Quick Rides on a Sharp Edge

California’s Joe Puccio Makes No Bones About St: He’d Prefer the Project That Truly Stretches Him and His Company

For most contractors doing well what they do best is sufficient challenge. Other wall and ceiling contractors like riding the razor’s edge.

A quick ride on a sharp edge pretty much describes the kind of job most attractive to Joseph L. Puccio, of Puccio Company, Inc., 41286 Chapel Way, in Fremont, CA, near Oakland.

Puccio specializes in lath and plaster, drywall and metal studs. For the most part his $600,000-a-year company performs routine work, but when the tough, complex job comes up that other contractors would just as soon leave to others, Puccio goes running. He does it often enough that Northern California contractors recognize certain jobs as “go to Joe Puccio on this one” types.

Born in Madison, WI, son of Margaret Catherine Balko Puccio, who still lives in Madison, and the late Charles Puccio, Joe is one of five Puccio children. Upon graduation from high school he went to work for his uncle, a lathing contractor, then served in the U.S. Army for two years.

Army duty took him to Newark, CA, and Joe simply remained in the area following his honorable discharge from the Corps of Engineers. He’d actually planned on staying with the Corps of Engineers but federal budget cuts decided otherwise. So Joe went to work as a lather. In 1967, he started his own lathing business and then picked up plastering and drywall skills as he went along.

Married to the former Shirley Wohlferd, of Madison, WI Joe is the father of two daughters, Cyrece Marie, 16, and Cyrene Marie, 10. Active in industry affairs, he is past president of the California Drywall Contractors’ Association, the Northern California Drywall Contractors’ Association, the California Lathing Contractors’ Association, and the Northern California Lathing Contractors’ Association. Joe currently serves as president of the East Bay Lathing Contractors’ Association.

An AWCI member Puccio also served on the California Lathing and Plastering Contractors’ board of governors. When not busy with all these things, he invents—and he’s successful at that, too.
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DIMENSIONS: When we were setting up interviews, I was told “talk to Joe Puccio. He’s the original ‘let Joe do it’ guy for tough jobs.” Where, how do you come about with that kind of reputation?
PUCCIO: I suppose I’ve built a rather well known reputation in Northern California for going after the tough job . . . the radius arches, lunets, groin ceilings—that sort of thing. They make me think, force me to look at different approaches, kick me out of a rut. To me, it’s the challenge, the test to see if I can bring it off.

DIMENSIONS: But in these times when a bit of conservatism is justified, is it worth it to put everything on the line for an adrenalin surge?
PUCCIO: I don’t gamble everything: that’s stupid. But I do like to have my abilities challenged by tough, complex, demanding work. If you can do it, then do it—

DIMENSIONS: —what’s the toughest job you’ve accepted? Where do you really get something that enters your head?
PUCCIO: That’s an easy one—Spanish types with arches. Anyone can stand up a stud and snap a line. But convex and concave flow lines, curves, bracket type work, suspending things—the challenge is straight to the head and not the hands. That’s when you really get a feel for what you’re doing.

DIMENSIONS: Still, though, the success of your business is, if you will, the bread and butter work, isn’t it?
PUCCIO: Yes, but I try to land two or three bigger jobs each year. This helps maintain a steady work force for me which allows me to keep quality employees on hand for the kind of work we do. Ideally, I prefer the bigger job because the bigger crews mean that I can pull a couple of good men off to do a smaller job. When small jobs are finished, these quality employees can be put back on the big jobs.

DIMENSIONS: But there are only so many Spanish type jobs around?
PUCCIO: There are all kinds of tough jobs. For example, we just com-
pleted building a series of all metal buildings for installation in Alaska. The buildings—as high as four to six stories—were built here in the Bay Area right down to the equipment.

We put them on a barge and floated them to Alaska where special tractors drove them inland 35 miles for final installation.

Everything—right down to the first roll of toilet paper in the ceramic tiled bathrooms — was done here. The big barges and tugs pulled into Alameda, at the southern end of the bay, and pulled them out without a hitch.

To give you an idea of the scope of the work, a single wall was 50 to 70 feet long and perhaps 35 feet high. Each wall had approximately 500 penetrations for 1-inch and 1.5-inch diameter pipes. You can imagine what a 4x8' section of drywall looked like with that many holes—Swiss cheese. Furthermore, the job wasn’t some backroom and fire taped project, but was a first class commercial application all the way.

**DIMENSIONS:** The kind of job that keeps you up nights?

**PUCCIO:** Oh, I suppose there were some moments there. But I got the challenge I thought I’d get.

**DIMENSIONS:** What about your crews? It’s fine for you to get a challenge—but it takes a lot out of the men, too, doesn’t it? Were they all that enamored with the complexity?

**PUCCIO:** Truth is, despite complaints to the contrary they all loved it. My foreman on the job almost went to a rest home and swears he won’t pronounce the name of the customer for a long time, but he’s admitted he’d like the next tough one—and I’m trying hard to oblige him.

**DIMENSIONS:** And the bottom line? Profit? The key to a good job however tough is: did you make money?

**PUCCIO:** We did 12 buildings. The work was inspected here, the punch list performed, the work was accepted—and paid. We did fine on the job. I’ll take a dozen just like it.

**DIMENSIONS:** Now you’re strictly an industrial-commercial contractor—

**PUCCIO:** —that’s right.

**DIMENSIONS:** —and they tell me you have an invention on steel studs that will allow them to accept a staple—not a screw—which would greatly increase productivity. Is that right?

**PUCCIO:** I not only invented such a stud, I have a patent on it, too.
DIMENSIONS: Have you taken it to the steel manufacturers? Seems like they’d be interested.

PUCCIO: We’ve met with just about every steel company in the U.S. but so far none is interested in moving away from their conventional product line. I feel my stud represents the difference between the Wright Brothers and a Boeing 707 . . . it’s labor saving like you wouldn’t believe.

You just have to realize how time saving it would be to fire in a staple rather than screw light gage steel which doesn’t need screws—it’s at least 25% to 30% more time with screws . . . and that’s not counting the cost difference.

DIMENSIONS: You expressed content to remain at your present volume level. Why not go for the big volume?

PUCCIO: The same reason that a lot of other successful wall and ceiling contractors don’t: success is in the bottom line and that translates from effective control of your business.

What impresses me is how much you come out with at the end of the year—not how big of a volume you had or how many men you run. I’ve run 50 men—and that wasn’t my cup of tea. Three of my jobs barely crawled in on time because I was simply overloaded.

When you stretch out you’re hiring people you don’t want—and, most important, you lose control. Too many loose ends flopping around. That’s not for me again—ever. I tried it once. These days, I even stretch out high pressure jobs.

DIMENSIONS: What’s your definition of a high pressure job?

PUCCIO: The job with paperwork and poor coordination from top. The challenging, creative job isn’t necessarily high pressure. It’s when a general contractor can’t—or won’t—properly coordinate that the pressure builds up.

The Alaska job had a couple hundred electricians and plumbers running around all day. Coordination was tough but the construction manager was right on it.

When you have tons of paperwork you know you’ve probably got a bad one. I don’t like to tear out work I’ve already done and start patching up mistakes.

DIMENSIONS: But on a job where there’s no running experience, where you’re innovating from the start . . . how do you estimate a job like that?

How do you know where you’re at once you’re on the job and running crews?

PUCCIO: You can do it. You visit the job and you control and coordinate. Six years ago I took a big convention center job in San Jose at $400,000. I left $100,000 on the table—and I made $90,000.

How? Control and coordination.

DIMENSIONS: But usually when a sub takes a tough job and he’s doubtful he adds? That’s human nature. What’d you feel like when you won the bid at your number—certainly not elated, were you?

PUCCIO: Oh, I was shook. I was certain my competitors had added so I went back and rechecked my own numbers. The GC, of course, didn’t tell me how low I was: he just took the bid quick.

But my recheck showed my numbers were correct. The others just wanted too much because they didn’t have the attitude toward complex work that I had.

DIMENSIONS: Oh, this was one of the tough ones?

PUCCIO: Yes. There was all kinds of bracket type work and ceilings. The structural steel work was extensive.

DIMENSIONS: The GC on that job thought he had a live one. Obviously you do work for old, valued customers. But what do you look for in a GC—even one with whom you have no working experience?

PUCCIO: I have my own qualifications, and with all GCs I ask questions . . . how much electric power and were do I get it . . . what about water and where on the job do I get it . . .

I learned to ask about these essentials the hard way. You forget once to ask where the water on the job is and, as a plastering contractor, you won’t forget the next time.

DIMENSIONS: Sounds like a good technique to avoid back charge surprises, too?

PUCCIO: That’s precisely what it is. I don’t have back charges. The room is broom clean when I finish drywall work. I set up my own sequences—but I do my best to coordinate with
others on the job: you can’t afford the reputation of “tough to work with.” But you do have to come down firm on what you require.

**DIMENSIONS:** How about contract forms, Joe? Do you have your own contract form, especially for these tough, one-of-a-kind projects?

**PUCCIO:** I don’t have my own contract form, but I do have an addendum to the GC’s form which stipulates my conditions for doing the job. Often my contract language supersedes the GC’s—

**DIMENSIONS:** —such as?

**PUCCIO:** I promised broom cleaning for drywall, and my contract provides for escalation protection, payment in by the 25th and due me by the 10th of the following month or I can go straight to the owner, my ability to sequence my work—

**DIMENSIONS:** That’s an awfully strong sounding list. You can get the GCs to accept that kind of language?

**PUCCIO:** I’ve paid my learning dues, as I said. I had my attorney draft this language and I take it to my customers. Some accept it and some don’t. As a matter of fact, I turned the language over to the Northern California Drywall Contractors’ Association and it’s now available to any of that group’s members.

**DIMENSIONS:** And when you personally get flack over this kind of language? How do you react?

**PUCCIO:** I tell them frankly and politely: if you don’t want to sign mine then sign one of the other guys’ because we all now have the same thing.

**DIMENSIONS:** But not everything works the same under different conditions. You’re not really that hard-nosed in every instance, are you?

**PUCCIO:** Contracting is a business of the practical. No, you can’t be a smart alec and survive long. I don’t rudely cross out and return a contract. I call my customer and tell him we should discuss something. I tell them I’ve attached my addenda—and we then compromise. You must be intelligent about what you want and how you go about getting it.

**DIMENSIONS:** How about the payment clause . . . the contingent payment clause . . . where you agree to no pay until the GC gets paid? Does that clause raise your shackles a bit?

**PUCCIO:** It depends on the GC. For the smaller GC, you’re doing them
a favor with that kind of agreement. In almost every case, though, it’s leverage and how bad you want the job.

Certain GCs are known as bad pays. If I don’t know the GC, you can bet I’ll check him out carefully on payment history. They must be Class A on payment or I won’t take their job regardless of how bad I want or need it.

**DIMENSIONS: Since you’re a stickler for control and coordination, what do you do with the GC to get something about this on the record?**

**After all, he really controls coordination despite your sequencing?**

**PUCCIO:** I ask right up front for weekly job meetings with other subs. If they want the wall up a week from now, they’d better have the door bucks out of the way, right?

How better can you achieve that kind of thing than through a regular meeting? And the meetings should be written up so a record exists. Memories are very hazy afterwards. I don’t mind taking it down and putting it back up—but I want to get paid for it.

**DIMENSIONS: Is Joe Puccio known as an “I’ll cover you up” contractor?**

**PUCCIO:** I’d like to have a dime for every time I threatened that but a dollar for every time I actually did it. I won’t purposely cover another contractor up: I’ll pull off first. But I do like to push the job and GCs love to use us as the threat wedge.

**DIMENSIONS: At this stage in your contracting career, I suppose you have a number of customers who prefer to have you on their projects. Are you still primarily a bidding contractor or do sales and/or negotiations represent the bulk of your new work?**

**PUCCIO:** I’m not so certain a distinction between the two is valid. I’m a salesman—and so is every other successful subcontractor. With some GCs I don’t need to be low because I’ve sold myself and my company’s ability to perform. They know they can rely on my assurances.

On big jobs, regardless of the GC, I must be competitive.

**DIMENSIONS: How big of a role has diversification played in your company? Was it a deliberate move on your part to round out the hills and valleys?**

**PUCCIO:** It puts a better base under you, that’s for certain. If the lath and plaster dries up I can always fall back on drywall, studs, taping—and vice versa. That’s what diversification is all about, isn’t it?

**DIMENSIONS: —that, plus the ability to package your bids? How much packaging do you do?**

**PUCCIO:** As much as I can which pretty much means every job. I learned early that a plasterer’s license would make things a lot easier—and the addition of the drywall improved matters.

My customers encouraged it because it makes it so much easier to coordinate with one person. GCs have learned that separating drywall from taping involves the ease of shifting the blame to the other fellow: when one company is handling both you get answers—not excuses.

**DIMENSIONS: You’re a union contractor. The Bay Area is strongly union but the non-union is becoming more competitive here, too. Do you see any major changes coming in this area?**

**PUCCIO:** As a union contractor, I have my problems—but I’d rather negotiate once a year rather than every morning. This way I know my labor rates—and I know my competitors so my bid will reflect my management and skills, not the backpocket of my employees.

If my competitors can live with the current union situation, so can I.

**DIMENSIONS: —Are there inroads being made into traditional union markets?**

**PUCCIO:** Some, yes. But I’m competitive with union contractors. In the not-too-distant future I won’t be competitive with others who are non-union. In other areas this has happened already. When that situation occurs, I’ll need to make a decision—but, remember, that will be the day when we’re all bidding labor rates.

**DIMENSIONS: It sounds a bit like business as usual. Am I interpreting you correctly?**

**PUCCIO:** I think so. I’m perfectly capable of responding to the situation. I’ve done that from the start—and so has every other contractor.

Whatever the future brings, I’ll meet it as I see it. The Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system put me into business. I did 11 of the first 14 stations, beginning as an employee and then on my own after my employer went bankrupt.

Everyone knows that BART was tough inspection, poor coordination and slow pay. I allowed for these problems, bid low—and still made a profit. That’s while other subs were afraid of the project and doubled their bids for safety.

Everything I faced was something new then. I’ve spent the last years prowling for jobs that provided something new.

So I’m not especially fearful of the future. Tomorrow morning doesn’t hold any more qualms for me than yesterday morning—except that, hopefully, it’ll be a little more interesting.