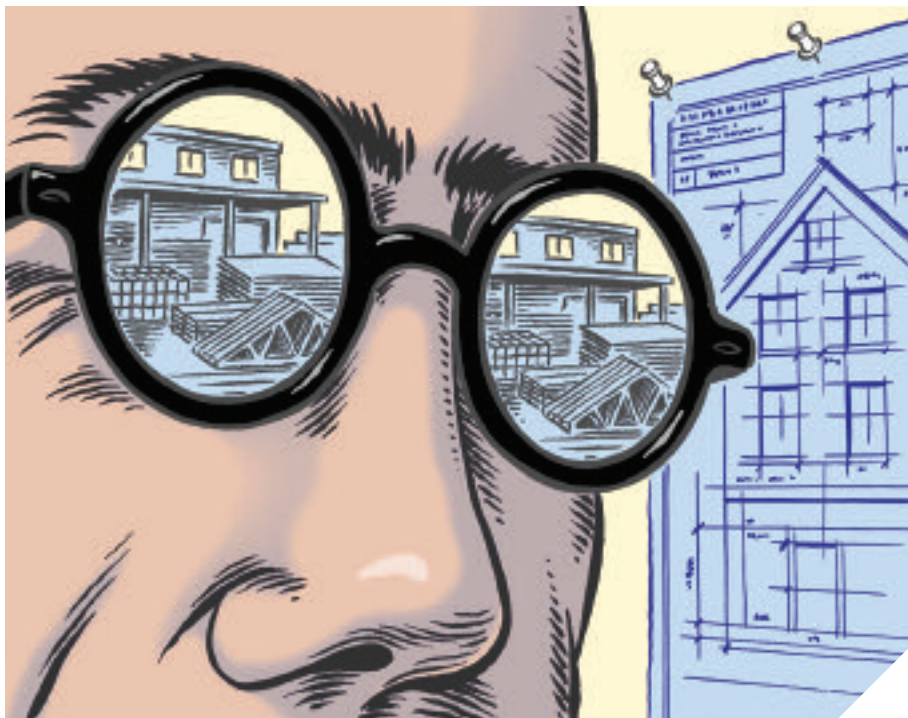


In the Lead

Looking for new sales targets? Consider the profit-building possibilities of residential architects. By Rick Davis



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Here is a trick question: Which would you rather have as a customer, a slow-paying, disorganized contractor who purchases \$30,000 a year or a long-term, loyal customer who offers fair margins and purchases \$250,000? If you think this is a dumb question, then consider that you may be driving right by the more favorable type of customer on a daily basis—the architect. Even though architects may not spend a dime in your showroom, they can be a source of significant profitability.

In spite of the many years of my life I spent dedicated to architectural sales, even I have neglected to write about this important audience, one which should not be ignored. The architectural community offers an outstanding opportunity within the distribution channel that is remarkably lucrative for those who commit time to an architectural sales process.

There is at least one market segment of new

construction in which architects wield more influence on product selection than builders—the custom home market. Approximately 15 percent of all single-family homes are considered “custom” homes and, while many of these homes are constructed by builders that strongly influence the product selection process, consumers play a bigger part in product selection for custom homes than they do for production homes. And a key source of influence for the consumer is their design professional, the architect.

Up Close and Personal

Architects purchase in exactly the same way builders and dealers and others buy products: They buy from people. If you want to have success with this largely ignored audience, consider making a concerted, long-term effort of promotion and sales. The key to success is to treat them like any other paying customer with regular sales calls, education, and servicing, ultimately striving to build a long-term relationship with qualified architectural prospects.

The architectural sales challenge usually begins with a debate over the issue of sales responsibility. Dealers spend time pointing at vendors, telling them to get the product specified, while vendors pressure dealers to do a better job of promoting the vendor's

brand. The reality is that the individual who builds a relationship with an architect is the one who wields sales power. So if you want to control more sales in the market, call on architects and recognize that your objective is larger than merely getting a product speed.

A specification is not a sale, but rather provides a strong opportunity to complete a sale. Architectural firms work in very close concert with homeowners on the design of their houses both for new construction and remodeling. By the time the builder gets involved, many product decisions have been made and the opportunity for a sale is significantly increased. However, the sale is complete only when the order is secured, product is delivered, and payment is received. Establishing a relationship with the designer and homeowner early in the process can dramatically increase your chances for a sale.

Many salespeople are concerned that architectural

Sell Sheet

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sales efforts will not result in “guaranteed” sales, citing the evidence that sometimes a competitor sells the same brand that was originally being promoted for the project. While this is a valid concern, it is also true that a salesperson has no guarantee they are going to earn the business when they are busy working three hours on a complex project takeoff. Business offers few guarantees but, on the other hand, does offer the opportunity to take advantage of favorable percentages.

Amazingly, architects are an audience that actually enjoys discussing product features and benefits. They

are usually in their office and willing to give a few moments of time to a credible (i.e., knowledgeable and trustworthy) sales representative. In fact, they often rely on the expertise that a highly skilled sales representative can provide.

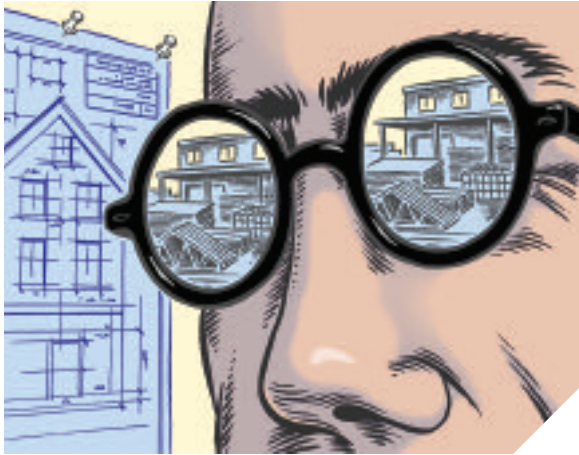
Approaching Architects

Consider developing a systematic approach to architectural sales and you’ll discover a new world of enjoyable sales open up to you.

1. Identify the right audience. The unique skill required in architectural sales is the ability to

target the right audience. During your travels you will discover that only 10 to 15 percent of the architects in your market fit the bill. You are seeking architects that design custom homes and work directly with the homeowner during the design phase of the project. The “payment” you receive from architects is not a check, but rather is the referral you get to meet with the homeowner, virtually ensuring an improvement in your chances of closing the ultimate sale.

2. Promote the right product. Although you may be selling what you consider a commodity product—e.g., lumber—there are products that you sell that are more specialized, such as windows, millwork, and decorative fixtures. Consider that a sale of a specialized product, while not significant on its own merit, could be the



catalyst that enables you to sell an entire house package of lumber, siding, and more. Networking equals success, and your focus on specialized products will give you the networking opportunity to sell more of everything that you have to offer.

3. Make appointments! Don't be swayed by the easy access that is afforded by architects. While they

work from their offices and are easily accessible by cold calls, you should still take the time to make appointments in advance in order to dramatically increase your chances for a successful meeting. In addition, remember that architects bill for their time, so your meetings should be brief and to the point.

4. Qualify with an "ear" for architectural salesmanship. Architects do not think exclusively in terms of budgets (although this is an extremely important issue in the design process), but also in terms of scope of work, design integrity, phases of the design-construction process, product performance features, and more. Where your qualifying questions with a builder may focus on schedules and budgets, qualifying questions with architects should focus on project design issues.

5. Make a relationship. You wouldn't make a single call to a builder and expect to create a long-term client. Architects require the same dedication of business-to-business communication as a builder. You should expect to make numerous calls (that are productive for an architect) before a relationship begins to solidify.

At a time when dealers throughout the country are intensely focused on ways to cater to the large-volume production builder, perhaps the easiest way to differentiate your sales approach is to target the lucrative architectural audience that everyone else is ignoring. Make a long-term commitment to cater to this highly profitable customer base. The steady attention you provide a handful of select architects in your market will yield incredibly powerful long-term results. ■