



Working With Showrooms

by Jim and Barbara Conen

When preparing estimates, contractors generally use a cost-allowance figure for plumbing fixtures. Fixture allowances provide budget figures that “keep things moving” during the initial pricing stage, without the mind-numbing details (and hours of work) required to pin down the costs of every single item. But after the bid has been accepted, the real work begins. That lump-sum figure that was so easy to pop in the estimate will now be itemized, scrutinized, and finalized.



As co-owners of a busy kitchen and bath showroom, we’ve had plenty of opportunity to observe the problems that can occur when fixture allowances are handled improperly. To help contractors cope with the sometimes tedious process of fixture selection, we’ve worked up the five-step process outlined below.

Step One: Choosing a Showroom

Working with the right showroom can save a contractor money through more efficient project management. We

often spend 15 hours or more with a contractor’s client, helping them choose plumbing fixtures for their project. To get the most out of this “joint approach,” it’s important to choose a showroom you’re comfortable with. The right choice will depend on your company’s market: If your work is comprised of mostly high-end jobs, you’ll probably be more inclined towards a showroom offering top-notch service rather than bargain-basement pricing, for example.

Take the time to visit the showroom, and question the owner or manager about the store’s inventory and procedures.

Step Two: Hook Up With a Sales Contact

When deciding on a showroom, it’s important to discuss with the manager how you typically handle fixture allowances with your customers. The key to a smooth-running fixture-selection process relies in large part on the showroom representative’s knowledge and sensitivity of this issue. If you don’t feel the showroom has personnel who can work with your operating procedures, you may want to consider another showroom.

Clients often ask what their discounts would be if they bought directly from the showroom. Most showrooms will discount direct purchases, and it’s very important that your showroom representative answer this question properly by explaining the benefits of being represented by a contractor, who will deal with any headaches that might arise.

Our experience has been that contractors who bill clients at direct invoice costs have the least problems. By including the fixture markup in the labor portion of the plumbing estimate, the overhead associated with the “fixture factor” is much less likely to become an issue with the

client. Other contractors prefer to take charge of the entire process (including pricing), and accompany their clients to the showroom.

Occasionally, we encounter clients who are dealing with their contractor on a “turn ‘em loose” approach. The contractor tells them to go pick out whatever they want, and often expects the showroom to handle *everything*. The problem with this approach is that issues like scheduling and accessories, for example, are seldom taken care of, and the contractor ends up pointing fingers at the showroom and the customer. This can be avoided if the contractor maintains some level of involvement

No matter what method you use, be sure your showroom representative is aware of your procedure, and be sure to notify them of any changes in policy *before* the client arrives.

It’s also important to discuss how to facilitate fast, two-way communication. How, for instance, can you get through to your showroom contact in an emergency, even if he or she is swamped with other requests? Ask if your consultant carries a beeper. And arrange for your consultant to tell the showroom telephone operator to put you through in special circumstances. (Even if you’re a steady customer, don’t assume that an operator will automatically give you special treatment.)

There may be occasions when showroom personnel other than your consultant may be more appropriate to serve you. If you’re checking on delivery time, for example, a customer service representative might be your best source.

And don’t forget to ask for a showroom binder with product literature for client presentations. Use this to illustrate why your preferred showroom is in your client’s best interest.

Step Three: Bring Your Client Up to Speed

Prior to the showroom visit, meet with your client to set general ground rules. Clarify matters such as budget, billing, timetables, and so on. This is also the time to review your client's "wish list" and provide a reality check.

If your client expresses a willingness to exceed the fixture allowance amount, pass on to the showroom representative your feel for the range of potential increases that the customer can handle.

Step Four: Visit the Showroom With Your Client

For the best results, it's a good idea to accompany your client on the initial showroom visit. At this meeting, you

should reinforce the communication lines between the showroom, contractor, and client. This will set the stage for the important return visits the client will make as he or she decides on fixture choices. Remember, you are the expert when it comes to the floor plan, plumbing constraints, special design considerations, and other issues. If you're not there, the result might be wasted time, plus costly mistakes and headaches.

Be sure to explain to your clients the importance of making appointments with the showroom representative and of keeping you apprised of the progress. If clients visit the showroom unannounced, they may have to wait, and they may not get your assigned sales consultant. The result? A blueprint for derailment.

Step Five: Keep in Touch

To ensure productive, long-term relationships, it's important to maintain a dialogue with the management. Give feedback (good and bad), and if problems can't be solved on the phone, set up a time to talk about them in person. In all likelihood, you'll iron out any misunderstandings. Once a problem is resolved, you may be surprised to find that your relationship with the showroom becomes stronger than ever. So take the time now to plan your next project's strategy — and save time and dollars in the end. ■

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