Steel
Building a Future on Frames
Western Partitions Sees Load Bearing Steel Framing as the Key to Rapid Growth
Most wall and ceiling contracting companies begin with specialties in drywall or plastering, and, as they grow, they expand into secondary areas, such as fireproofing, acoustical ceilings and steel framing. Barely does a contractor start off with a focus on steel framing. Even rarer is a fully established contractor who will change directions to make steel framing the driver of his company.

An exception to this general situation is the Portland, Ore.-based Western Partitions, Inc. Like many other contractors, Western Partitions has done its share of both interior and exterior framing. Yet this typical framing, explains Senior Project Manager Gary Williams, was non-loadbearing, and the new thrust is to provide loadbearing framing, which will bear the support of the floors up through the building.

“We’re at $40 million in revenues a year, and with our new steel framing orientation, we would like to grow the business at $8 million to $10 million a year,” Williams says. Moreover, Williams says that loadbearing steel framing represents not simply an exciting future for his company, but for other contractors across the country and for the industry as a whole.

But, before we move forward, let’s take a brief look back to see how Western Partitions got from there to here.

The company was founded in 1974 as a family business, and it’s still a family business. The presi-
dent and corporate secretary are Mike and Pam Roach. Their children are Victor, vice president, and Angela, assistant to the corporate secretary. The founders started doing piecemeal drywall working from their home and continued in this fashion until 1983 when they began to expand. At this time, when Gary Williams was hired along with several others, the company was doing about $2 million a year. During the following 18 years, with some minor dips, the company clipped along with a growth rate of about 20 percent per year. Western Partitions has opened additional offices in Medford, Ore., and in Seattle. Today the company has more than 400 employees in the field and an office staff of 35 to 50 people.

Williams credits the significant and steady growth to three main factors. “The first is our vision statement,” Williams says. “We pride ourselves as a high quality commercial contractor who places a priority on customer service.” Williams explains that it’s always been the company’s policy to promote from within, to motivate employees by giving them opportunities to develop and advance. Finally, instead of growing through borrowing, as is the usual practice, Western Partitions has always paid its own way and financed its expansions with its own earnings. “Our
the company insists on being involved with the building design.

financial strength gives us a lot of flexibility,” Williams says. “Were able to take advantage of opportunities, put money into them and make sure we get a return.”

**Stealing the Moment**

The big opportunity at the moment is steel framing. Traditionally, drywall and metal studs have made up 70 percent of the business; insulation is 10 percent, acoustical ceilings make up 10 percent, fireproofing is 5 percent, and EIFS and interior plastering together are 5 percent. Williams predicts it won’t be long before steel framing will make up 20 to 25 percent of the overall volume.

In making the move toward steel framing, the company brought
on board, about a year ago, Bruce Ward, project manager/steel stud systems, who has spent most of his career working in the steel industry. For the previous seven to eight years he had been a spokesman for the steel industry, traveling around the country and presenting seminars on the merits of load bearing steel frames over wooden frames.

Ward explains that it was in the early 1990s that the steel industry, which was intent on developing new markets for its products, began to target light commercial and residential. “The obstacles were the labor force, who were used to wood framing,” Ward says.

Ward’s mandate was to try to convince contractors to convert from using wood framing on typically four or five-story buildings, to using steel frames. He wanted to see the steel move from
being a secondary component to being the primary structural support of the building.

The benefit of steel over wood, Ward says, is the trueness and straightness of the product. The quality is uniformly high, its durability is better, and it minimizes the amount of repair needed down the road. Since steel, unlike wood, does not burn, it’s a better choice in terms of fireproofing issues. Steel also provides for better job scheduling, Ward points out, since it is ready to assemble once it reaches the jobsite and does not need site preparation, as does wood.

“Steel is also more consistent in pricing than wood,” Ward says. “Wood is cheaper now, but it goes up and down in price, and the quality of the wood is sometimes in question.” Although wood can still generally undercut steel in price, Ward says steel is competitive in this regard, and is cheaper than concrete and iron.

Ward, in getting out his message, worked in conjunction with four main steel organizations, allied in purpose, and all located in Washington, D.C. the main one is the American Iron and Steel Institute, an offshoot of which is the North American Steel Framing Alliance. The third is the Light Gauge Steel Engineers Association. “Another organization that has really led the way is the Steel Stud Manufacturers Association,” Ward says. “They’ve helped standardize nomenclature and product information so that it is consistent throughout the country.” This was no small
task, Ward adds. For one of the downfalls of steel framing in the past is that every manufacturer would have a different way of naming and describing what were basically the same products. This created confusion and was an impediment to the widespread acceptance of steel framing.

Ward’s role has also been to educate inspectors and building department officials who may have some awareness of steel framing, but not the detailed knowledge. His main efforts, though,
have been directed toward architects and general contractors. “We’ve spent a lot of time speaking to architects and engineers,” Ward says, indicating he is making marketing efforts now on behalf of Western Partitions that he previously did for the steel industry. “We’re getting many architects and engineers to look at this option for the first time. We’ve also come across many who have been interested but are not able to find wall and ceiling contractors with the labor resources to do this work. This indicates that there are not too many wall and ceiling contractors out there pursuing this avenue; they really don’t take it on unless it’s dropped in their lap.”

**Ready to Work**

How has Western Partitions prepared for entering this new arena? “We do a lot of in-house education of mechanics,” Williams replies. “We’ve modified most of our rolling stock to transport the equipment needed efficiently. And we’ve changed a bit in how we deal with architects and engineers. Instead of just waiting until we’ve been given their plans, we’re insisting that we be involved in the design and detailing from the start. This is perhaps a departure from most drywall companies. It’s a major push
to become involved in the start of the design process, and we’re very excited about it.”

Although the company has been involved in smaller projects, its first full-fledged steel framing project is about to begin—a four-story 50,000-square-foot building. Williams says their market research shows a big market for steel framing in buildings typically of four and five stories, but also up to nine stories. These are in three main categories that the company is targeting. One is the multifamily and assisted living home. The second is the “box,” something like a four-story hotel. And the third is the mixed-use structure, with retail shops on the main floor and residences on the upper floors.
Williams says this type of work is more accessible to larger contracting companies that have a skilled work force, like Western Partitions. “In the Portland area there have been basically the same five or six contractors over the past 25 years, with 50 to 60 smaller ones who come and go.” Williams adds that a similar situation is in Seattle, though Western is newer to that market, and the company has virtually no real competition in Meford. About 15 percent of the companies work is negotiated, but of the 85 percent of bid work, Western is one of only two or three contractors on the bid list.

Western is a union contractor, and Williams believes this helps. “Unions provide a much more stable work force, along with the education and quality standards,” Williams says.

Although Western Partitions is pioneering loadbearing steel framing, it is not trying to keep the idea to itself “This is going to be a huge growth area for the industry,” Williams says. “And we welcome the competition. We want to see the industry grow, and we see ourselves as leaders in the industry—so we don’t feel any discomfort about others getting into this arena as well.”
