When the Tough Get Going

The expression, “Let’s give it to Heimerl,” isn’t necessarily a war-cry by wall and ceiling contractors to gang up on a Southern California colleague.

It does, though, reflect a response to certain kinds of jobs that they’d just as soon be grabbed up by Robert C.J. Heimerl, head of Mowery-Thomason, Inc., of 2910 Allesandro St., Los Angeles.

Bob Heimerl makes a point to take the difficult, complex, risky work that other contractors would just as soon avoid. His readiness to take on those jobs is well known and partially explains why MTI runs a consistent $4-5 million annually. The bulk of the work is standard, but it’s the tough ones the company seeks.

A well-known specialty contracting firm, MTI focuses on plastering, dry wall, fireproofing and metal studs. Its subsidiary, Lathco, Inc., does the lathing work. Both companies operate out of an attractive 2-story stucco and brick headquarters building located on a 28,000 square foot property on the fringe of downtown Los Angeles.

For Heimerl, a career in construction came on an outside-in entry. Born in Los Angeles, son of the late Joseph and Emma Leins Heimerl, Bob finished high school and junior college in Pasadena, before going on to San Jose State where he received a BS in business administration.

His first job was with Jet Propulsion Laboratories, followed by a six-month spell as a propeller repairman with the Air National Guard. Upon his discharge in 1961, Bob was recommended by “Bus” Ratliff as an estimating trainee to Mowery-Thomason. When Homer Thomason died following surgery four years later, Bob was promoted to plant manager and took over as president and CEO when Heimerl retired in 1975.
By Concentrating on Tough, Complex Jobs With No Loss of Traditional Markets, California’s Bob Heimerl Keeps a Steady Business

later, Bob bought his interest in the company. He completed his ownership by buying up Tom Mowery’s shares when the latter decided to retire in 1972. It’s been strictly a Bob Heimerl show ever since.

Married to the former Toni Arnerich, of Pasadena, Bob is the father of two children, Todd, 17, and Lori, 14, both high school students. Active in community and industry affairs, Bob was an assistant scoutmaster, and is in his third term on the AWCI Board of Directors. He was chairman of the AWCI Resolutions Committee, and currently serves as Chairman of the Site Selection Committee, and is a member of the Convention Committee, and the Continuing Study Council.

He is also a member of the Southern California Contracting Plasterers’ Association and the California Lathing & Plastering Contractors’ Association.

DIMENSIONS: It’s been mentioned here and elsewhere, Bob, that your company is perfectly willing to take on complex work that other contractors turn their back on. Is that true?

HEIMERL: Yes, we seem to take jobs that are more detailed and challenging such as hospitals, remodel work, jobs with complex walls and ceiling framing, etc.

It’s a challenge to our technical and management ability and actually makes for work of high interest. The risk factor is there, of course, but the profit potential is higher, too. And you can’t overlook the reduced amount of competition you face—

DIMENSIONS: —lots of bidders around here, are there?

HEIMERL: In a market such as Los Angeles you can have up to 10 bidders on one project. It’s really fierce and in many cases the bidder with the mistake is the one who gets the job. Frankly, I like to have jobs with better odds.

DIMENSIONS: Of the tough jobs, can you name one that contains all the ingredients that make for an interesting challenge?

HEIMERL: There are many but the one we’re doing right now—the new mission church at famous San Juan Capistrano—is exceedingly complex and challenging.

It’s a $1 million job that started in December, 1982. We took the job right up from the basic structural steel . . . and it contains—because we’re still working on it—all the challenges a contractor could want . . . arches . . . domes . . . intricate framing . . . curves . . . metal lath and plaster.

DIMENSIONS: How does a contractor go about birddogging such a job? How did you get the jump . . . the in . . . on the San Juan project?

HEIMERL: John Bartlett, the architect for the job, had been a customer of ours on a pebble crete application we did on an engineering science building. He liked working with us . . . and the quality of our work . . . so he recommended to the general contractor that he get in touch with us.

DIMENSIONS: Had you worked before for the GC?
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HEIMERL: No, it was Sutherland Construction Company, right here in Whittier, too. But Joe Byron, of Sutherland, gave us a call and we first took it off in May. We were bidding against three other subs that they’d pre-qualified.

DIMENSIONS: Did you have concrete plans to go on-or was there still design work to be completed?

HEIMERL: As a matter of fact, the job was fairly well detailed. Any questions we had on the pre-bidding we went over with the architect and he went out of his way to help us understand the scope of the project and what he wanted in the way of a completed job.

DIMENSIONS: On the issue of working for a new general contractor. Did you have some kind of procedure for handling requests for bids

Sometimes you just have to say “no” . . . when you can’t properly service a customer . . . when you might over extend yourself . . . I say let your competitor have the job if he can perform better than you can. Customers have a way of remembering the bad more than the good you’ve done.

DIMENSIONS: Some contractors today feel that reputation isn’t as important as the low bid, especially since many GCs are really mere brokers?

HEIMERL: Oh, I think reputation is still important. Of course, it depends on the customer but most of the ones with whom we deal put stress on timely and good performance, quality workmanship . . . that sort of thing.

DIMENSIONS: As a traditional lath and plaster contractor, Bob, do you see much future in the new exterior insulated systems?

HEIMERL: They’re going to be a big factor in our business, I think. You have to understand that these systems haven’t yet been accepted by the City of Los Angeles. That’s why there hasn’t been any kind of breakthrough here yet.

There are too many nice jobs in other cities to think it won’t come here. We’re keeping our eyes on the market and once the break comes we’ll be active very quickly.

DIMENSIONS: Some education of the building community may be necessary, is that right?

HEIMERL: Some, perhaps. The conventional system is less expensive but has some problems—cracking of cement plaster for one thing—that the newer technology corrects. The time pick-up comes in the curing time. You don’t have to wait out a curing time for these new materials.

DIMENSIONS: Just looking at some of the new, emerging technologies, do you see some significant changes coming in the next decade?

HEIMERL: Some of these new developments are already encroaching on existing markets. The exterior insulated system is just one. It’s lighter, fast to install and has some
installation flexibility that older, conventional systems can't compete with.

Look at interior plastering. Drywall has virtually replaced all of it and you see interior plastering only on special jobs such as the San Juan church—but seldom elsewhere.

Now the trend is for more steel stud framing to replace heavy exterior precast concrete systems. The glass reinforced fiber panels are also starting to replace heavier pre-cast concrete panels—and to replace lath and plaster, too.

**DIMENSIONS:** I've looked around your attractive headquarters site and I see no evidence of computers. Are you avoiding, still researching, or using computer technology at MTI?

**HEIMERL:** We’re as heavily involved in computers right now as I feel we should be at the present time. That means we don’t rely much on computers except for payroll and the computer application made by our accountant.

**DIMENSIONS:** Do you see little future use of electronic crunching in your company?

**HEIMERL:** I didn’t mean to suggest I’d shut the door on computers. We tried some time ago to set up a job costing program. It took more time to sort out the paper work from the computer run than it did to post it manually to the job cost sheets.

In the absence of good software—and this is the big problem right now—I feel that with appropriate organization a company can maintain hands-on control of job costing and project status without a computer.

**DIMENSIONS:** So you don’t feel any wall and ceiling contractor should be deeply concerned if his company isn’t utilizing computers at this time?

**HEIMERL:** That’s right. It’s really related to volume of work. In the future, a computer will earn its way into this company because our manual systems—which are adequate now—won’t be able to digest all the data. But I intend to hold back and wait for the programming to catch up to our needs.

Panic isn’t the answer. My systems work fine; any job folder will tell me quickly what I need to know about the company or any job status.

**DIMENSIONS:** Where do you expect a computer to be of most service to a contractor either now or in the near future?

**HEIMERL:** The benefit of a computer now would have to be in the area of estimating. There are enough repetitive functions that a computer could be useful for “crunching” data and assisting with the clerical needs. The subjective or mental aspects of an estimate, though, will probably remain in the contractor’s mind or experience.

From an overall standpoint, I’ve heard some real horror stories on contractors trying to set up a computer operation . . . the hours spent and lost. Now a few success stories are starting to come through and soon we’ll find one that’s right for us.

But when I do make the move, I want one learning experience, not two. I’d prefer that others learn from their mistakes first—then I can learn, too . . . from their mistakes.

**DIMENSIONS:** How about your approach to contract forms? Dealing with complex jobs so much, you must be a nitpicker about contracts?

**HEIMERL:** Not really. I’d estimate that 80% of the contracts we sign are standard forms of the Associated General Contractors. I don’t find them that worrisome. We can live with them, and I find that most contractors are pretty much the
same. They’re obviously in the general contractor’s favor, but they protect the sub, too.

DIMENSIONS: But a payment clause that is contingent upon the GC getting paid first can work some financial hardships, can’t it?

HEIMERL: Yes, but the entire philosophy behind a collections policy is being careful with whom you do business. If they don’t pay us, we can’t afford to do their work. That’s one of the benefits of doing business with customers who have a record with you.

DIMENSIONS: Let’s look at coordination on the job. What is your reaction when you get a less-than-competent supervisor trying to run things?

HEIMERL: The main thing—good superintendent or bad—is to get a working relationship that’s advantageous for everyone. As the contractor doing the steel framing, walls and ceilings, we pretty much set the pace for the job anyway so we do have some control over the situation. The kind of job that I really like is where weekly job conferences are held. This provides an opportunity for all subs to air their problems and work out what’s affecting their progress and work.

Once you get a coordination of activities of all the trades, the superintendent’s job becomes easier—

DIMENSIONS: —and MTI can be employed as the “pusher”?

HEIMERL: The cover-up trades always have been the pushers. Yes, we’re used as the pusher, but I like to hang back on threats to cover anyone up. Truth is, there’s some reluctance to pay us for going back, tearing out our work, and then patching back up again for a trade that’s fallen behind. Sometimes, though—

DIMENSIONS: It could be done with a change order, couldn’t it? Do you have a procedure for handling changes?

HEIMERL: Absolutely. We have a standard form for our foremen to proceed with extra work—and it has to be signed by the proper authority.

We prepared the form so that it would be complete . . . description of work . . . type of labor and materials involved . . . day of the week . . . hours spent . . . and a place for the GC’s signature.

DIMENSIONS: How about the architect? Let’s say he wanted a change and began instructing your man on the job about what should be done—

HEIMERL: —our contract is with the GC. We take orders from him.

DIMENSIONS: Where to from here for MTI? It’s been said that contractors must become diversified in order to survive in the 80s. Will you be actively pursuing other services?

HEIMERL: We’re always keeping a watch on changes even if we don’t make a big deal about it. Change is inevitable—and many of the trends we see emerging now will be a fact of business life very shortly.

I’ve never shut the doors to opportunity so we’ll continue to take on more responsibilities as the market dictates.

In the final analysis, it’s what the customer wants and needs that spells how successful we’ll be. We just need to keep responding and changing at the same time. It’s not too much to ask for a healthy business.