

A View from the Back of the Bus

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Effective Architectural Sales Calls

In my perspective from the back of the bus, I often wonder why so many product representatives feel ineffective or intimidated calling on architects. Granted, some architects can be quite a treat. The terms argumentative, aloof, know-it-all, unapproachable, abstract, and expletive deleted, are often mentioned. Have you ever stopped to wonder why?

Without trying to defend architects, consider that often an architect's attitude towards product reps is the result of being misled or over-sold on the applicability, features, and benefits of construction products. Look at a typical reaction to telephone marketers or used car salespersons, what is it that is so offensive? I would suggest two aspects. First, the unrelenting hard-sell without having any idea of your needs or interests; and second, the underlying attitude that the product offered is the only possible choice and how could an architect be so stupid not to immediately understand?

Unfortunately, product representatives must overcome the back wash of less enlightened sales types that have gone before them. However, it is relatively easy to overcome this type of resistance by using an solution-oriented approach rather than a typical product-oriented approach. Architects are primarily concerned with finding the most appropriate range of solutions not the best or greatest product.

In a survey done by McGraw-Hill Sweets, architects were asked what they wanted from product representatives. The top 2 results were 'recommended uses & application of products (92%)' and 'guide specifications (88%)'. The last choice was 'manufacturer's history, experience, overall capacities & range of products (40%)'. This means that architects want to know how to appropriately apply and integrate products into their designs, not be confused by competitive features and benefits. The need for guide specifications clearly indicates the need write clear, competitive, and enforceable specifications. Lastly, horror of all horrors, the least thing architects want to know is about your company.

Another critical element for effective architectural sales calls is the ability to listen. Practically every time a rep calls on me, the first words are about company history, the president's ancestors, and how many products have been installed in Outer Slabovia last week. Next, we hear how many years he or she has been in the business, how big their territory is, on and on. Then, a guided tour through the product binder, page by page by never ending page. In all this time, usually 30 minutes, never once has the rep asked about projects, how products are selected, are the office master specifications up-to-date, and the like. The best advice I can offer for effective architectural sales calls is to SHUT-UP AND LISTEN!!!!. You will be amazed by the knowledge and insights you can discover about what the architect knows and wants to know about your product. There is a definite reason why the Creator gifted us with 2 ears and one mouth. Here is the outline that I used when making architectural sales calls. These are basic issues and touch points that I found highly effective when dealing with project architects, curmudgeonly specifiers, and firm principals.

- I. Strategic placement and opening remarks
 - A. Never sit across the table if possible, try to sit next to the architect.
 - B. Ask opened ended questions about the individual's role in the firm, responsibilities, project types, involvement in AIA and CSI, etc. Look for points of connection and mutual interest.
- II. State of Industry
 - A. Briefly outline the current state of your industry, competitive issues, new industry directions, key competitors, and local issues of interest.
 - B. In other words, immediately establish yourself as an industry player and expert. Even if your are not, chances are you know more about your industry that the architect does. If not, shut up and learn something.
- III. Product Use and Application
 - A. Ask open ended questions about how your type or class of products are used in the firm's projects.

- B. Listen closely for what the architect knows and doesn't know. This is the most critical juncture in the conversation. Here is where you can learn about hot-buttons, problems, and issues related to your product industry.
 - C. Ask how products are selected and specified. Most architectural specifications are written and revised around mistakes and problems in the field. Ask questions that try to get to the real knowledge level of the architect.
- IV. Guide Specifications
- A. Go through your guide specification pointing out key issues and problem areas where you have found most specifications to be lacking, confused, or in conflict.
 - B. Deal with these issues from an industry point-of-view not from your product sales view. It is critical that you establish yourself as an industry resource and expert.
 - C. Discuss the primary competitors and how the architect's specification should reflect the competitive issues. Be strategic here, but remember, a sole source specification is still a red flag for being substituted no matter how much the architect loves your product.
 - D. Also, despite what your sales manager says, yours is not the only or the best product in the universe. Don't criticize the competition, just discuss them in a professional and even-handed way.
 - E. Ask to see and offer to review office master specifications. Indicate that you will review for industry standard information and will update yours and the competitors product numbers.
 - F. Do not rely on your guide specification to get specified. Do everything possible to get the office master for review.
- V. Closing
- A. If you are not in the current specification ask what you must do to be included. Generally, if you have been effective, the architect will say no problem and you will be added. However.....
 - B. Follow up and make sure that you have been added to the spec. That is why getting a specification to review is so critical, you can add your product to the master and it will probably get updated.
 - C. Offer to present continuing education programs.

You will notice that discussing products is not included, especially features and benefits. Use and application, design solutions, enforceable specifications, industry procedures and standards are far more effective than talking about products, and eventually will enable you to discuss products without forcing the issue.

At the end of the day consider this. I once called upon an architect that had forgotten my appointment and said he could only give me 5 minutes. After 45 minutes, I commented that he was rather busy and asked what it would take to get in his specification. He expressed great admiration for my firm, my products and indicated no problem getting specified. Here's the rub, never once, in that 45 minutes, did I mention my firm or my products. I asked open ended questions, provided broad-based industry information, talked about key competitive issues, and discussed effective specifications, and how to minimize substitutions. I also never mentioned I was an architect and specifier with too many years of experience.

Effective architectural sales calls are very simple.....be quiet, listen, and provide industry standard knowledge and resources. That's my view from the back of the bus, welcome aboard; come on back! Let me hear from you.

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