Success Through Design

Michigan contractor John Bouma discusses Ceiling Systems, Industry Trends, Diversification

John Bouma, a longtime active member of AWCI, agreed recently to an interview with Construction Dimensions in his office in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

A successful wall and ceiling contractor since 1950, Bouma discussed candidly our industry with emphasis on ceiling systems. In this exclusive interview, he told Construction Dimensions what he believes are the keys to success and gave his ideas on industry trends. He also discussed the affect of the economy on today’s business.

The diversification of the Bouma Corporation is reflected in the offices of The Bouma Corporation at 4433 Stratford Avenue in Grand Rapids. Constructed to show varying designs, the offices successfully present an attractive, modern, efficient and pleasant working atmosphere.

DIMENSIONS: Mr. Bouma, can you give us some background on your business?
BOUMA: Yes, I founded the business in 1950 as a development tile company. In 1951, the Bouma Acoustical Company was started and then developed into a corporation, which it is today. In 1980 we became the Bouma Corporation because we became involved in so many different products in interior finishing contracting. During the past year we have gone under the name of the Bouma Corporation which has worked well for us. The Bouma name has been around for about 30 years.

DIMENSIONS: You have brought your sons into the business, is that correct?
BOUMA: Yes, John Bouma, Jr. is Executive Vice President and Doug is Vice President for Sales for our corporation.

DIMENSIONS: Can you tell something about your approach to diversification?
BOUMA: Diversification was gradual during the beginnings of our company. In 1950 we first did tile work, then in 1951 we took on our first franchise for acoustical products which at that time was with the National Gypsum Company. For that reason we changed our name to Bouma Tile and Acoustical Company. Then, after a period of about ten years, we got into our own lathing operation. Prior to that time we had subcontracted our lathing. Later we got into plastering. Lathing and plastering was a large part of our business during those years.

About ten years after that we got into drywall work because as your market changes, you have to change your business. Then carpeting came into the picture and we do a substantial business in carpeting. Recently we have added furniture and space planning. We have people on our staff that are capable of doing all the carpentry work needed and the interior walls.

DIMENSIONS: Because your business is so diversified, do you feel you have an advantage over your competition?
BOUMA: I do believe diversification does give us some advantage, but when you’re bidding for a job, you sometimes do not always come out too well on one portion of it or the other; it all seems to even out, however. We’ve done rather well, and for that we’re very thankful.

DIMENSIONS: Is most of your work here in Grand Rapids or do you travel?
BOUMA: We travel basically to Western Michigan but not so much out of state anymore, although we do have one out-of-state contract at the present time.

DIMENSIONS: Do you consider yourself more of a bidder or a negotiator?
BOUMA: Over the thirty years we have done a substantial amount of bidding, but we’re more into negotiations in the last three years.

DIMENSIONS: What type of ceiling systems do you deal with most, and what are the most popular now?
BOUMA: Right now we are doing a substantial amount of work on integrated steel. We have contracts right now with Owens-Corning Fiberglas and Johns Manville.

DIMENSIONS: What changes have you seen in ceiling systems that you believe have been the most significant?
BOUMA: As far as integrated systems are concerned, I believe it is most important to use the right product, with a background masking system, as far as the sound is concerned. We also put in the heating and lights. As far as our suppliers are concerned, we have the greatest praise for both the companies we work closely with.

DIMENSIONS: What trends do you see in finishes and colors?
BOUMA: In our particular business we believe the trend will be to get more into office design, layouts with landscaping, open office planning with color coordination. We believe that this is a specialty area, and we believe that we are very capable in this area and very well organized.

Continued on page 12
JOHN BOUMA
From page 6

DIMENSIONS: Does the question of accessibility remain a major consideration from the designer’s standpoint?

BOUMA: The accessible ceiling is definitely very important for office buildings, for hospitals, whatever. As far as architects and designers are concerned the most important thing is the variant of colors—earth-tone colors are very big right now. The look of the ceiling is really a matter of preference of the architect or designer. Some like the smooth look, but the crushed look ceiling has also become very popular today.

DIMENSIONS: Is it true that, in general, the inorganic or non-combustible tiles are more expensive than organic tiles?

BOUMA: Yes, it is. All your commercial buildings are either what we call the Class-A rated tile, or incombustile tile, or a fire-rated tile. In this particular area we use a lot of Class A tile. It really depends on the local fire marshall.

DIMENSIONS: How do you control a job?

BOUMA: First of all, every job has a job foreman. Every week we have meetings at which every job is discussed thoroughly, and we work our cost figures off of our computer. Russ Hibma, our vice president of field operations, is in charge of all field personnel and he has superintendents at each job that report directly to him. That’s how we control our organization.

DIMENSIONS: Some contractors have said recently that they avoid the long-term job. Is that true with you?

BOUMA: Well, we have office buildings right here in Grand Rapids that we completed 15 years ago, yet we still have some of our people in them. That’s a very nice type of job to have, and they are nice clients to work for. They are very demanding, and rightfully so, because when they want space in the building changed, they do not want to wait a long period of time before they get their rents back up again.

DIMENSIONS: With the changes in the economy and with the present double-digit inflation, do you find that collections have been more difficult?

BOUMA: Well, quite frankly, we have been very fortunate with the people we have been working for. They know we want our money, that’s number one. Really we don’t lose any money on bad collections.

DIMENSIONS: Again, because of inflation, have you found that you have had to cut back on any of your budget items such as promotion, marketing, research and development?

BOUMA: No, we’ve really been quite fortunate. We just work harder trying to get new jobs—we try to do a better job selling. We’ve also been fortunate in that we have maintained
a good reputation in the area. Of course we could use more business, but we’re thankful for what we have. 

**DIMENSIONS:** What is the attitude in the Michigan area about union vs. non-union shops? 

**BOUMA:** As far as the general contracting in Western Michigan is concerned, I’d say that approximately 85 percent of the jobs are non-union. But, even though we are a union subcontractor, we are able to work on both union and non-union jobs. 

This arrangement is an exceptional one that has prevailed in the Grand Rapids, Western Michigan area. If you go just 60 miles from here to Lansing, almost 100 percent of the work is union. We are a union shop employing 100 percent union people, and we have people that have been with us for many, many years. The key is employee relations. Our people are proud to work for us. We have a company party each year at which employees with twenty years of service are presented with gold watches. We’ve given away quite a few gold watches. 

**DIMENSIONS:** Do you believe the craft unions are in trouble? 

**BOUMA:** Oh, I definitely think they are in trouble. First of all the craft union has as many problems as say Chrysler or Ford in the automotive industry. 

I think they’ve all been riding on the idea that they need more people, more executive vice presidents, and even more overhead, all of which does nothing. I think the unions should start cleaning house and get back to the nitty gritty if they are going to survive. 

**DIMENSIONS:** How is the industry responding to the need for more energy efficient buildings? 

**BOUMA:** That’s a very important area, especially in this part of the country. We as a company are very energy conscious. We are doing much insulation work now, and that’s the type of thing that adds to our total input to a building. 

**DIMENSIONS:** Do you do much renovation? 

**BOUMA:** We do, but most of our renovation work is interior rather than exterior. 

**DIMENSIONS:** Do you feel you have to educate your customers in retrofit? 

**BOUMA:** Not too much. When people get their heating bills and other energy bills, they are ready to listen. 

**DIMENSIONS:** It has been said that craftsmanship has a new meaning, that there is no old time craftsmanship left in our business? Do you believe this statement is true? 

**BOUMA:** I have to agree. I’m sure that it is especially true in certain trades. For example, years back we did quite a bit of marble work along with our tile work. But the cost now is prohibitive and there isn’t enough marble for our tradesmen to use anymore. The same goes with cornice-type plastering work. There are very few craftsmen who can do this specialized type of plastering, and that’s a shame. Also, people just can’t afford it. That’s what it all amounts to.