As many contractors ponder this new era of construction and daydream of the past, others with a fresh innovative approach are attacking the industry with vengeance. Jim Biddle is one of this new breed.

To Jim Biddle, President of the Mader Construction Corporation in Buffalo, New York, the years ahead offer new and exciting challenges for the enterprising wall and ceiling contractor. Biddle believes that the last five years are only a sampling of what the future has in store. For this reason, some might term him a pessimist while actually quite the contrary is true. He remains an optimist because he knows that no matter what the circumstances there will always be room for superior companies.

Perhaps this explains Biddle’s strive for excellence with himself and his employees. He believes strongly in the fact that an individual’s education is on an ongoing daily experience that blossoms with birth and never ends.

So when Biddle was selected as the Chairman of the Area Conference and Education Committee 6 years ago, it just seemed like the logical choice. However, no one could expect at the time that it would become’s permanent position. Since his 6 years as Chairman of the Committee, the educational programs and symposiums of iWCC/GDCI have become the showcase of the entire industry.

For Biddle, it’s been a long trip.

A native of Buffalo, he started working, the Mader Corporation at only 14 years old by working summers and after school. After graduating from high school he quickly moved into the office to become an estimator. It was at this time that he formed his strong bond with Larry Reger, the Chairman of the Board of the Mader Corporation.

In 1967, Biddle helped extend the construction arm of the company by improving a branch office in the neighboring city of Rochester. Under Biddle’s leadership the company flourished and grew. Until 1976, Biddle was called back to Buffalo to ac-
cept the position of President of the Mader Construction Corporation.

Today, he resides in Buffalo with his lovely wife, Janet, and four children, the oldest of which, Jim Jr., has already started working summers with the company at age 17.

As for his hobbies, Jim states that every now and then he will indulge in a friendly game of golf; but admits he won’t have much time since becoming the Secretary of iaWCC/GDCI last July.

Biddle has long been active in association affairs. Besides being the Chairman of the Area Conference and Education Committee, he has held a seat on the Board of Directors and the Continuing Study Council.

No stranger to the 15 hour day, Jim still found time to sit down with Construction Dimensions and chat about the wall and ceiling industry and the challenges of the future.

DIMENSIONS: Jim, a lot has been written lately about the recent up-swing in commercial building starts. Has the northeast experienced its share of this new business?

BIDDLE: Not at all. There is a tremendous need for housing in the State of New York. As a matter of fact, there is a shortage of single family dwellings at this very moment.

The reason why there is no new housing starts when the demand is obvious is because of the New York State’s usury laws.

Basically, the law states that the banks and lending institutions may not charge over 8 1/2% of interest for any home mortgage loan. Therefore, no loan . . . no loans—no sales . . . no sales—no construction . . . it’s just simple mathematics.

Like so many other problems contractors face today, this situation is a direct result of antiquated legislation produced by politicians who either misinterpret or just plain don’t understand the basic economic principles of construction.

DIMENSIONS: As a wall and ceiling contractor, how do you interpret the so-called basic principles?

BIDDLE: Take the example of housing in the State of New York. When the legislature originally passed the usury law, it was viewed as a noble piece of legislation by everyone. The potential home owner obtained legal protection against not so reputable loan operations and even builders saw the new law as an insurance that housing would always be affordable in the future.

Then came the energy crisis with double digit inflation and suddenly you couldn’t buy money for even 10% much less 8 1/2%.

That was 1974 and the law still hasn’t been changed. When are the politicians going to realize that their constant tampering and their tremendous desire to create law generally create problems instead.

In the meantime, commercial contractors are loving it. The usury laws do not apply to commercial work and money is more plentiful than ever.

DIMENSIONS: Some say that the contractor’s true competition is the government and not the other contractor he is bidding against. Do you find this statement to be true?

BIDDLE: Of course, it’s true. In the last 10 years alone; the amount of paper work the government requires to be filled out has easily quadrupled. The forms themselves are a full-time job, and only then if you can figure out what in the world they are asking for.

Contracts are another area where the amount of paper work has gone wild. There is no reason in the world why a contract should take more than one or two pages at the most. Yet, recently I’ve seen contracts run 20 pages or more.

DIMENSIONS: Not long ago, contractors were literally fighting to obtain a contract of any sort. Has the construction picture surged enough that you can pick and choose your own customers?

BIDDLE: I’ll never turn down a job or a contract from anyone as long as I feel I have a good chance of making a fair profit.

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Sure, I’ve heard other contractors say that they wouldn’t bid on a job because of having to work with a particular building owner or general contractor. Actually, this is a ridiculous statement and following a principle of this sort only results in losing a lot of jobs and money.

The job doesn’t exist that cannot be controlled with the proper management.

**DIMENSIONS:** Many times, the job is not the problem but rather collecting for it! How do you handle collections when working with an “undesirable” client?

**BIDDLE:** Collections are probably the number one problem contractors face today. You strive to grow and increase your volume and all of a sudden the cash flow stops but your overhead does not.

The larger companies with their extended credit lines can usually weather most storms, but it’s the smaller companies that can easily go under with a cash flow problem.

At the Mader Construction Corporation, we take a systematic approach to handling collections. There are basically four to five steps which are taken on every collection with the last step being me pounding on their door.

I’m not saying our approach is full proof or that someone else’s isn’t better, but this method seems to be our most productive so far.

If anyone could come up with a full proof system of collections, I’d personally like to learn about it.

**DIMENSIONS:** Learning in the classroom about their profession from qualified teachers and industry experts is relatively new to most contractors who thought that on the job experience was the only way to learn. As Chairman of iaWCC/GDCT’s Area Conference and Education Committee, what areas of education do you feel are most important to the future of wall and ceiling contractors?

**BIDDLE:** A good definition of stupidity is a man who thinks he knows everything. Let’s not forget that construction and in particular wall and ceiling construction is a never ending learning experience.

Just look at the changes that have taken place in the industry over the last 20 years and you will have to agree that wall and ceiling contractors have come a long way.

We’ve expanded our expertise and horizons into dozens of related fields. Our stature has been elevated from blue collar worker—to manager—to businessmen and community leaders. All of this has resulted from the fact that contrac-
dustry argument of bidding versus sales and what is your opinion of a contractor who relies solely on bidding for his professional livelihood?

BIDDLE: I love him! The contractor who only bids is giving me additional work and making my job a lot easier.

Actually, what he has done is remove himself from the competitive battlefield. He is afraid that if he has to negotiate a price he is going to lose money, and that just isn’t true.

Contractors have to realize that times have changed and that they had better change with them.

DIMENSIONS: In what areas do you concentrate your sales effort?

BIDDLE: At the Mader Corporation, we emphasize steel framing, integrated ceilings and demountable partitions because we feel that these items are the most “saleable” in this area.

I have salesmen who are constantly on the street visiting architects and building owners to demonstrate that steel framing is superior to masonry, that an integrated ceiling is better than your standard acoustical and that demountable partitions are definitely an improvement.

Every job I can get switched over to these systems means more work for the company.

DIMENSIONS: However, getting the jobs switched over is only part of the battle. You still have to obtain the bid. Isn’t it just work down the drain when you do all the initial preparation and a competitor gets the job?

BIDDLE: Honestly, I try not to view it in that light. Instead, I prefer to think of it as time well spent, because I have the opportunity to bid a job that I didn’t have a chance at before.

For example, when I approach an architect and convince him to change his design to reflect a steel frame building instead of brick and block, I’ve gained a chance at obtaining a job that I never had before. Sure, I might lose it to a competitor, but in the long run I come out way ahead and so does the industry. As steel framing integrated ceilings and demountable partitions continue to grow and expand so do the profits of wall and ceiling contractors.

DIMENSIONS: Jim, historically, when work is good and building starts are up, materials tend to be in short sup-

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ply. Have you been experiencing any material shortages?

BIDDLE: As a matter of fact, materials have been my least worry. Our biggest problem at this time is a shortage of labor especially plasterers. There just aren’t enough qualified plasterers in this area to man the jobs that we have right now.

The basic problem is two-fold. First off, the amount of plastering contracted in this area has increased dramatically over the last several years. Secondly, I’m willing to wager that the Rochester and Buffalo area has not had a new apprentice or journeymen enter the field in the last 5 years. These two reasons along with the fact that many existing lathers and plasterers have abandoned the field for a chance at steadier employment.

Whatever the reasons, the results are the same—there is a definite labor shortage of qualified lathers and plasterers in the northeast.

DIMENSIONS: Joe Baker, the Executive Vice President of iaWCC/GDCI, recently stated in an editorial that the construction industry could be compared to a risk inside a gamble wrapped in a chance. Do you agree with this statement?

BIDDLE: No one in his right mind would say that construction is not a risky business. But at the same time, you must realize that it’s well worth the gamble.

Most contractors dream of the perfect situation . . . more work than they can handle with no material shortages or labor problems. Well, that’s just not being realistic and it will never happen.

There is always going to be a battle. The enemy and the battlefield might change but the struggling never stops. In a way, what I love most about this crazy business we call construction is the never ending challenge it affords us every day.