



By Angie Gutenson

WORK

In a Cut-Throat Market

The Keys to Get in the Door, Get on the Jobsite and Grow Relationships

Do you find yourself dreaming of yesterday's blue skies and sunny glow; the days when three familiar competitors joined you on the bid list? What a stark contrast to today's chilly air and snowy landscape where you will find 33 competitors joining you on that bid list.

So much is different. But the behaviors that win work have not changed dramatically. Yes, low price often is the prevailing factor in today's climate. But complaining won't get you anywhere. It is time to look through a new lens. Don't get too excited, they aren't rose-colored glasses. This lens is realistic and powerful; you will find it when you look through your client's eyes. You must operate from your client's perspective in order to succeed. Before you

land the job, you need to chase it with the enthusiasm that comes only from understanding the client's mission and values. When you land the job, you need to run it like it is your own.

In the end, winning really comes down to people. It comes down to doing the right thing. It comes down to relationships and the ability to infuse value. We can complain about low price until we are blue in the face. Instead, let's look at what wins work when you are one of several with the low price.

Your goal? It's the same as it was in the boom times. Get in the door, get on the jobsite and grow those relationships.

Get In the Door

Right now is a terrific time to build for those who have access to cash. So who has the money? And when will your old tried and true clients be in a position to build again? As far as the private market, when will we see a sustainable volume of work return? Keep your finger on the pulse of the private market as the answers come to light. The market will rebound. For those that do government work, you are in luck. They have cash; they'll just print more when they run out. But proceed with caution. This is not a long-term game plan. The government cannot sustain this level of spending forever. The pendulum will someday swing. There is nothing wrong with taking full advantage of the market that exists today. Just make sure you open a variety of doors. The market could change in a series of moments and you don't want to find yourself shut out.

When it comes to identifying leads, the old days of using newspapers, industry publications and cold calls are fading while networking and relationship building are on the rise. That's because in this information age, there isn't much of a competitive advantage in drumming up business leads using the old model; it's old news once the paper hits the stand. Today it is all about leveraging relationships.

Not all leads are created equal. Are you chasing anything and everything? How is that working for you? There are negative consequences of chasing work you know there is little chance of winning. Just because the market is down does not mean it is prudent to chase every job that comes your way. Nobody benefits from a crummy job. It is important to utilize some form of a Go/No-Go mechanism. Ultimately you are looking to factor for desirability and success. You need to consider the relationship with the client, your competitive advantage or disadvantage, how your experience measures up, whether you have the right team players, whether you can turn a profit, what

it will cost you to chase the job, and how likely it is that you can win the work.

At the point that you decide a job is worth chasing, be prepared to put your best team in the mix. Clients are becoming increasingly discerning and they want to know the credentials of the team that will be making their dream a reality. If you do not select the right team, you need not apply. Stack the cards in your favor and send your best and brightest to those projects you have the best chance of winning and closing out successfully.

Get On the Jobsite

Those that are winning jobs today know that relationships and capability do matter. Smart owners and general contractors are becoming more wary of the dramatically low price. Banks are getting into the mix to caution against that really low number. Everyone is wondering if they can get to the finish line with that low number contractor. They worry about what will happen if the contractor goes out of business during the job.

Let's say you have it all: capability, chemistry, client-mindset, relevant experience and the low price. If all else (price included) is relatively equal, you had better believe these factors have something to do with getting you the job:

- Enthusiasm for the project
- Likeability
- Trust
- Responsiveness
- Communication skills
- Comfort level
- Listening skills
- Cooperative attitude
- Honesty

The good news is that these are perceptions and perceptions are manageable. Talk less about yourself and more about the client's project. Focus precisely on the current client need. Listen, carefully, to what the client wants. Is it price, is it the schedule, is it quality? Something always bubbles to the

top. Figure out what that client values. Relax, tell the truth, be responsive. You will set yourself apart because many of your competitors will focus more on communicating their own company history and qualifications than on assuring the client of their excitement and understanding of the project.

There is an interesting dynamic in the market today. Have you noticed that you are competing with some of the big kids on the block for work that those larger companies would have never entertained competing for in the past? Don't change your game plan. You know your market. Stay on course and emphasize your unique strengths. Your low overhead will propel you forward; you are leaner than the larger contractors. Your top management *is* the team; the client gets direct access to your company owner. Also recognize where you might be inferior. A larger firm may have more polished proposals and presentations, better bonding capacity, and more experience in specialized areas such as green building and BIM. Understanding where you have the advantage and where you might be weak is essential to creating the right game plan to win the work against these new competitors.

And who are these others invading your playground? Research the new out of town competitors. Find out what their weaknesses are. Remember your strengths and communicate and capitalize on them. Can your out-of-town competitors deal with code issues and local inspectors like you can? Do they have the relationships with the subcontractor and material supplier communities that you do? You have some major advantages; use them to win.

When responding to RFQs and RFPs, make sure you prepare a unique response to each request. In other words, do not use templates! Address all RFP requirements in the same order they were asked for and follow instructions precisely. Be careful to watch the exclusions; demonstrate that you are a team player.

Important pieces to improve upon include:

- Resumes (show that your team is a custom fit for their project)
- References (verify that these will be positive)
- Project Experience (relevant experience only)
- Photographs (that highlight relevant experience)

Most importantly, you want to emphasize your approach to their project and incorporate a strategy for reaching their goals.

Be aware that government purchasing agents divide and conquer RFPs. Different individuals are reading the RFP. Follow their order and duplicate vital information from section to section. Dot every i, cross every t and check every box. As far as relationship building, remember you can talk to procurement people all day long until they put a job out to bid. At that point, the rules change.

When you have the opportunity to get your team in front of the potential client, make sure you are prepared! If no agenda is provided, determine it on your own. Gather intelligence on individual hot buttons, know who has a vote, understand your competitors' strengths and weaknesses, know your strengths, and incorporate your strategy for their project. Develop a key message and repeat it. Make sure the whole team knows the project through and through. Ask open-ended questions to ensure they are participating and engaged. Listen closely and tailor your pitch to guarantee you meet their precise needs. Talk more about them and less about you! In every communication, remember to focus on the customer. Communicate the excitement for the client's project and their business.

Make sure everyone in attendance has a role during the presentation. Focus every team member on the client's needs. Practice with in-house competitions and post-

job presentations to colleagues on lessons learned and best practices.

Consider this special note to general contractors: GCs need the sub community to win the work. A GC with loyal subs has the advantage. Be good to your subs. A sub can make or break a project. When you are running jobs with razor thin profit margins, one bad egg can have devastating consequences. Do you talk a big talk about all being part of the team? It would serve you well to bring those words to life and engage your subcontractors as full team members. Educate everyone in operations and business development about the importance of sub relationships. Do this and you will have an advantage over the competition.

Growing Relationships

The proposal is in. Now it's a waiting game. Regardless of the outcome, there is potential to develop the relationship further.

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Assume for a moment that you did not get the job. That does not mean you cannot learn from it. And it doesn't mean the relationship is sour. Get a debrief from the client. Talk to subcontractors or vendors. Always have an internal meeting to review lessons learned with your team, and most of all maintain communication with the client.

Now assume that you did get the job. Woo-hoo – time to celebrate! Then get to work and focus on service to the client and growing the relationship.

Your leaders on the job need to run that job tighter than they ever have before. Provide quality service on current projects and you are more likely to get a great referral or a negotiated job next time around. Get back to basics and shore up all the little things. Call when you say you will. Communicate problems and be responsive. Be honest, fair and open-minded. Be yourself and have fun. Analyze the project and make decisions as if you owned it and were spending your money. Every problem on that job is your problem and therefore your responsibility to solve. Make sure the client has no surprises! You don't have to be friends, but be friendly. Remain professional during conflict. Do not be afraid to lose the battle to win the war.

Closeout for Repeat Work

Some believe that the quest for the zero punch list is unrealistic, but the fact is that some elite contractors are doing it. Try to let go of everything you have always been told about punch lists. Open your mind and imagine this, would you buy a new piece of furniture that had dents, scratches, and faulty hardware? Can you imagine the sinking feeling in the pit of the owner's stomach when exposed to a slew of punch list items during the walk through? Did the owner really need to see all of that? What other industry does this? Forget the excuses. Figure out how to get to that zero punch list. Can you incentivize in a way that creates a real effort to get to a zero punch list?

Can you engage all the team players from the start and get their buy in?

Winning the Work

In the end, it all comes down to doing the right thing for the customer; operating with the customer's expectations in mind. Quality marketing materials, capability of staff, and depth of credentials and expertise impress clients. So does having the low price.

But relationships are a great tiebreaker in this market. And when the rebound happens, relationships will win jobs. Take care of business today and position yourself to gain ground when the economy rebounds.

Angie Gutenson is a vice president of Associated Builders and Contractors-Virginia Chapter.

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