Welcome to our continuing series of articles on building systems. In the final analysis, no one knows a system better than the contractors who roll up their sleeves every day and get dirt on their hands at jobsites around the country—so we interviewed several for their honest feedback. Because we’re asking foremen and supervisors to “name names,” they are rewarded with anonymity for their honesty. This may not be an in-depth, definitive study but it does serve as a barometer for those who are interested. Advertisers are not involved with this in any way; all the responses are genuine and not swayed by any outside influences.

While there are some smaller players in the acoustic ceiling industry, such as AcoustiFab, CeilingMax, Dow and Corning, the 18 contractors surveyed (see Chart A) made it clear that what goes into most acoustic ceilings around the country is provided by four companies, with Armstrong the clear market leader (especially on the Eastern seaboard).

So how come these contractors made these choices? Chart B (on page 31) shows that one in three said it was because of the quality of the product and the ease with which the system could be put together. Armstrong scored most strongly in these categories, but before everyone rushes out to buy Armstrong, it should be noted that USG and Chicago Metallic also garnered votes.

No Real Difference

Also, almost one in four considered there was no real difference in quality between the systems on the market. Others use a particular product line only because it is the one their local supplier stocks.

“Each manufacturer has its own niche,” says an Oregon contractor, “but there is little difference between them.” As one contractor in Florida puts it: “I don’t know whether Armstrong is better than the rest. They are all three about equal. There’s a little bit of difference between them, but not too much.”

Another in Florida agrees: “It really doesn’t matter whether we use Armstrong, Chicago Metallic or USG. They go together in much the same way, and there’s no real difference in terms of quality. Armstrong was the industry leader, but they are around longer and started with a broader line of products. The others not only measure up today, but also innovate—Armstrong has had to play catch-up, too.”

Focusing on the Grid

The grid, rather naturally, is where the most trouble seems to occur during installation, and is the focus of attention for many contractors.

“We have had some problems in the past with Armstrong grid,” complains a contractor from Colorado. “The ears...
were too tight to snap in easily. They have improved on that point now, but the old Donn® grid [from USG] used to work better.”

A North Carolina contractor prefers the Chicago Metallic system because, “You get better production with it—the snap connection is better. The acoustic mechanics don’t have to place a hand on each side of the beam connection, for example, to snap them together. They can be 6 feet away on the scaffolding and push in the beam and the connection snaps. It works well.

“Chicago Metallic is a superior product,” agrees an Alabama contractor. “It has a heavy duty grid system that is manufactured with zero or very few defects.”

In Illinois, one contractor voted for Armstrong grid because he “likes the way it goes together easily, compared to Chicago Metallic.”

In Michigan, USG got the nod from one contractor because “it has improved its grid over the years to make quick-release systems. The original clip was one of the most positive, solid locking systems on the market, and easy to work with because it is the type of system that can be butted to the wall, cut to a string, and when you pop the tee in, it sets up perfectly. USG still has the best product out there.”

From Connecticut, we hear that “Armstrong’s tees snap into the right-hand side, making it easier to put together than USG’s, which snap into the left-hand side.”

There is no questioning the opinion of one contractor in Texas: “USG and Armstrong are the only two that are worth anything. They are simple
enough to put together, they are true and accurate in most cases, and we’ve had no problems with them.”

While the various merits of the grid systems on the market can be argued, it is clearer that in quite a few cases, distribution and sales/marketing are the real reason for one company being used in preference to another, as one Maryland contractor pointed out: “Armstrong and USG market and distribute in our area. The other guys either don’t go door-to-door with the architects and get speed, or they don’t have a good distribution network.”

Room for Improvement

Who uses how much of whose product and for what reasons is interesting to know, but it doesn’t help do the job better. For that, we asked whether there was anything about acoustic ceiling systems that could be improved upon. The majority felt things were as good as they needed to be or were going to get. Three, however, saw ways that would make it easier to install.

From the West Coast, in Oregon, we hear a plea for a system that doesn’t require “all that extra seismic bracing.”

“It would be nice if they could reduce the cost,” was some
wishful thinking from a contractor in North Carolina who was otherwise very happy with the level of existing technology.

The third contractor, in Michigan, had more to say: “The choice of tile cutters on the market needs to be expanded. We use Tegular tile cutters, but no one provides the kind of cutters that we need in applications with modular parts that fit within ceilings today. We run into a lot of jobs with lineal diffusers in them. They are continuous within a room. If you have two of these lineal diffusers, it is sometimes like hanging three separate ceilings. They haven’t developed a way to make a modular ceiling that incorporates the kind of parts we are dealing with. Maybe that could be turned around to say that the parts should fit within the system, but we have run into a lot of problems with them. The same goes for the radiant heat panels that are installed in the ceilings.

“These two items are always something we watch out for in a job, as they can be very labor intensive. The one doesn’t mesh with the other very well, and it doesn’t always look good with top rivets in the middle of the ceiling when you are trying to make them mesh.”

The Ceiling’s the Limit

There is obviously room for some improvement, but acoustic ceiling tiles have performed well and filled a need since the 1920s, when Celotex first introduced them to the building community.

A Georgia contractor feels that “For the purpose they are designed,
and for the aesthetic quality demanded, they are an ideal commercial construction material."

“Architects and owners dictate whether we are to use drywall or acoustical,” says a Florida contractor. “Acoustical is cheaper, which is one reason they go that route most of the time, plus it does have better sound-dampening qualities for offices.”

There is no doubt that acoustic ceiling systems will find their way into many buildings in the decades ahead, and will continue to improve in their efficiency and ease of installation. Which companies will be providing them will depend on how well they are managed. And it also will depend on which manufacturers listen to the needs not just of the consumer, but of the folks in the field.

About the Author
Steven Ferry is a free-lance writer for the construction industry. He is based in Dunedin, Fla.