With the changes in the way construction business is now being passed out, wall and ceiling contractors would be well advised to begin thinking of their own public relations program toward design professionals, especially architects.

More and more architects are exerting influence in the selection of specialty contractors—sometimes the contracts go direct—rather than let the traditional bidding process leave the selection to the general contractor.

Not everyone agrees on what public relations is: indeed, there are just about as many definitions as there are people doing the defining—and most of them are correct. Public relations is such an all-embracing type of term that a contractor would do well to think of it in the most general way as the relations he maintains with his different publics.

These publics are anyone and everyone whose opinion of the contractor either directly or indirectly influences business prospects. Each of these publics views the contractor from a unique vantage point; one that reflects their interests.

Design professionals, through public relations, form an impression of a contractor—efficient, reliable, well financed, etc. They keep their impressions of contractors filed in their minds for quick reference.

This impression that each public has formed is called image: it’s someone’s reputation.

Improving Relations With Architects

The one thing to remember in all dealings with an architect is this: he is the owner’s representative, and a major part of the responsibility for the completion and success of any project rests with him.

This is the architect’s own definition of his responsibility and he stakes his reputation on every project he designs. It should come as no surprise that he takes his role very seriously.

For the most part, the architect will decide on materials and equipment to be installed, recommend and approve payment for work installed. He can also play a powerful role in influencing decisions regarding the selection of contractors for a job—whether the contract is direct from the owner or through the general contractor.

Following are a number of steps that a wall and ceiling contractor can take to improve relationships with various architects in the immediate community as well as in other cities.

The suggestions are applicable both in general terms and while the contractor is working with an architect on a job. Architects, like contractors, talk shop among themselves, too, and it never injured the business chances of any wall and ceiling contractor to be spoken about in glowing terms when a group of architects got around to discussing job experiences.

As expected, some of the suggestions will seem rather fundamental, but they are included here nevertheless as a reminder that the best program must be based on basics:

1) Provide every architect with a brochure or fact sheet about company:

Architects are design conscious and are eye oriented. They react well to colors, good design, and the like. But the brochure must still provide good information on the projects the contractor has worked on, and in general, impress the fact that the subject is a capable businessman and a competent contractor.

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2) Work on developing a relationship based on mutual respect:
A wall and ceiling contractor should extend to the architect the respect due him based on the latter’s position within the construction industry, while earning the architect’s respect for doing work in accordance with the highest standards—and completing work on time.

3) Once the contract for a project is signed, suggest a pre-construction meeting with the architect involved:
Admittedly, this can be a sensitive gesture by the wall and ceiling contractors because when a general contractor is involved he often prefers it if the specialty contractor doesn’t even know the architect’s name let alone get together in a meeting.

But a pre-construction meeting with the architect can be most helpful for all concerned. The wall and ceiling contractor should discuss how he intends to install the work, and the equipment and materials he plans to use. If at all possible, the contractor should point out places where money can be saved without hurting the quality of the project. Meetings like this will help earn mutual respect and can also help in getting considerations for substitutions as well as prompt approval on shop drawings.

4) On the job, offers to assist with problems are appreciated:
An image-minded subcontractor doesn’t sit back and wait to be told what to do. As he does with the general contractor, he shows the architect he’s also concerned about the project by offering usable solutions to problems.

5) Perform work properly according to the specifications and in accordance with the highest standards:
It is especially worthwhile that particular attention be paid to all contract requirements during the final 5% of a job. That’s where a contractor’s reputation is made or broken—the last 5%. At least, that’s where an architect’s memory is sharpest and most critical. For this reason, it’s vital to get work finished completely and on schedule at the job comes to an end. Prolonging completion cuts everyone’s profits—and the responsible contractor’s good will. By putting on pressure to see that the last stages go well, a contractor enhances his future chances.

6) Follow-Up and especially when the job has had some problems:
The creative process that an architect goes through on a project design is a deeply personal one and when a contractor demonstrates his own concern and commitment to that project he makes a friend of the architect. By making certain—personally or, at a minimum, by telephone—that the work is performing to the architect’s satisfaction and that no new problems have developed, the contractor is demonstrating honest concern. And, if corrective work or warranty work is needed, the prompt execution of this work will stamp the contractor as one who is highly reputable—and worthy of further consideration.

7) An offer should be made to provide budget estimates for projects in the design stage:
Relations improve quickly between a wall and ceiling contractor and an architect when the latter learns that the contractor is willing to come in, listen to the architect’s concepts, and then advise as to what the contractor feels the idea will cost to implement. The contractor could also, at that time, give the architect some ideas, or offer suggestions—and, frankly, probably help himself to a better competitive edge.

8) Business is always a two-way street:
When a wall and ceiling contractor has a customer who is considering a construction project, he should make every effort to recommend an architect. When such a recommendation is made, a call should be placed immediately to the architect to let him know a project is brewing and that his name has been dropped in for consideration. In this way, a customer has been made happy, an architect is happy, too, and a contractor has increased his stock of goodwill. That, in the long run, means more profits and in the short run, too.