

## **Building Effective A&E Relationships**

NSCA EXPO2002, Denver, CO April 2002

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MCA Specifications

While the primary thrust of the MasterFormat Expansion Forum presented at NSCA's EXPO2002 was about the proposed expansion of CSI's MasterFormat and its direct impact on NSCA members, the program also discussed how to be effective in implementing the proposed expansion areas. Co-presenter Michael Chambers FAIA FCSI offered a brief personal view of the future of technology and design. He also suggested a strategies on maximizing relationships with design professionals and being effective consultants and integrators using specifications and continuing education.

### **The Future of Technology and Design**

#### *Design-Build*

One of the fastest growing segments of the construction industry is Design-Build. From the technology integration point-of-view, there are a number of key issues that must be considered in the design-build process. In marketing to design-builders, relationship selling is paramount. It is important to develop relationships with both the design and builder parts of the team. While cost is always an issue, more often than not, schedule becomes the key, while time is money, schedule will usually govern. The ability to deliver product or system on time is critical. For a manufacturer or distributor, understanding subcontractor relationships and preferences can be a significant competitive advantage.

#### *Performance Specifications*

There appears to be an increase in the use of performance specifications in the construction industry. The reasons can often distilled down to either lack of knowledge about systems and products or a manufacturer trying to protect a sole source specification. Enforceable performance specifications for a building or any element of a building must begin with identification of basic requirements. Since performance specifying has commonly been limited to a few types of products rather than building elements, specifiers, architects, and engineers have not had much experience with the process of identifying requirements. It is critical for consultants and integrators to understand the ramifications of using performance criteria in specifications. True performance specifications allow integrators to develop systems rather than obtain a competitive product advantage.

#### *Strategy vs Tactics*

As the integration of technology into building design increases, it is important to develop a strategy to bring technology to the attention of the design community in the initial phases of the design process. A strategy is a big picture, visionary notion that considers what needs to be accomplished, who are the key players, and how do we integrate into the process. Tactics are the tools or methods used to accomplish the strategic objectives. Too often, consultants and integrators focus on tactics of products, systems, and design while ignoring the larger strategic issues of problem identification, design integration, and justifying the role of technology integration in the design process. Technocrats are always far more comfortable with methods, materials, and tools. Owners and designers need to understand the larger picture and the critical benefits of integrating technology into the building design rather than the current alternation and renovation of technology into brand new buildings.

Integrators and consultants have two powerful strategies for working effectively with design professionals in the design process. Continuing education, becoming the primary educator of technology integration, elevates the relationship from vendor to design partner. A knowledgeable design professional asks better questions and becomes a powerful ally in developing an appropriate system. The ability to work closely with design professionals in developing specifications is a huge competitive advantage. Specification strategy is about getting the products and systems specified appropriately and competitively. An

integrator can significantly reduce non-competitive substitutions and inappropriate systems or products by helping the specifiers to craft competitive specifications.

## **How To Be Effective with Design Professionals**

### *Relationship*

Relationship is the most effective way to develop a strong system/product identification. It is critical to understand type of work design professionals do. Understanding what design professionals are interested in is critical to forming positive working relationships. Discovering how to uncover a design professional's hot buttons is a valuable tool. Asking questions rather than talking or lecturing can make all the difference. Listening is the most powerful sales tool in the world.

Another powerful way of establishing relationships with design professionals is to become an educator. Education is the best tool for influencing design and getting specified. Educating design professionals establishes solid professional credibility and removes the stigma of being a vendor. The better educator you are, the greater your chances of relationship and being included in the project.

### *Strategies and Tactics for Effective Marketing Calls*

In a survey done by McGraw-Hill Sweets, design professionals 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 design professionals 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 last thing design professionals want to know is about your company.

Again, another critical element for effective architectural sales calls is the ability to listen. Practically every time a rep calls, the first words spoken are always about company history, the president's ancestors, and how many products have been installed in Outer Slabovia. Next, it is how many years they have 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 for effective architectural sales calls is to SHUT-UP AND LISTEN!!!!. It is amazing the knowledge and insights to be discovered about what the architect knows and wants to know. There is a definite reason why the Creator gifted humans with 2 ears and one mouth.

From personal experience as a specifier and product rep, clearly the easiest way to develop a true competitive advantage with design professionals is to focus on use and application, product limitations, and industry/competitive knowledge.

### *Specifications Are the Most effective Marketing Tool*

While it may go against the grain of every salesperson's basic instinct, competitive specifications typically offer the best results for increasing sales and creating successful design. When a spec is written around clear industry standards and qualified manufacturers, everyone benefits. The owner gets the best price, the design professional's design intent remains intact and the industry competitors have level playing field that they can bid on. Anytime allow sole source or noncompetitive specifications are employed, substitutions are unavoidable.

Substitutions are the last thing either reps or design professionals want to deal with. The best way to eliminate substitutions is to ensure that every one of the appropriate competing manufacturers is included in the specifications. This requires that the reps be knowledgeable about the competition and that the design professionals understand how the industry works. It is clearly in everyone's mutual interest that substitutions are minimized. For the design professional, substitutions mean significant extra work,

usually at the last minute, requiring decisions based on inadequate information and sales pitches. For the product rep, substitutions mean trying for last minute access to the specifier and typically competing on price alone rather than best application and support of the design intent. It is rare when a general contractor will consider a substitution unless offered a cost advantage. Of course, pre-bid substitutions are somewhat different, but the same principles apply. Don't wait until the last minute to get products to the design professional. Their first response will usually be negative and that is no way to begin a relationship.

### *Continuing Education is the Most Effective Communication Tool*

Product reps must become educators to be the most effective with design professionals. Learn how to educate design professionals using continuing education opportunities. Remember that even in education relationships are key, successful education presentations are based on face-to-face exchange of knowledge, not Powerpoint® or slick videos. Successful education experiences stem from the rep's ability to personally communicate their industry expertise and willingness to make it available as a design and specification resource. Reps and their manufacturers have a responsibility to educate design professionals about the realities of their industry and how to reflect that reality in their specifications. Remember that design professionals are not stupid only ignorant. Education can eliminate ignorance, be an educator not a salesperson.

### *Using the Internet: Marketing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

A website is not an electronic catalog. It is a database of knowledge about industry practice, standards, expertise, products, and how to use them appropriately. The ability to combine graphics, technical data, and specifications in a simple to use format is the most effective marketing use of the internet. A website should contain everything necessary to understand, design, and specify an industry standard application of the product or assembly. Websites that focus on features and benefits and competitive disinformation rarely get return visits. Colin Gilboy, president and webmaster of [www.4specs.com](http://www.4specs.com) says, "Your website should provide the information a designer needs to select and design using your products. ALL OF IT. Don't worry, your competitors already have your UL test reports and other proprietary information, so make that information available to the architect. You have copies of their information, don't you? So make it easy for potential users to access that information as well." The minute a specifier leaves the site to find a critical piece of information on another site, especially information that could have provided, the site has failed.

### *Networking: Professional and Industry Associations*

Being active in CSI, AIA, and other design profession related industry associations can significantly increase enhance the opportunities for relationships. While the current trend seems to suggest that investing time in associations is a low priority, the advent of continuing education and the crucial need to be specified to increase sales should cause everyone to reassess active membership in industry associations. Actively participating in industry associations can have a very positive impact on both sides of the industry/professional relationship. Generally, product reps who are active members of industry associations are always more sophisticated and knowledgeable about industry trends and processes. The critical element here is industry expertise and how to communicate it. Industry associations as networks and providers of education are a mutual resource for design professionals and product reps, alike.

Thinking strategically and focusing on relationships with design professionals can have a very positive effect on any industry member's bottomline by getting products specified, establishing a competitive advantage, and generally staying out the substitution business. The proposed MasterFormat Expansion is a significant opportunity for NSCA members to expand their critical marketing networks to include design professionals.

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