

Effective Specification Sales
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In the 30 years I have spent in the design and construction business I have been called on by the best and the worst of product representatives, company presidents, vice presidents, national sales managers, and related sales types. In reviewing that experience, I estimate that less than 35% of those individuals ever talked to me about getting their product specified. Their sole focus was to sell me their company, product, and ensure that I knew that their competition did not warrant consideration. Worst, I estimate that less than 20% of them had any useable specification skills or interest in making sure the specifications did not disadvantage them in the bidding process.

Specification Sales is SOLELY a Marketing Process

In my experience, the greatest disadvantage the majority of product representatives have in working effectively with design professionals is their sales orientation. I have sat through hundreds of miserable and ultimately unsuccessful product presentations because the product representatives thought they were going to sell my team a product. Representing products to design professionals is a marketing and education process. Design professionals need to be educated about the industry, use and application of products, and the key competitive issues currently in affecting construction.

Use and Application, NOT Features and Benefits

The sales process is about features and benefit, costs, installation, lead times, and related competitive issues. The process of marketing design professionals is about educating the design professionals about use and application of the product, limitations of the systems, competitive product issues, and how to craft a competitive specification that will minimize substitutions.

Educating design professionals about the use and application of product systems must be presented from an industry viewpoint. Leave the features and benefits for someone who cares, such as the distributor and subcontractor. Educate the design professionals appropriately and you will establish a professional relationship that will get you specified time after time.

Features and benefits are the number one reason for successful substitutions. Since manufacturers want to differentiate their products from the competition they develop features and benefits that attempt to make their products appear better, of higher quality, or easier installation. When an ignorant specifier writes a specification around one manufacturer's features and benefits the substitution flag is raised high and clear. Specifications based on industry standards, standard practices, and uniform performance requirements can be crafted to be practically substitution proof. In general practice, the majority of specifiers are trying to publish specifications that are open, competitive, and establish a minimum level of acceptable quality and performance.

A product representative's ability to read, understand, edit, or even write specifications is the most effective sales tool available. To be able to support the design professional's specification process almost always means that your product is specified and specified in such a way that you have an equal opportunity to successfully bid the project. Ignoring the specification writing process negatively impacts the sales process. Often the product representative lose bids because they never developed the critical relationships with design professionals that support successful specification sales.

Division 1 is Your Friend, Minimize Substitutions

In addition to writing a competent specification, product representatives need to understand the power and resources contained in Division 1 – General Requirements of the Specifications. Division 1 contains critical procedural information and requirements that affect every one of the sections in the specifications. Procedural requirements for submittals, payment, change orders, owner furnished equipment; project closeout, temporary facilities, and the like are found there. Most importantly, the procedures and process

for making substitutions is contained in Division 1.

A good working knowledge of Division 1 is a key element in specification sales and successful avoidance of inappropriate and frivolous substitutions. Understanding the process and procedures underlying specifications is a tremendous competitive advantage for product representatives.

Closing the Sale, Ask for the Specification

One of the most frustrating experiences for me as an architect, specifier, and product representative, is to watch an experienced and knowledgeable product representative do an outstanding job educating the design professionals, discussing substitution conflicts, identifying the appropriate competitive products, and then to walk away without pointedly asking for the specification.

In a sales situation, an experienced salesperson makes the pitch, presents features and benefits, handles objections and concerns, and always, always, asks for the sale. No sales type in their right mind would do all the work of the sales process and then leave before asking for the sale and doing everything possible to close including the "hard sell".

When dealing with design professionals on product specification issues it is paramount that you never finish a presentation without taking about specifications. Even if you are talking to a designer or project manager, discussing specifications will accomplish one of two things. First, they will talk with you about the specification issues or they will introduce you to the specification writer. Either of these two outcomes is highly desirable.

When you finally are speaking to the specification decision maker, educate, educate, educate. Then ask for the specification, find out what it will take to get specified and do it. A number of years ago when I was marketing architectural wood doors, I had the opportunity to call on an architect with a local hardware representative. When we arrived at the architect's office, it was clear that things were hectic. As it turned out the specifier had forgotten our appointment. He was gracious and said he only had 5 minutes but come on in. 45 minutes later, I suggested he was busy and we should be going. As my practice was to always "close" a sales call, I asked him what it would take to get our product listed in his specifications. He responded that he was extremely impressed with the product and the firm and he would be listing us in his specifications.

Sounds great, right? I had done a fine job selling him my company and product, correct? Actually, during the 45 minutes we had with him I never once mentioned product or referred to my company. I talked about wood doors, the wood door industry, and how to specify wood doors correctly. The local rep still can't understand how I did it. It was very simple, and it works every time. Architects want solutions not products. If you focus your sales calls on understanding the architect's issues and provide industry standard solutions, the conversation will always come back to product. Solutions, products, and specifications are the triple crown of architectural sales. However, it is always, always, solutions first, the rest will follow.

But DO NOT forget to ask for the specification!!

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