

defining the designer/ flooring contractor relationship

Professionalism, transparency are paramount

BY RICK GREGORY

While important, the relationship between flooring contractors and designers is not always seamless. Sometimes the teamwork yields a project masterpiece that exceeds the client's expectations. Other times, however, it seems the relationship runs a bit haggard.

There are many ways in which this problem can be alleviated. A good start is to look at the situation from each other's perspective with the objective of finding ways to experience a more fruitful collaboration.

However, many top-level design firms – those commonly referred to as the A tier of specifiers – say they deal mostly with manufacturer reps and general contractors rather than flooring contractors (which could be problem No. 1).

"This particular flooring contractor used our relationship for his own ends, hounding our client, and I resent it," said Pam Juba, design director at HLW International in Santa Monica, Calif. "Today, it's a rare event when a designer or design firm has a mutually beneficial and ongoing relationship with a flooring contractor. It is even more rare for individuals in an A-level design firm to communicate with flooring contractors in the devel-

opment of product specifications for specific end-use function areas."

Richard Friedman, president of DFS Flooring in Los Angeles, said the A-level firms are staffed with younger designers who need to make a name for themselves. "These firms typically have full product libraries and receive highly focused attention from manufacturer reps. Designers neither need nor want involvement from flooring contractors, and contractors waste their time trying to deal with them."

It is clear that there is, at worst, a lack of trust, or at best, a lack of communication, between designers and contractors. One common perception echoed by flooring contractors throughout the country is that "designers focus on appearance without adequately considering performance." Designers, however, particularly those with many years and successful projects under their belts, counter that they have sufficient experience and support from manufacturers' representatives to give them the knowledge and confidence to create appropriate and effective specifications.

Yet, there is still a very large pool of design firms that deals directly with the flooring contractor.

These professionals are the link

between the design firm and manufacturer reps, who typically have less field installation experience and represent a defined product offering. Their training focuses on the presentation of features and benefits associated with specifying their products. However, any pricing they give has to be general and within guidelines they've received from their management and marketing departments. While there is virtually never any intent to deceive a specifier, a manufacturer rep's lack of field experience, along with an unfamiliarity with jobsite conditions, renders pricing or budget information incomplete. This is one area where the flooring contractor can be an asset to the designer.

So what is the answer in navigating these emotionally charged scenarios where each player could benefit from the knowledge and experience of the other? Felecia Kobeck, an interior designer with Tennessee Health Management in Memphis, has found success with one flooring contractor in particular. "Because



of his years in the business, he has a wonderful breadth of floor covering knowledge and has many times saved me from making a poor specification choice," she said. "He stays abreast of current trends and constantly updates us on changes in the flooring industry that might affect us. He knows I'm going to test his prices against other contractors, so he consistently remains competitive, and he's always available."

Both sides say professionalism and transparency are the key issues. So what does professionalism look like in this environment? To a specifier, flooring contractors are professional when they:

1. Never refer to the specifier as a "decorator."

2. Answer phone calls and/or emails in a timely fashion. With the advent of SmartPhones, there's no reason anyone can't make a quick call, send an email or text to say when a response can be expected.

3. Attend quickly to budget or sample requests, knowing the information may need to be presented to the owner/client and have an impact on the



client's perception of the specifier.

4. Put the end user's needs ahead of their own agenda. Special buying agreements and manufacturer partnerships are incredibly valuable, but they have no business taking precedence over project-

specific, end-user requirements.

5. Give adequate and accurate pricing, especially for preliminary budgets.

When it is appropriate and possible, include the "sticky" issues like moisture testing and moisture vapor emission mitigation, along with any known floor prep challenges.

6. Contribute to the success of the project with appropriate installation or performance contributions.

If a flooring contractor believes a product won't perform in a particular environment, he must let the designer know his concerns to ensure the material is appropriate for both the installation method and end use.

7. Honor the designer's design ideas.

If it sounds like a crazy idea, the flooring contractor should take some time to figure how he might help make the idea successful. If it is truly an untenable option, help the designer see the difficulties.

8. Don't play pricing games, low-balling a job to gain position from which higher prices will inevitably follow.

9. Take responsibility. When the flooring contractor makes a mistake, he needs to admit it and fix it as quickly as possible.

10. Look to build relationships rather than simply "winning" the contract for a specific project.

Randy Weis, founder and president of RD Weis, a full service commercial flooring contractor, affirms that flooring contractors offer something more than reps. "We provide an installed, finished floor. A mill rep sells a piece of material." And Keith Rogers, a flooring contractor in Lubbock, Texas, believes flooring contractors

are the link between the design firm and the mill rep.

Additionally, flooring contractors, especially those who have been in business for an extended period of time, have the ability to represent a wide variety of

products. While they may not have an intricate knowledge of every aspect of every specification, they have immediate access to the data and will certainly know which products are going to perform best in specific end uses. Because they also deal daily with onsite job conditions, they can effectively estimate true installed costs, taking into consideration all areas of the job.

From a flooring contractor's perspective, designers are professional when they:

1. Consider a product's performance potential in tandem with its design appearance.

2. Take the time to understand how products are bought and installed. For example, a pattern that needs only three tiles from a carton, may waste the balance of product that has to be purchased in full cartons of 45 tiles.

3. Ask questions about how a particular product will be affected by the design. Selecting a carpet with a 48 x 48 pattern repeat may create dramatic waste when it's installed in a corridor with varying widths or another small area.

4. Take the time to engage with current installation techniques and processes for the location. Inviting a trusted flooring contractor to come for an open-mike Q & A session, where there's no selling, may be one idea. Designers and specifiers can ask any question about any phase of the floor covering installation and sales process.

5. Partner with a trusted flooring contractor to examine whether repurposing might be more appropriate than recycling. Does it make sense to spend the money to palletize and wrap old carpet, then pay the fuel and shipping costs to a recycling facility hundreds of miles away when local non-profits are clamoring for help?

6. Engage the flooring contractor early and often. Designers are generalists, required to adequately understand a multitude of disciplines. It is impossible for

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