Creating an Effective Construction Presentation

Once you’ve been in construction awhile, particularly in commercial, you’ll no doubt find yourself going after larger, more complex building projects. This is only natural evolution, for in most cases these projects offer the potential of larger sales revenue, greater volume and enhanced prestige, which never hurts a company on the rise. Sure, remodeling local clinics, small offices and occasional store-room additions were nice—after all, it got you established, but now the company has matured, you’ve matured and confidence is on the rise. The office and field are in tow, and you feel comfortable that you have the right people in the right places. And your bonding compa-
ny didn’t faint (a very good sign) when you told them your plans to upscale. So you decide it’s time to move from remodeling Joe’s Quickmart to constructing IBM boardrooms.

**Dogs and Ponies**

With larger clients comes greater protocol, greater formality and sooner or later, you’ll come across a construction opportunity where you’ll be asked to perform a customer presentation. These presentations normally happen as a result of one particular client interviewing a handful of selected contractors for a project that the client has in the planning stages. The goal of the presentations is to choose one contractor with whom that client will partner the job. Since this may be your best (only?) chance to make your impression, it becomes well within your best interest to learn how to create, present and even excel in giving effective sales presentations.

Where I’m from (contrary to opinion, not Mars), we lovingly refer to these presentations as “dog and pony shows.” This is because these performances tend to take most of us nuts and bolts kind of guys out of our natural element (building and construction) and re-cast us into the comparably un-natural and circus-like world of speaker/presenter. Of course the problem is that most of us are still shell-shocked from 10th grade speech class and can still recall the horror of standing up in front of the class, stumbling and stuttering our way through “How I Spent My Summer Vacation.” The last thing in the world we want to do is be the sole focus of attention for two (very) long hours in front of a group of stern, discerning curmudgeons. Sweat forms on your forehead just thinking about it.

**Presentation Tips**

But take heart. There are a number of techniques and tricks (No, I’m not going to tell you to picture them naked. I’ve seen some of these clients and the image is just too horrifying) you can employ to make the chore less taxing—and less frightening. And since knowledge builds confidence, and confidence wins you work, let’s see if we can calm our nerves. Let’s develop our skills by examining a few tips that can help you better build your customer presentation. Here we go.

- **Unless you’re an orator on par with Winston Churchill**, *some* type of audio/visual aide is always a good idea for your presentation. It simply breaks up the monotony of having to listen to one lone voice for the entire duration of the presentation. You can use different elements to add variety: slides, charts, graphs, photos, renderings or anything else that might help you bolster your case and get your point across. It also shows you have the computer capabilities to create such multi-media, which simply makes you look more professional. And the good news is that there are many products out there to help you out, such as presentation software packages like Microsoft PowerPoint®. These packages—with their array of features
and graphical acrobatics—can make even novice presenters look far more polished and professional than they really are.

One caution: Be sure these enhancements really do propel your message forward. Don’t include that color, 3-D, full-animation, exploding pie-chart simply because you possess the technology to do so. Every part of your presentation—verbal, written or multi-media—should directly bolster your argument. Too much flash can distract from the mission. Remember, the message is the thing.

- As uneasy as you may feel standing up in front of the crowd, don’t show it. Even if you have to fake it, the cheer is “Confidence, Confidence, Confidence!”

Remember this: You know what you’re talking about. You’ve been a contractor for years, and there’s absolutely no one in the world more qualified to present your case than you. The customer is about to invest a lot of money and effort into an important project, and he’s not about to hand it over to someone who appears unsure of himself:

- Bring along the key people of your team. The estimator, project manager, even the safety officer (if it applies) should be in attendance. After introductions, tell a little something (not too much) about these people and give a brief history of your company’s successes. Your potential clients have a marked interest in knowing with whom they’d
be dealing should they choose your firm. They want to know their money and project is in safe, competent hands.

Research your competitors (if you already haven’t done so), and attempt to offer something unique-something singular to your services and company that separates you from the pack. For example, if you’re giving a presentation for the new local school construction, offer to assist them with pre-referendum services, such as flyer creation/distribution, database name collection, or offer to attend the school board meetings. Find anything (legal) to convey to the audience that your company is innovative. Remember: Most of these clients have sat through these presentations before. Try to give them something they don’t expect.

- Regarding the presentation itself: the “KISS Rule” applies—Keep It Simple Stu-
pid. If there’s a choice, brevity is best. Don’t cram tons of jargon into slides or frames, and don’t regale longwindedly over your company’s accounting department. All you do is tire and/or confuse your audience. Your presentation’s photos, graphics and charts should visually be easy and quick to comprehend. You will fill in the details with your talk.

- Rehearse, Rehearse, Rehearse! Confidence is great, but take it from someone who’s been there: There’s nothing more frustrating then wishing you’d brought out an important or crucial piece of information, after the presentation is over. Rehearsing also helps build confidence. Yes, there are some people who’ve been blessed with the natural gift of oration, but most of the polished speakers who make it look so easy weren’t born with the gift. They worked hard to get there.

- Get the crowd involved. Ask them questions. Get responses. Basically, get them talking. It calms the atmosphere, knocks down the walls, and builds a bond between speaker and audience. It also allows you to discern more precisely the needs and concerns of the client. This you can adjust on the fly as to where to place focus of your talk.

- Take time beforehand to learn the customer’s business. Know their history, their principals and their product. The client will be impressed with your knowledge and appreciate that you took the time to better understand their background and motivation. More importantly, it simply allows you
both to move more quickly to the heart of the deal.

The construction industry offers unique considerations when marketing to our clients. Construction is a different animal in that our product is (normally) inordinately expensive; sometimes obscenely expensive. In our day-to-day travails, we often forget that. Therefore, decisions to buy aren’t made overnight.

Once the presentation is complete, don’t give up, and don’t dismiss prospects from which you see no activity. The client’s decision to go ahead is often affected by things that have absolutely nothing to do with your company or presentation, and much more to do with internal matters such as financing or searching for the perfect location. Follow up as any good salesperson would do, and be patient. In the end, the best company will win, and by having delivered a solid, professional, effective presentation, you’ve already shown them who’s best.

About the Author
S.S. Saucerman retired last year after 26 years in the construction industry. He also taught part-time in the Building construction Technology program at Rock Valley college in Rockford, Ill., for 11 years. Today he is writing, speaking and consulting on a full-time basis.