



Bringing the Showroom To the Customer

by Chuck Green

Half of my company's kitchen and bath projects have no architect, so in addition to drawing up the plans we're responsible for developing the full set of job specifications with the customer. Over the years we've found that at the first meeting, customers usually have only a vague idea of what they want. Getting to the stage where we have enough information to make a solid job proposal used to take several meetings and numerous hours of unpaid work — which all too often only served to set up the next bidder with all the completed groundwork.

To spare myself this grief, I developed a low-cost way to reduce the time spent working up K&B bids. By arranging product catalogs and other printed information from manufacturers and suppliers into several loose-leaf binder presentation books, I'm now able to detail and specify much of the project with only one meeting.

Narrow the Choices

I've purposely limited the choices I present, staying with product lines that we and our subs like and that past customers have often chosen. As much as possible, I try to offer the customer only two brands for most product choices. Some categories have only one choice, however, whereas a few have three or four — cabinets, for example. Limiting

the choices has several advantages: I'm familiar with all the products I'll be installing, it's easy to keep up with current pricing, and the customer's job of choosing products goes quickly.

I don't want the customers to feel that we're being restrictive, however. I present the core products initially but remain flexible. If I have to match an existing product at the site, or if the customer has a must-have item that is not in the binders, I'll track it down. Chances are I'll find it in one of the many other product catalogs we keep at the office. For most categories, however, there are plenty of choices: Offering just two lines of plumbing fixtures, for example, still leaves a wide range of models to choose from.

Making product selections at the initial meeting accomplishes several things. It minimizes the customer's trips to showrooms and stores required for a typical K&B project. It reduces the time I spend chasing down dead-end leads, and it narrows the unknowns in my bidding. Plus, it makes us look good at that first meeting by coming in prepared with (hopefully) all the information the customer needs.

What to Bring?

Gathering most of the materials I wanted was not too difficult. Selecting

which of it to use was the hard part.

My first step was visiting our suppliers and calling manufacturers to get catalogs, countertop samples, etc. I was uncertain at first. Can one actually choose cabinets from a catalog? Can tiles be chosen from catalogs? Are there even tile catalogs? (Yes, and they can be somewhat helpful, but photos of completed tile installations seem far more helpful). How much stuff should I bring to meetings — should I bring a sample box of Surell and Corian blocks, as well as literature on each, plus full rings of Wilsonart and Formica chips? I gathered lots of material, and gradually selected what now fills six binder books, plus two large countertop sample boxes.

Our plumbing contractor agreed that we had always had good experiences with Kohler and American Standard fixtures, so I developed a book with information on only those companies' fixtures. I also bring information on their faucets, as well as on Delta's. On one job the customers requested KWC faucets right off; the catalog was back in the office and I faxed the appropriate pages to them an hour after our meeting. We work with only one water filtration system, and the supply company provided me with great sales materials, as well as technical data sheets and pricing information.

I purchased a number of 1- and 2-inch ring binder books from an office supply store. Rather than have one massive book, I divided the information into categories: plumbing, cabinets, windows and doors, electrical fixtures, appliances, and miscellaneous (countertops, fans, tiles, in-the-wall heaters, towel bars, specialty hardware, etc.). I also bring a portfolio book of before-and-after photos of previous jobs, subdivided by type of work. To be a bit showy, I have no labels on the books. Each has a different color cover that serves as a simple visual mnemonic: blue (water) for plumbing, white (sunlight) for windows and doors, black (no light) for electrical fixtures, red (hot) for appliances, light brown (wood) for cabinets, and maroon ("m") for miscellaneous. It's impressive to be able to authoritatively select the correct unlabeled book.

Be Prepared

There is a lot of information here, and I learned quickly a lesson that I offer as



No hassle: A prospective K&B client chooses fixtures and appliances in the comfort of her own home, using the author's product binders.

Rule #1: To look professional, study your binder books in advance and know where all the information is in each binder! My other suggestion is to buy only high-quality ring binder books. For years I've advised customers not to cut corners (my company's name, Four Corners Construction, is a result of this). But I made the blunder myself, thinking that all binder books would be the same, and I ended up throwing out the cheap ones I initially bought at a discount office supply superstore. I have found that D-style rings work better than round rings, with materials getting stuck less when one flips large bunches of paper from one end to another.

With some catalogs — windows, skylights, and hardware, for instance — a lot of editing was needed before putting the information in the binders. I separated out what I wanted, then reassembled the pages with colored dividers between manufacturers. The plumbing, electrical, and fixture catalogs stayed intact for the most part, though their three predrilled holes needed enlarging. The standard holes were 1/4 inch, too small for flipping back and forth in a book holding several

large catalogs. Trying to enlarge the three 1/4-inch holes in the shop, using a drill press and clamping the catalog between boards, took a long time and worked poorly. So I had a local shop drill 3/8-inch-diameter holes with a special bit; drilling 6 inches of catalogs cost \$5.

I also learned from experience what to bring. On one bathroom bid I brought some Surell samples, then found that I needed to match the kitchen, which had been done the year before in Corian. For counters, I now bring in only printed literature for two laminate lines and two solid surface materials. The samples of each come along but stay out in the car unless needed.

Cabinet, plumbing, electrical fixture, and window and door selection have gone particularly well with the binder method. Customers sometimes still want to follow up by visiting showrooms — primarily for cabinets and electrical fixtures — but it saves them from dead-end trips, and they go well-prepared to make their final choices.

One problem was gathering pricing information. Limiting the choices makes this easier, but getting prices for an entire

catalog has not always been possible, especially with cabinets. Cabinet suppliers I've worked with will not quote me prices for their cabinet lines except when I've brought them a specific job list with a request for a bid, and then I don't usually get cabinet-by-cabinet itemizations. So with cabinets I'll fax a complete cabinet list and usually get the quote later that day. The same has held true with appliances. With most other items, though, I've been very successful in getting pre-bid pricing information on file.

Another problem I faced quickly was when a customer asked to keep several of the books for a few days. My answer is usually "No" but we have not held to this rigidly. The books are important to the business, but if it seems necessary we'll leave up to two books overnight.

Most busy people do not like to waste time running around looking at products, and they have welcomed this in-home shopping. It's saved me a lot of time as well. From here on, I'll simply continue to refine and update the binders. ■

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