technique or a spreadsheet. It was time and attention, given freely, to a young man who had not yet earned

it but did want it. I intend to pass on everything I've learned to the next generation—because that's the best way to pay it forward.

Pass It On

This industry has been good to me, my family, and our employees. I believe in small businesses and the positive impacts they can have—on the professionals who build careers in them and on the consumers they serve. A small business is not just a P&L. It is where people learn their trade, raise their families, and find out what they're capable of.

So hold onto what you love about this work, and then pass it on to someone coming up behind you or walking alongside you.

From where I sit—in both of my chairs—that's where I hope we're going.

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