

A View From the Back of the Bus

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What Do Specifiers Want from Product Reps?

In my view from the back of the bus, I recently noted an interesting exchange of views on product representatives by several architects and specifiers in *4specs.com* Discussion Forum. The following comments were extracted from the discussion database and used with permission of *4Specs.com*.

I am soooo tired of product reps that end up being an "anything for a sale" salesperson. I especially hate it when they lie about their competitors or competitor's product. I am threatening to only have joint meetings with competitive product reps. That way they can't lie about the other guy's products with him sitting in the same room.

When I do find an honest rep. I keep them in my "inner circle" and consult with them for honest answers.

When you find a product rep that is honest about his/her products as well as his/her competitor's product failings, you shower him/her in gifts and take him/her (this gender thing is getting out of hand) to lunch as often as you can - not vice versa.

Clearly, these specifiers are very frustrated with the level of service and integrity they were experiencing with product representatives. While their comments do reflect a general feeling of their peers, I do not believe for an instant that the comments are indicative of a industry wide lack of integrity or honesty, but more of a lack of mutual understanding, competing self-interest, and primarily, poor communication. It goes without saying, however, that there is no substitute for honesty in business. Just check your recent stock market portfolio if you don't believe it.

Unfortunately, while architects and specifiers are excellent at criticizing, they are very slow at providing useful criticism or helpful feedback to their product industry partners. However, as the following comment illustrates, specifiers have the ability to understand the product rep's side and clearly appreciate those who can provide honest, quality information that allows them to specify products appropriately and competitively. (Emphasis is mine).

Spec writers (and architects and engineers always need to be skeptical about product claims (product reps get lied to by their companies, too), and it is the A/E's professional responsibility to make the right selection for the application. There are, however, reps out there who know their products (strengths and limitations), who understand why their products are better than their competitors (or understand that they represent a commodity product), and who will refer me to a competitor when their product won't meet my criteria. THESE ARE THE PEOPLE THAT I NEED TO KEEP ON "SPEED DIAL" WHEN I NEED INFORMATION ABOUT A PRODUCT (AND THEY ARE SOMETIMES SURPRISINGLY GOOD ABOUT COMING UP WITH THE NAME OF A GOOD REP FOR A PRODUCT THEY SHOULD KNOW NOTHING ABOUT).

In February 2001, I authored an article in the *CSI Specifier Magazine* entitled *Specifiers and Product Reps, Making the Most of the Partnership*. In that article, I discussed opportunities for specifiers and product reps develop partnerships and effective working relationships. Primarily, I believe that if we will take the time to understand each other's self-interest, ask better questions, and most importantly, listen to the answers, it is possible to develop the type of relationship presented above.

As a place to start, consider these guidelines as a way to grow relationships and be more effective in the critical exchange of information between specifier and product rep.

1. FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS NOT PRODUCTS. Ask questions about project types, general product use and

application, try to determine what the specifier does and doesn't know about your industry and products. Understanding design issues and presenting solutions that directly applicable to projects will get your product specified every time. Presenting products without solutions is just information overload.

2. INDUSTRY EXPERTISE is most the valuable asset available to product reps. Focusing on product knowledge, features and benefits, company history and capabilities are clear channels to failure. Use and application, sustainability, specification application, and detailing presented as an industry player is far more effective than presenting product as a peddler.
3. Use GUIDE SPECIFICATIONS to educate specifiers on product use, application, and industry (competitive) issues. From a specification point-of-view, product limitations are the most important piece of information to communicate. In the final analysis, if your product is not specified or is specified incorrectly, the time and effort with the specifier is completely wasted, and worse, a relationship damaged.
4. REVIEW SPECIFICATIONS for industry compliance and appropriate competitors. Try to obtain office masters for review. Everything a rep needs and wants to know about a specific firm or specifier is contained in their specifications. Specification analysis is the most powerful knowledge management tool available to reps.
5. CONTINUING EDUCATION must be applicable to professional practice. If program attendees can't immediately apply the materials presented to their current projects and specifications the program is a failure. Continuing education is only successful as a marketing tool when it demonstrates the rep's industry expertise, is non-biased, impartial, and is solution not product focused.
6. Knowing where to find PRODUCT INFORMATION is far more important than knowing the information. Be able to provide credible information resources that are easy to access and understand. More and more websites are the 'go to' information resources. Binders, while still important, are out-of-date as they are printed and often misplaced in office libraries. Missing a specification because of no product info happens on a daily basis.
7. SAMPLES must be meaningful and accurately reflect use and application. Hands-on demonstrations increase specifier's understanding and retention 10 times that of words and 3-4 times that of paper.
8. Present examples of PRODUCT AND SYSTEM FAILURES and discuss why they failed. Provide specification and detail solutions on how to avoid or minimize failures. Provide clear graphics, details, and photos. Product (actually installation) failures are very effective marketing tactics. Especially, if you point out what in the project specification or detail contributed to the failure. Hopefully you won't identify failures by name or use failures from the firm you are visiting.
9. DEMAND FEEDBACK from specifiers. If they won't tell you face-to-face what they want, think about you and your product, there is a very good chance that you are wasting your time.
10. INDUSTRY NETWORKING is the process of developing relationships outside of the sales call. Active and effective participation in CSI and AIA can greatly simplify the difficult task of getting to specifiers and designers. Don't be afraid to ask senior members to introduce you to someone or request a firm contact. Consider more active participation on committees if that fits your MO. However, in the end, showing up is the most effective part of successful networking.

That's my view from the back of the bus, come onboard and let me hear from you.

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