Polishing Up Your Public Relations

It’s the general contractor who usually passes out jobs, and specialty contractors should work on their images.

It’s an understatement to say that every wall and ceiling contractor should have good public relations with everyone in his industry.

But understatement or not, the business-seeking contractor will devote time and attention to improving the working relationship that he has with the people who hand out the work.

And such a consideration certainly must include the general contractor.

In the world of construction, the mighty word travels with astonishing speed. If an architect feels that a particular wall and ceiling contractor is a good addition to any building team, chances are he’ll mention it to an engineer or two.

The engineer, in turn, will pass the word on to a general contractor—and that wall and ceiling contractor’s name and reputation are well on the way to a happy future. It’s well to remember, though, that the bad word also travels quickly and a good reputation can be ripped to shreds in a very short time.

Inasmuch as wall and ceiling contractors receive most of their work through general contractors, the latter’s importance is essential. Anything done to improve the relationship with general contractors will generally result in increased business volume, better working relations, and direct and indirect savings in costs at the project site itself.

There are a number of strategies—most of which wall and ceiling contractors know about and follow—and they are all included here because general contractors mentioned them when they were asked what they like most about their favorite subcontractors.

The primary need of a general contractor is to be convinced by his subcontractor that the latter will respond promptly when the general contractor makes a business request. This means that the subcontractor appreciates the need for the general contractor to make a profit, too, and will cooperate and work towards a successful, profitable project for everyone concerned.

“The general contractor must be the leader of the team,” emphasizes S. Peter Volpe, one of the most reputable general contractors in the nation. “And if a sub is right on the mark and he’s driving it’s good for the entire job,” the Massachusetts contractor says. “When my company finds a sub like that we keep him: We, of course, want to make money and the sub is showing us he realizes that and is willing to help us achieve our goal—while making a good profit for himself.”

When a sub responds promptly to a general’s requests—such as putting five men on the job and not complaining at
every turn—he is showing interest in the project. When a sub coordinates his work through the general supervisors and provides assistance in resolving project problems he is demonstrating an interest in the project.

It isn’t a big thing, but to a general with deadline problems and overall responsibility it shows a sub who, of course, is interested in a profit but also a sub who believes in delivering service and quality work. And that helps explain why some generals will sign on a sub who is known to him and at a price that is higher than some of the other subs submit.

A third way to improve relations with generals is to observe the schedule while doing the work properly in accordance with good installation practices. Delays of any type mean lost profit opportunities for the general and everyone else.

E.F. Brady, San Diego wall and ceiling contractor, is known all along the West Coast as a subcontractor who hangs tight to a schedule and will “plaster over” another sub who is tardy on his work. This may cause slow subs to complain occasionally, but it does prove that the Brady firm is a driving type sub who wants in and wants out on schedule at top quality. It also explains why E.F. Brady has a long list of happy, satisfied general contractor customers.

Because scheduling does play such an important role in profit making, a wall and ceiling contractor should make it a practice to offer to assist the general contractor in establishing project schedules.

Such an offer—even if rejected for some reason—demonstrates interest in the project and will promote smoother, more effective coordination among the trades. From a selfish viewpoint, the sub can schedule his own labor and materials and equipment, thus taking maximum advantage of cash flow.

Another move by the wise sub is to attend all project progress meetings. It not only allows the sub to keep abreast of developments, but it will reinforce the sub’s and even the generals position in the event of a dispute.

One of the easiest ways to destroy any good relations that have been built with a general is to break the chain of command. One general announced publicly at a meeting that, because of this breaking of the chain, he was happiest with a sub, “. . . when the $%$#$@& doesn’t as much as know the name of the architect.”

“Being as well prepared as possible is a definite strategy?

Before going over the head of the general a subcontractor should be absolutely certain that he is in the right and that the general simply can’t or refuses to redress the problem. The sub who looks out for his own and the interests of the general by helping both make a profit will be remembered by the general in the future.

Being as well prepared as possible is a definite strategy. Whenever the sub takes a position on a claim or a complaint it is his responsibility to be as well prepared as possible. The appropriate documentation should be available and the matter pursued only after careful double checking.

In this manner, when a sub has a problem the general will be more apt to give his full attention because he knows this sub is always well prepared.
One of the final strategies for a sub to follow is: follow up on the project. Surprisingly, too many contractors fail to take advantage of the good work they do to cement their relations with the general.

A sub should make certain that his work is satisfactory—preferably more than satisfactory. He should be quick to do any required corrective work immediately, especially punch list items.

Once the finish up work is completed, a clever sub will make it a point to visit with the general to make certain that the general knows he made a wise choice by selecting him as a member of the building team.

With a number of strategies as mentioned already firmly in place, the wall and ceiling contractor should also set up a specific checklist of actions to take in any potential bidding situation as well as a checklist for things to consider after the contract has been awarded, hopefully, to him.

**Checklist For Items In Pre-Bid Stage**

Here are action items that the wall and ceiling contractor should consider for improving business relations with general contractors during the pre-bid stage:

1) The sub should pick up a telephone when he learns of a job in which he has an interest and call the general contractor, expressing his interest so as to make an appointment to come to the general’s office and discuss the project.

2) The sub should keep the appointment. For generals with whom the sub has never worked before or hasn’t worked for some time, the sub should have a current brochure or fact-sheet covering his company’s present capabilities and financial standing.

3) The sub should discuss with the general the project under consideration so the former will know the time-frame as well as the uniqueness and/or administrative aspects which are peculiar to the project. If the sub is interested in the project, he should say so and then proceed to demonstrate to the general just how he (the sub) can help on the project. (E.F. Brady once commented that he doubts a set of drawings exists in which he or his sons could not save at least 5 percent in project costs.) Bidding procedure should be considered carefully so there will be no surprises.

4) The sub should keep in close touch with the general and his estimating department during the bidding period, so he can be promptly responsive to any requests and coordinate activities.

5) The sub should ALWAYS read the general conditions. “When he signs a contract,” Volpe says, “he not only accepts the technical requirements but also the general conditions.” A sub’s reputation can be damaged immeasurably when he shows up on bid day and isn’t familiar with the bid form or the alternatives that exist.

6) The sub should submit his bid promptly and on time. This means that the bid is responsive and qualified, and all necessary statements and information have been included.

**Checklist For Items After Contract Award**

Getting the bid is one thing. Following up properly to insure further good working relations with the general contractor is another. Here are some guidelines that a wall and ceiling contractor could use after the contract has been awarded to him.

1) The sub should immediately call the general contractor and arrange for a pre-construction conference with the general, architect, and engineer. (If the
general doesn’t wish you to be at a meeting with the design professionals and/or owners, a pre-construction conference offer with the general should be suggested.) At the meeting, these determinations should be made:

- where material substitutions may be allowed
- where any design changes are permitted
- how change orders are to be handled

2) If a preconstruction meeting is held with the designers and owners, another meeting, this time only with the general contractor would be valuable so the sub can:

- establish billing procedures
- determine the procedures for material servicing
- coordinate the thinking relative to such project tasks as cutting, patching, facilities, etc.
- establish the staging and completion schedules

3) The sub should submit the required material to get approvals as soon as possible. Here, the sub should check his submissions for completeness and shouldn’t make an incomplete or partial submission unless the general specifically requests it.

4) On any proposed substitutions the sub plans or hopes to make, he should provide valid reasons together with the price consideration of, if any, price differential. Any submission of substitutions should include a detailed performance and fabrication data as well as sufficient data to allow proper evaluation for approval. This would be especially true in cases where fire resistance, insulation, etc. are concerned.

5) A sub should try to arrange an early introduction between the general contractor, his project people, and his own personnel who will be on the job.

6) A sub should impress upon his management people and other employees the importance of maintaining the chain of command once he has confirmed his company personnel assignments to the project.

7) All project meetings should be attended and the subcontractor emphasize his readiness to cooperate, work to help solve problems, and his willingness to man the job with an adequate number of qualified personnel.

8) On minor project changes, the sub should establish a reasonable and fair attitude regarding “credits” or “extras”

9) Most good relations are destroyed during the last 5 percent of a job. The careful subcontractor mans the job at this point with conscientious personnel who will strive to complete the items and thus draw favorable attention to the subcontractor during a period when most general contractors are most vexed.

10) When the project is completed, the subcontractor should conduct his own tour and arrange for the completion of any items that do not meet his own standards of quality. A check-up some six months after completion is also a good idea—and it’s good to let the general know your doing it.

11) Finally, a good subcontractor promptly repairs or replaces defective work covered by warranties.