A construction salesmen can be effective only so long as the ‘inside’ people support him properly

By Henry Holtzman

Not every wall and ceiling contractor has fulltime or even part-time sales representatives, but those who do have heard the fairy tale...

"... then the salesman sold the project, and the contractor and his customer lived happily ever after."

Acquiring a new job by selling is no more the end of a selling situation, than a bid job is the end of the construction season. A sale, like a marriage, is the beginning of a unique relationship between a buyer and seller. To the buyer it means a flow of product and services whose quality is consistent with the price. And to the seller, it means revenue, profits, and growth.

But if it's in the best interests of both the buyer and seller to maintain this relationship to their mutual satisfaction, how do the stumbling blocks get in the path of success? Most often they were there before the sale was ever closed, fall out of the ever present tug-of-war between the people who sell a company’s product and services and the folks who actually provide it.

As one salesman puts it, “I’m the outside man whose job it is to get and keep customers. My partner is the inside man... It’s his job to do the job correctly and on time. But my orders keep getting fouled up. Whose side is the inside man on? The competition’s?”

Of course the other side of the coin is represented by the job superintendent or estimator who says, “Our salespeople promise the moon for delivery yesterday... at 5% less. Every job is a rush. My job is to get good quality work accomplished at minimum cost. I can’t do that by paying overtime wages and top dollar for materials. Worse yet, when you do work at a dead run it’s harder to keep it free of defects.”

The salespeople maintain that there is a pace and flow to construction, and if installation people can’t stick to it, the contractor ought to get new people. The field people claim that salesmen through eagerness get trapped into rash promises, then expect them to pull the salespeople’s chestnuts out of the fire.

Even where the counter-pull of responsibilities between sales and installation result in no worse problems than good-natured kidding, there come times when the contractor must determine whose side is nearest a company’s goals: inside or outside? It’s rarely an easy decision to make; however, there are ways to substantially reduce the number of times it needs to be made.

The Function of a Business is Marketing

A good start in preventing a perpetual clash between sales and installation (both of whom wave the “best interests of the company” like a banner over their viewpoints), is to make it amply clear to each that the primary function of the company is getting and keeping... (Continued on page 75)
STEEL FRAMING:
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The load bearing steel stud and joist system is being selected with increasing frequency for structures in the three to six story range. There are numerous examples of completed projects throughout the U.S., including the four-story Casa de los Amigos retirement home in Redondo Beach, California.

The significance of the project is that it is the first four-story structure framed with steel studs and joists to meet Zone 4 seismic requirements. According to Architect Arthur Hugh Kensler, the steel framing system saved more than $150,000 over the originally specified wood frame system on this $3 million dollar complex.

A number of contractors around the U.S. have already added load bearing steel stud and joist framing to their total offering. The opportunity is there for you who are willing to take advantage of it.

Cooperative promotional effort by all of us in the industry will lead to an ever increasing number of specified jobs. And the growing list of successfully completed projects will make it easier to convince designers, specifiers and owners to switch from the old traditional methods.

INSIDE . . . OUTSIDE
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Don’t encourage your people to come to you every time a problem arises. Make them work it out if at all possible. You should have enough problems of your own.

Do resolve problems of adequate lead times to handle orders. Communicate the solutions to all sales and production people.

Don’t reject the concept of “rush jobs” out of hand. There are times when they are bonafide and necessary.

Do work out a system for handling “rush” situations. Make sure sales and production people are well-acquainted with that system.

Don’t permit individual salespeople to have special rights within the job scheduling system to expedite their own jobs.

Do recognize that it is human nature for a salesperson to have his or her job out first. Salespeople are a highly competitive breed, but all salespeople should get an equal chance to have their orders flow smoothly through the system.

There’s no reason in the world to delay a decision when a job starts going sour. The longer you put off

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dealing with it, the worse it will become. Determine whether the problem was caused by simple human error, a bad estimate, poor field management, poor crew, or a failure to follow the system. The first and last are relatively easy to deal with.

Don’t be afraid of confrontations. Although these can be emotionally painful, they tend to clear the air between two strong personalities. Better still, confrontations can crystalize the exact nature of the problem.

Keep the solutions to problems on a business-like basis. The fact there are personality clashes between individuals should play only a small role in making business decisions. It would be a rather dull world, indeed, if everyone shared the same personality.

Communicate... Communicate... Communicate...

In the crush of doing business it’s very easy to forget the problems faced by others. Consider the possibility of getting together both your sales and installation management people in a relaxed atmosphere to discuss their individual jobs and problems. This is much easier to do in a small company than a larger one.

The objective of this type of meeting is to remind—on a first hand basis—people in sales and production that each of their jobs has its problems, opportunities, frustrations, and rewards.

This meeting should be guided by you, and shouldn’t be allowed to degenerate into a gripe session. It is simply another way to communicate on a people-to-people basis that isn’t done enough. The meeting should be structured, interaction encouraged, and not simply become an in-door substitute for a company picnic. The goals of both departments should be shared, and problems foreseen by people at the “hands on” level should be aired and resolved.

The results of the meeting should be shared, preferably in writing, with both attendees and those who could not be there. When solutions to problems raised are put into effect, this, too, should be shared information.

In fact every success—whether it’s in sales or production—should be shared by communicating it to those in both departments. In smaller contracting firms this may be by word of mouth, but in larger companies it should be in writing. By all means have fun with these shared successes... and in the way you announce them.

It’s a Team Effort

The late Walt Kelly, creator of the cartoon strip “Pogo”, once had one of his characters remark, “We have met the enemy and they is us.” The last people in business together to view each other as enemies are the sales and production departments. They are two parts of the same team. Each part has a critical role to play in marketing a construction company’s products or services.