Service Helps EIFS Contractors Excel in Competitive Market

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What does it take to excel in today's tough construction climate?

On open bid projects, cost is frequently the most important consideration. However, many business leaders agree on a host of principles designed to win customer respect and business. Often these principles are cited in marketing surveys by potential customers as characteristics they look for in choosing a supplier of a product or service-characteristics such as:

--A reputation for excellence
--Quality
--Innovation
--Vision

Best-sellers have been written on each of these company leadership qualities. It's interesting to note that in many surveys, customers cite cost after reputation and quality/reliability in the list of characteristics that are most important in choosing a supplier. No wonder companies invest substantially in programs designed to make their names household words, and their products and services the most reliable available.

Yet in the grassroots world of economic downturns, construction slowdowns and tougher competitive bids, small contractors, if not the giants themselves, may find it difficult to concentrate on leadership principles while dealing with the practicalities of finding tomorrow's jobs and collecting yesterday's receivables.

How can a contractor—perhaps with slashed budgets and fewer employees—continue to devote adequate resources to the programs that can provide business growth?

The answer, in my view, may lie in emphasizing the one quality that supports all the rest: superb customer service. Providing excellent customer service automatically builds the reputation required for repeat business from old customers and great recommendations to potential customers. This is a sure way that an exterior insulation and finish system (EIFS) contractor can differentiate himself or herself from the competition in the marketplace.

Enlist Help of Suppliers

Moreover, customer service is an area in which contractors can enlist the help of the many materials and product suppliers who are, in reality, their partners in supplying construction service to the consumer or commercial customer. Senergy, for example, just over a year ago implemented a Technical Application Consultant (TAC) program geared to assisting the EIFS applicator. Regional TAC services are provided free to contractor applicators, so the program represents a substantial investment for Senergy—an investment that will be increased by one-third this year.

Key to the company's commitment is the belief that an annual 20% to 25% growth potential for EIFS manufacturers—and corresponding growth for EIFS contractors—can be obtained only by ensuring that excellent customer service contributes to building the industry's reputation. Since the manufacturer can grow only if the contractor's business grows, Senergy is committed to joining the contractor on the front line to ensure that the end customer is totally satisfied and that the EIFS contractor is able to make a decent profit.

You might think the philosophy sounds good, but is it practical?

You bet! Here's how it has worked for contractors dealing with Senergy.

Pre-Job Coordination

A key way to ensure competitive service (in the eyes of the general contractor and architect as well as the end customer) is for the contractor to enlist the aid of a Technical Application Consultant in making recommendations in the way certain architectural details are implemented.

While such service may be most used by contractors relatively new to the EIFS industry, it also is extremely useful to experienced contractors who may encounter new types of details in different architectural shapes or in handling the different substrate conditions and variety of details found, for example, in the growing renovation market.

Recommendations may range from adding more aesthetic joints—often to provide reasonable stopping points for the crew—to planning the most economical way to cut shapes for decorative design—perhaps to take advantage of standard expanded polystyrene (EPS) insulation board sizes and avoid unnecessary framing situations on the job. On renovation jobs, special solutions may be found for handling existing windows, doors and penetrations for utilities or heating, ventilating and air conditioning sys-
tems that may not already provide the best ways to deal with water runoff, for example.

Ideally we can review plans with the contractor before a bid is made. Sometimes, for smaller jobs and/or when immediate turnaround makes it impossible for a TAC to meet in person with the contractor, Senergy’s technical service 800 number and today’s fax technology make it possible to communicate on the plans by phone.

Manufacturers also may be of help in situations where the bid already has been made—perhaps against minimum parameters for a standard EIFS job when the situation call for something more. for example, an architect may simply indicate V-groove control joints on a plan to show where joints are to be placed, but in the written spec add the term, “or per manufacturer’s specification.” The location of some of the V-grooves may be at points where a more costly full caulking joint is required—for example, where a building’s brick substrate changes to cement or wood. Since various substrates expand and contract at different rates, placing an expansion joint at the boundary where they meet avoids cracking. A $2 or $3 per linear foot difference in joint types could result in a contractor, theoretically, absorbing a substantial cost. Our Technical Application Consultants work with EIFS contractors to help them avoid such situations.

John Hall, general superintendent and construction manager for all five operations of AcoustiEngineering of Alabama, Inc., is one of many who has found Senergy’s TAC service useful. The company is among the top 500 construction firms with more than $15 million in sales and operations at its Birmingham headquarters in Huntsville, Montgomery and Dothan, all in Alabama, and in Navarre Beach, Florida.

With its own extensive resources, manufacturer service is not the key reason Acousti chooses to use Senergy products. Yet it is a consideration.

Hall points, for example, to a large condominium project in Birmingham on which Acousti had questions and concerns about some architectural details. The Senergy TAC coordinator spent two days reviewing the plans, made some recommendations and participated in a meeting with the architect to resolve several issues. These included optimizing details on caulking joints to avoid cracking and on gutters to avoid leakage, as well as ensuring that metal studs could meet deflection requirements.

Pre-job coordination meetings the TAC attends with the EIFS contractor may involve only the architect—or, later, it may also involve a full-blown, pre-job coordination meeting that includes the general contractor and owner as well. On the more unusual design details, it sometimes is possible for the manufacturer to add enough weight to the change recommendation that the contractor does not take a slice from his profit in order to make a job workable—and one on which both contractor and manufacturer can provide a worry-free warranty.
Job Site Visits

A vital aspect of the TAC program is job site visits. Ideally, visits by the consultant can be made at each stage of a job: start-up and substrate inspection, base coat application and finish coat application.

Start-up meetings are particularly important for a contractor who may have mechanics who are fairly new to the EIFS business. Before starting the job, the TAC can provide recommendations on tools, staging, cutting and application techniques. They can offer guidelines, for example, on where to start in relation to the sun’s path of exposure or whether it would be more efficient on a particular job to use a hot knife, saw-type knife or to set up a table saw for cutting the EPS.

For experienced journeymen mechanics new to the use of Senergy products, the Technical Application Consultant might offer tips on their use and point out any differences in application methods compared with products they previously have used.

According to Robert A. Votolato, president of American Lath & Plastering, Cranston, Rhode Island, such technical assistance “helps by assuring we do it right the first time. You can’t make money by doing it over.”

Votolato, for example, believes the consultants help his company be more innovative in handling certain design shapes or colors and details. “They visit the site regularly--and when they have suggestions on a better way of handling a detail, we listen very closely.

“We have to warranty the project to the owner. And if we build according to Senergy’s guidelines, Senergy warranties the product to us.

Acousti Engineering’s John Hall also appreciates site visits. He mentions an initial Senergy project—a large movie theater with a lot of flat wall space. The Senergy technical consultant walked the project, pointed out areas of concern—particularly the transition details from sheathing to concrete—and suggested methods to alleviate them.

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