

Competitive Advantage

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There is a lot of talk about competitive advantage in the construction product industry. Mostly it is about “faster, better, cheaper”, in terms of how a product is sold and delivered. To my mind it is a rather dated and archaic notion of competition, especially when discussing selling products to design professionals.

In my experience, one of the most critical elements in developing a competitive advantage with design professionals is to control the specification process for your product or system. Another element is managing and delivering the knowledge that design professionals need to successfully integrate your product or system into a building design. A third element is managing and controlling the critical Division 1 process, particularly substitutions. Successfully integrating these three elements into your sales and marketing strategy will provide a level of competitive advantage that even “cheaper” will have problems competing with.

Get Specified!

In the nearly 30 years I have been called on by construction product representatives, my recollection is that in less than a third of sales calls were specifications even mentioned. Product reps who can effectively work with specifiers in developing appropriate competitive specifications can gain some immediate benefits. In the final analysis the only reason to call on design professionals is to get specified, any other goal is a waste of time and resources.

Getting specified have significant advantages. First, you understand what is in the spec and what the design intent is. Second, if you have done your job correctly, you will know who the acceptable competitors are. Third, you most likely will get a call if a substitution or bidding issue comes up to see if it is appropriate.

Every sales type knows that you must close. In the sales arena we ask for the sale, deal with objections, and do everything possible to close the sale and get the order. When dealing with design professionals you must also close. Closing a specifier is very simply asking to be specified and following through to ensure that it happens. There will be plenty of objections, but if you can demonstrate your specification expertise you can get the spec.

Knowledge Management

Design professionals are constantly in over their heads, drowning in a sea of never ending information. Product reps can significantly increase their competitive advantage by helping manage the flow of knowledge to the specifiers.

In any given project there can be anywhere from 75 to 125 specification sections that need to be developed for a construction project. Design professionals can not possibly stay abreast of the information contained in each one of those sections. Providing the specifiers with up-to-date information, industry insights, and competitive knowledge will set you miles apart from your competition.

Be very cautious not to provide biased and partial information. It is easy to do and can cause you to completely lose your competitive position by trashing your integrity and credibility. The temptations will be great but just give the specifier solid, industry standard information and you will benefit tremendously.

Substitutions

Successfully getting specified does not mean a closed or sole source specification. Those are

the easiest to break and substitute. Helping the specifier to write an open, competitive specification gives you a much better competitive position. The ability to control who is specified can practically eliminate substitutions.

When I speak of “control” I do not mean slanting or biasing the specification to benefit a manufacturer. Control means that you know what is happening, how the bidding or negotiating will be handled, and who you will be competing against. There is nothing worse in the world to find you are bidding against a product or system that only looks equal.

Understanding and effectively working the processes and procedures in Division 1 can often be the most competitive advantage available. If you are unsuccessful in getting specified and becoming the specifier’s preferred knowledge vendor, you can still be quite effective with the specifier in how you handle the substitution process.

During most of my career, the substitutions I received consisted of a transmitted and a product cut sheet. No comparative information, no idea of how the proposed substitution would be incorporated, basically no clue, period. It is critical to show the specifier that you understand not only the process but that you can address the real issues of product or system equivalency.

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In my experience as both a specifier and a product representative, I know how important competitive advantage is. To be an effective product sales type with design professionals you must ask for the specification, provide non-biased, impartial technical information, and close the specification by understanding and effectively using the key processes contained in Division 1. Then and only then can you fall back on “faster, better, cheaper” and successfully bid and get the order from the contractor on a level and well understood playing field.

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