



“I HAVE ALWAYS DONE IT THIS WAY” VS. “I HAVE NEVER DONE IT THIS WAY” A CONTRACTOR’S STRUGGLE

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When a manufacturer produces a new product that is performance-, cost- and labor-efficient, it seems as if everyone would want to begin using it immediately. The acceptance by the design team is only the first step in using the product; the installer or masonry contractor must be willing to try the new way in a competitive market, knowing that the “way I have always done this” would have been performed without the unknown factors of a new product. This article discusses the thought process of the contractor as they make the decision to move on from the conventional methods and move into the “new and improved” methods.

The masonry contractor thought process is simple: safety and money. When deciding if a new method or product should be used, it all comes down to those two factors.

When estimating a project from the masonry contractor’s desk, one has only a few things to consider before they can start measuring and calculating. First, was today a really good day, or a really bad day? This outlook can affect the productions placed into the estimate. Second, is the company’s best foreman available for this project, or will additional management time have to be spent watching this project closely? Again, this will affect production. Third, has the construction team worked with the project management and design team on a prior project? Prior relationships can ease new job tensions. Before even starting to take off a project, though, the quantities are the same on a good day or a bad day, but the production rate chosen depends on the estimator’s outlook. The outlook can change daily productions by 10 or 15 units per day and over time this adds up when using new, untried products.

Why is this important? Because in an instant, a mason can see when they are making or losing money; the estimator needs to be comfortable with all the factors that make up the entire job.

The biggest changes to the industry are not in the laying or placement of materials. They are in the support of the labor and

systems available that are being constructed, and this is where production and estimators’ outlooks come together.

A New Product for the Architect

When the economic slowdown occurred a few years back, many fine architects and trained construction personnel either retired or found other ways to support their families, which has opened the door to new and younger folks that do not have the experience to say, “this is how I have always built this.” Now, we hear a lot of “have you ever seen this before” and “I would like to try this method.” This is actually a positive step in the industry. This attitude, though lacking in experience, eases the transition into new products and equipment used in today’s industry.

For building products, support has to initially be presented to the architect or engineer who heads up the design team. A presentation that discusses the design requirement for the project, a solution that will be tailored for the individual project and test results should all be shared. Testing results are critical in product selection, but it becomes the responsibility of the manufacturer to explain how the tests were done and what the results mean for each individual project. When a salesperson states the testing numbers without defining how the test relates to each project, they will quickly lose the customer, and in many cases, lose the chance at having a really good product specified. Many of the younger generation employees are not familiar with all the history of current manufactured products or methods. The testing will level the playing field.

In order for the industry to grow, we must move to the new direction without conflict between the contractors and the design staff. Conflict has always been present with design and construction personnel. The way for change to successfully occur is to provide the necessary training for both groups in similar but very different ways. Training is the key to the product or system success on the project. In the case of a building products

system, the architect needs to know how it goes together with adjacent products and structural components.

Importance of the Manufacturer as the Trainer

New products, as a whole, are typically well tested, meet industry standards and have undergone numerous field challenges before they ever get to a salesperson. The manufacturer is becoming the industry-leading expert for their individual product, and, in some cases, for their products' compatibility with other manufacturers' production. It would be unreasonable to think that an architect or a contractor can look at a brochure or website and really see how to install or utilize a new system or product. The manufacturer's efforts directly affect the results of the building team for the project. Training is required at different levels and will result in success or failure for the portion of the project they are related to.

Training the Dealers and Distributors

The next step in manufacturer support is the involvement of the local dealer that supports the project. An architect knows that there may be a change here and there, but waiting for long periods of time for a building product is upsetting when it is just out of stock. In this busy time, there is no reason for just-in-time delivery. A quality salesperson, taking good care of their customers, should invest a few dollars when possible to make sure the customer has what will be needed when obstacles occur. If it is a building material such as a specialized flashing system that is being used, the distributor should stock several boxes more than the original purchase order indicated to show the product and project support that contractors and architects need. This will show the customer that they are important, the customer needs are understood and it will allow the customer to count on them as a partner.

Once the product becomes an approved concept, the distributor needs to quickly get pricing into the hands of the construction management staff so purchase orders can be written. Training now comes down to two very different training sessions. The distributor needs training on what materials to stock, lead times on what they do not want to stock, freight expenses for small shipments and availability of products used on the current project. The distributor needs to know the component makeup, replacement or additional parts required, lead times, freight delivery methods and direct product cost to the contractor. This is when it becomes economically wise for the distributor to invest in customer retention by identifying products or equipment repeatedly specified in the local geographical area by becoming knowledgeable and committing stock to provide support and availability. Many contractors have had the experience of going to buy something at a brick and mortar store and it turns out they do not have the item, but will order it. Often, this repeats, another visit and the same thing happens — the product you want is not in stock, so they find other ways to buy what they need, usually by purchasing online.

Training the Construction Staff

In the case of labor-saving equipment, the contractor needs to have the equipment demonstrated and proven to them, simple



as that. Every experienced contractor thinks, "Put up or shut up." They already have a ton of equipment that can get the job done and make them money, so why do they need the new stuff? Well, things wear out, parts and labor can be expensive and mechanics are getting hard to find and sometimes it is time to upgrade. When a building product is the issue, prove to them that they want the product by letting them try it out. Most contractors quickly decide if the new item will work with their methods or not, and if it fails, it is really hard to get a second chance to prove value to a contractor.

Training on the product or system is not a "one-and-done" presentation to a construction company. Training has many forms, and the same product is not presented to everyone in the same manner. For instance, the contractor training we have seen goes a bit like this: the first presentation is made to the construction management staff or project management staff. The contractor needs to know the product or piece of equipment in detail to make an informed buying decision. The trainer needs to know the contractor's business like the contractor does. This is where the contractors' respect begins, because most contractors already know the piece of equipment or the product inside and out. The training for the contractor needs to explain why it will be cost effective using real numbers and real labor rates. The contractor has to understand the product will offer them reduced risk in using the product and it has to be supported by someone who understands that the masonry business runs from 4:30 a.m. until 10:00 p.m. Monday through Monday. The trainer must be able to support the contractor with exact details of connections, placement, codes, tolerances, temperature restrictions, ultraviolet restraints, waste, weights, adjacent product compatibilities and the most efficient method for installation.

In conclusion, our jobs are complicated. Products are complicated. And people can become frustrated when new concepts or equipment are fresh to a project. It is important that if it is your product, you bridge between the design team and the construction team to keep the project rolling smoothly.

