When architects and engineers talk about “their man in Washington”, they are talking about Mark Price. On the steps of the Congress, in the boardroom, or in the halls of the federal construction agencies Price is picking up bits of information that make his clients successful bidders for federal construction budget dollars.

Meet the “Marrying Sam” for architects, engineers and the government

Consultant Mark price runs a company that provides advance information so precise, his various clients obtain 81% of contracts they bid

Believe it or not, there is a quiet, distinguished gentleman in Washington, D.C. who has taken a group of engineers and architects and helped them to obtain more than 80% successes on the federal contracts they have bid.

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Mark Price, who is President of Building Development Counsel International, Inc., has put together a sophisticated legal intelligence network that provides pre-bid information so accurate, he is becoming a virtual “Marrying Sam” for government agencies and architects and engineers who have entered a multi-billion dollar construction market in search of each other. His is the largest independent marketing firm for A & E’s in America.

“Architects need marketing,” Price says simply. “They’re artists, they don’t know anything about merchandising themselves. At the other end are committees or hospital trustees or whoever wants to build something. They need architects. I bring the two together.”

If it seems a little unlikely that Price could make a living by selling a product as obscure as architects or engineers, consider that he’s always been a successful salesman. He possesses an uncanny knack for recognizing an opportunity and the ability to pursue that opportunity from the first knock on the door. It is a system Price
developed years ago, and it has made him a wealthy man.

“I would lay back and try to pinpoint a specific need for a product or idea,” Price explains. “Once I established the need, I’d make myself a specialist in the area, and I’d sell the hell out of it.”

“It” began some years ago—with Formica products. One of Formica’s executives was bemoaning the fact his products were everywhere except on campus. After a little thought, Price figured Formica was too slippery for floors, not readily adaptable to walls or ceilings, but absolutely indestructible as a desk top. “No John could love Mary with his penknife in Formica,” he chuckles today.

After a slow buildup (“You don’t immediately expect to make a bundle of money; believe in your idea and sell it, and in time, the money comes in the back way,” he says), Price’s Desk Tops, Inc. was making money. It had to expand its plant space three times in a single year. He eventually sold the firm, and in his own words, “Here I was with money and nothing to do. I became a palatial bum.”

That didn’t last long. Price’s experience with desk tops gave birth to another idea: “I figured an architect who built a beautiful school or hospital had a certain amount of pride in his work, and it would gall him to see the doors all scratched and banged up after a few months when everything else was new and shiny.”

That notion led to the establishment of Vistron Door Corporation, which markets plastic-coated doors in the “Sell the hell out of it” Price tradition.

The third career
You might think Price would have been content to sit on his laurels after two straight successes, except that once while exhibiting his doors at a convention, an architect asked him why he didn’t work out a system for the marketing of professionals. One thing led to another, and before long, Price was helping his inquirer to land better contacts.

That was the planting of the seed for Building Development Counsel, which began with a single client and has grown to its current revolving-door rollover of an average 40 at any given time.

All of that growth has been accomplished since Price, a native of Cleveland, Ohio, set the company up in 1963. BDCI is now enjoying a national reputation as a sophisticated management consulting firm for carefully-selected architectural and engineering firms throughout the United States.

Price’s success record with BDCI is attributable to several factors. For starters, he has assembled a team of “advance scouts”, who are themselves engineers and architects in various regions of the country who keep a finger on the pulse of key construction planning. When budgets for various agencies are announced, his firm studiously studies them in infinite detail. When projects are finalized, he uses his network to match specific project needs with the established talent within his client firms.

But he is quick to point out that he never utilizes political clout to get the job done and in fact advises that to attempt to introduce politics into the process would be counterproductive and damaging to a firm’s chances of obtaining federal contractual work.

“The selection committees of the federal agencies are among the most dedicated, conscientious and professional groups I have known,” he says. “Their work is the quintessential of professionalism and to bring politics into play would most certainly prove to be an error of judgement.”

But the real key to success in Price’s system is the fact that his clients get a head start on the bidding process. “We know the agencies. We know the people. We know the whole process from top to bottom,” Price says. “An architect could spend a few hundred thousand dollars in developing an individual field representative to learn what we already know, or he can forget about reinventing the wheel and utilize the talent we already have established.

Price’s team is so expert in the field of federal building projects, they know at least six months before announcements of the project in the Commerce Business Daily, that the project is viable and in a “GO” situation. The firm’s range of information is so detailed that his clients obtain design criteria months before others read the Commerce Business Daily notice. When Price’s clients pursue federal work, they already know enough about the specific nuts and bolts of the project to give them an edge.

The process
Why is having a bidding edge important? When the fed publishes its announcement of a project, a bidder generally has only a short time to file Forms 255 and 254 and any supplementary information that may be asked for. From the full field of bidders, the agency’s selection committee will select a “short list”, usually no more than seven bidders from which to ultimately select the contractor for A/E services.

By the time the announcement is published, Price’s clients have already received his professional assistance on preparing forms. Their entry onto the “short list” is almost assured. While other firms are sorting through the sea of what they might put into their proposal, Price’s clients are already working on their presentations to be given before the selection committee. Charts, slides, graphics and other items needed for that presentation are being assembled and/or reviewed by BDCI.

BDCI’s job is made easier by the fact it has developed a competent
network of architectural and engineering firms with proven records in specific areas of construction, whether in designing hospitals, office buildings or post offices. The network is so sophisticated that only firms with track records in hospitals will be considered by BDCT for bidding federal hospitals. The same approach is applied to post offices, office spaces, etc. "Somebody has used the terminology of matchmakers for what we do," Price says. "In essence, that's all there is to it. We match our client's expertise with the federal agency's needs. We match our client's needs to our expertise in the preparation of bids and beyond that into the area of negotiating a contract that can be successfully executed. It's very important to us that the client wins the final contract.

If the whole process seems like a well-orchestrated production, Price concedes that it is meant to. "It's not unlike the guy who's producing a play. It's been written. The dollars are committed. There's going to be an opening on Broadway. Now, in preparing the play, he comes to the point of determining who is the best person to play the major part. He decides that so-and-so is ideal for the role. This is somewhat like what we do.

"I sit back and I read the scope on the project, and I ask myself where is the client firm who is ideal for this project? Who is going to do the job the way it is supposed to be done? I take into account their proven record for the type of project, then I look at their in-house talent. When we match the client up to the project, we know he's ideal for the agency. And we do everything possible to see that the agency knows he's ideal."

The approach is vintage Mark Price: find the project, find the architect or engineer, do the homework, refine the idea, "and sell the hell out of it."

Also vintage Mark Price is that he is not necessarily now content to rest on the laurels of BDCT's phenomenal success rate with A/E contracts. He's looking now at the idea of branching out to match his contracted architects and engineers with proven contractors specializing in the types of construction federal contracts generate. "I'm thinking about it; I'm thinking very hard about it," he says. "Take the good-sized, ambitious building contractor in Cleveland, Ohio; that man is greatly advantaged if he knows well in advance that a team of architects and engineers have been assigned a significant project. The earlier he comes to know that, the better will be his bidding position at the time the architect is prepared to accept bids. Just as an architect can't rely on a limited scope of a project as it is published in the Commerce Daily announcement, the general contractor needs to know as much as he can, as early as he can, about the specifications implicit in a project. When he has that advance knowledge, the better and more sophisticated his bid is going to be when the appropriate time arrives.

"There's simply no question that having advance intelligence, if that's the appropriate term, is of value to anyone who would be considering bidding any phase of a federal construction project," Price says.

While he is mulling his decision on expanding his services, Price offers this advice to any contractor who would contemplate chasing after more federal contracts: "Find out what they need, develop the in-house talent to meet that need, and then sell the hell out of it."

And, as a sort of "Marrying Sam" for the public and private sector, Price adds that marriages may be made in heaven, but federal contracts are made by the person who does the most, and best, homework. Falling back on his days as a desk-top entrepreneur, he reminds "You don't start out expecting to make a bundle of money . . . it's dedication to your ideas that leads to success."