Sweeney Drywall Finishes Corp., Burlington, Mass., has a simple way of winning new business. Its marketing motto goes something like this: “We don’t argue. Absolutely no fighting is our policy.”

At one job site, for example, the drywall firm began work only to find that the structural steel was not properly lined up. Much of the framing package would have to be re-engineered, but president Dan Sweeney acted calmly about it.

“I don’t think it’s that much of a hassle,” he said on the occasion. “We’ll handle it and move on.”

Move on? Did he mean move on without lodging a complaint, without being difficult, without exchanging words with the general contractor, the architect or some other trade? That’s exactly what he meant. And it’s why Sweeney Drywall has landed many of Boston’s highest-profile projects.

Whether it’s working for Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Massachusetts General Hospital or EMC Corp., Sweeney Drywall promises to get the job done well and to create positive on-site working relationships. The reputation, Sweeney believes, helped in part to win a contract for work on the football stadium of the New England Patriots.

Unprecedented Design

The new venue in Foxboro, Mass., is enormous. Named after an Internet tech-
nology company, CMGI Field lies along Massachusetts’s Route 1 and dwarfs the adjacent Foxboro Stadium, home to the Patriots since 1971. CMGI Field will open this spring, when the Revolution, a professional soccer team, will use it in advance of the NFL season.

Patriots team owner Robert Kraft says the 68,000-seat CMGI Field will be “fan-friendly” and “capture the character and tradition of New England.” He says the stadium’s clubhouse “will feature an unprecedented design incorporating a glass wall that extends from one end zone to the other along both sidelines.”

Club members and guests will enjoy big-screen televisions, full-service bars, fireplaces and plush leather furniture.

Such high-end amenities call for high-quality construction. About 200 subcontractors work on the project, and Sweeney Drywall is one of them.

Sweeney Drywall is a third-generation family business owned by Dan Sweeney. While previous generations ran the firm under a different name, Sweeney Drywall has been the official company name since 1992. The firm handles 100 projects a year
A New Tool to Cut Sheathing

While job site cooperation and smooth work flow are Sweeney Drywall hallmarks, the company also relies on more than a few tricks of the trade to ensure that it delivers productivity as good or better than the competition.

One good example is the power shears the company uses to cut the Fiberock Brand Sheathing used on the CMGI Stadium project. After trying several different methods to cut the core-reinforced gypsum/cellulose panels, Sweeney opted for the SS460 Snapper Shear from Pacific International. It looks like a tin snips, but has wider jaws and is power-operated. It slices through the sheathing as though it were butter.

“It works great,” says Dana Griffin, a Sweeney Drywall hanger. “It’s better than using a razor knife.”

Griffin says the powered shears cut straight, handle curves and create minimal dust. Using the new tool, he and two other hangers working at CMGI Field, Foxboro, Mass., whizzed through the application of the new sheathing. In fact, Griffin says the installation of 250 MSF of the U.S. Gypsum sheathing went just as fast as it would have taken to put up glass-mat facing sheathing panels.

...and generates about $15 million in revenues. It is 100-percent unionized, with 200 employees on the payroll.

Last summer, 20 to 30 of those workers began installing exterior metal framing, sheathing and exterior insulation and finish system at CMGI Field. Another firm has the interiors contract for the stadium, and a third is installing the acoustical ceilings.

“It’s the one job that everybody wants to talk about,” says Sweeney. “It’s on TV every time the Patriots play at home.”

Careful Planning

As prominent as it is, the project is complex and has called for careful planning. For example, Sweeney Drywall has had to micromanage its staging requirements by thinking through its crew deployments and teaming up with other trades to share staging costs. Because CMGI Field is being built on a hillside, some of the work platforms have had to rise only a few feet above ground, whereas others have had to reach installation points several stories high.

During one week, three Sweeney Drywall hangers—perched 55 feet above ground on pipe staging—fastened Fiberock® Brand sheathing with Aqua-Touch™ from United States Gypsum Company to 18-gauge studs spaced 16 inches o.c. Installing 30 or 40, 4-by-8-by-1/2-inch sheets per day, the hangers worked so quickly that Sweeney’s staging crews couldn’t keep up with the pace. Joseph Duffy, project manager and vice president for Sweeney Drywall, never thought the new core-reinforced gypsum/cellulose panels would go up so fast.

“My initial impression with this board was that it would take longer to install,” Duffy says. “Well, it doesn’t take longer to cut. It doesn’t take longer to hang. It’s just great stuff.”

Could Sweeney have used something other than basic pipe stag-
ing to reach the 55-foot elevation? Standard scissorlifts could be repositioned quickly as work progressed, but none on site would extend to the necessary height. While all-terrain boom lifts might have worked well, Duffy felt they were expensive to rent and wouldn’t necessarily have added speed to the operation.

In the end, the equipment choice didn’t really matter. It all came down to people.

“The whole key is Jacques Larochelle,” Duffy says. “He’s the guy running the operation.”

Jacques “Jake” Larochelle has been hanging board for 23 years and is Sweeney
Drywall’s foreman at CMGI Field. To Duffy; Larochelle is more than just a veteran, he’s a “special talent.” Initially, Larochelle managed the metal framing install by ordering pre-cut stud lengths to keep costs down. After that, he orchestrated the installation crews so as to get good production in both framing and sheathing phases.

How does he do it? When asked, Larochelle will tell you that there’s no badgering, cajoling or intimidation involved in his method of motivating people. “I treat the crews like human beings,” he says, “and they treat me likewise.”

“I really needed someone with good people skills on this job, and Jake’s got them,” Duffy says. “Many foremen know the mechanics of the work, but they don’t always know how to work with the crews. Well, Jake has that quality. He can sit down, talk to crews and get them to work efficiently.”

Feeling Good

Duffy, who currently is managing seven other jobs besides CMGI Field, has been pleased. Installation of 250 MSF of sheathing and subsequent EIFS is a major project, but thanks, in part, to the quick sheathing installation, the job went without a hitch. Sweeney Drywall has no complaints, no criticisms—nothing but praise—for the GC. And there’s been nothing quite as motivating as building the home of a favorite sports team.

“We’re working for the Patriots, and aren’t we all patriots anyway?” asks Larochelle, who moved to the United States from Canada in 1964. “We all feel good about our work.”

“It’s exciting. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime thing,” Duffy adds. “How often does one of these stadiums get built?”

About the Author
Mark L. Johnson is a free-lance writer based in Shenandoah, Iowa. He writes frequently about wall and ceiling construction.