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The Human Element

Finding the human touch in a web-based age



SPECIFICATIONS

David J. Wyatt, CDT

Colin Gilboy, founder of 4specs website, estimates there are only 800 W-2 employed and 1099-independent specification writers currently working in the United States. (By his reckoning, it takes 30 to 50 employees to support a full-time specifier.) The rest of the specification writing is done by people for whom specification writing is not their primary task, such as project architects. Although this number may be relatively small when compared to similarly situated specialists serving other professions, specifiers are a stable and dedicated subset of the design profession.

A 2009 demographic [survey](#), initiated by Robert W. Johnson, RA, Distinguished Member, FCSI, CCS, CCCA, suggests the typical construction specifier is in his or her mid-50s, has been on the job

for about 20 years, and, at a critical point, benefited from the influence of a mentor who affirmed this career path as worthwhile.

This demographic group has seen office technology evolve from typewriters, drafting boards, rotary telephones, and snail mail to computer-based document production methods, paperless electronic document delivery, and wireless communication. These men and women will experience widespread use of building information modeling (BIM) and greater integration of design and construction at some point before they retire. However, not all technology-driven changes have been embraced.

Common concerns troubling the most discerning professional specifiers include misbegotten manufacturer websites and the presence of fewer knowledgeable product representatives in the field. Both of these problems point to heavy reliance on technology to deliver information and diminishing investment in the human element so essential to traditional business transactions.

Communication and roadblocks

When it comes to manufacturer websites, the most common objections of specifiers involve guarded access to technical data; and the manner in which this data, when found, is formatted.

With respect to access, registration as a prerequisite to access technical data seems to raise the greatest ire. Manufacturers usually justify it as their need to control information flow, protect business interests, and attain leads. Many specifiers object because it slows them down, but the indignation expressed by some reveals more than a whisper of entitlement to the information. Those objections might be tempered with better understanding of the financial resources manufacturers devote to them. It may take a succeeding generation to agree on this.

As for inconsistent document format, it is hard to blame the manufacturing sector for issues the design sector still struggles with internally.

Lack of knowledgeable product representatives in the field is a more complex problem. It involves cost and availability of human resources, along with the return on investment (ROI) in the eyes of financial decision-makers. There is little doubt the number of on-the-ground product representatives has diminished as territories have expanded, as older, knowledgeable reps have retired, and as fewer new ones are taking their places. All these factors signify economic pressure on the bottom line.

The cost of training and the years required to gain the requisite perspective necessary to consult with professionals are as challenging in the manufacturing world as they are in the design world. It is cheaper and easier to design a website and fund a skeleton customer service call center. However, what toll does this take on relationships with the design profession?

Face-to-face communication, as costly as it may be, is still regarded by the Baby Boom generation as the best way to achieve high level business results. In an article, "What's so Great About Face-to-Face," published in the May-June 2011 issue of *Communication World*, Carol Kinsey Goman wrote:

In face-to-face meetings, our brains process the continual cascade of nonverbal cues that we use as the basis for building trust and professional intimacy. Face-to-face interaction is information-rich. We interpret what people say to us only partially from the words they use. We get most of the message (and all of the emotional nuance behind the words) from vocal tone, pacing, facial expressions, and body language. And we rely on immediate feedback—the instantaneous responses of others—to help us gauge how well our ideas are being accepted.

Face-to-face communication is highly valued around the world. Japanese business etiquette is especially ceremonial and worthy of attention. The exchange of business cards—known as *meishi*—is an example of how a simple face-to-face encounter, so casually carried out in the United States, can cement a meaningful business relationship.

Each technical development for making design processes more efficient and accurate has had an individual (or more likely, a team) involved to identify a problem, devise a solution, and ultimately share it with the profession. Despite our technological advances, the human element remains a necessary and valuable component in information exchange, team-building, and overall project success.

Some recommendations

For as long as Baby Boomers make important business decisions, manufacturers willing to invest in face-to-face communication with design professionals will have an advantage over those who do not. Further, those who take the time to understand the needs of specifiers when it comes to information access will more likely see their products specified as the basis of design than their less-accommodating competitors.



However, every investment needs a corresponding return for it to make sense from a business standpoint. Often, merely setting aside some time to meet with product representatives, whether it is during a break at a professional event like a trade show or spending a few minutes following an educational lunch to discuss a project, is sufficient affirmation of the human element's worth as an investment.

The ability and willingness to invest in the human element under time-demanding circumstances, rather than merely relying on technology to do the job, demonstrates the value and respect a manufacturer has for potential clients, and the level of resources it is willing to expend to carry its message.

David J. Wyatt, CDT, is the specifications writer for TC Architects (Akron, Ohio), where he is responsible for product research, technical specifications, bidding documents, preparation of project manuals, construction contracts, construction bulletins, shop drawing review, and contract close-out for all project. With the late Hans Meier, Wyatt co-authored Construction Specifications: Principles and Applications. He can be reached at dwyatt@tcarchitects.com.

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7 thoughts on "The Human Element"



Tim Duffy

December 17, 2013 at 2:19 pm

Great article David, thanks. As a specifier in the earlier part of my career, it's great to get recommendations like this. Much appreciated!



Dave Wyatt

January 10, 2014 at 1:46 pm

Thank you, Tim. Think about contributing a specifications article to the CS.



Ted Wantuck

January 19, 2014 at 10:25 am

David ; as a product rep, I agree with your comments on the return on investment; spec writers are generally good about this, but it's more difficult to get this return from PA's that write their own specs, since they only want the info for the current project. I hope that they will take your comments to heart and provide feedback to us when we ask.



Dave Wyatt

January 20, 2014 at 8:51 am

Thanks for the comments, Ted.

I have worked as a product representative, and I know it is not easy, but it is very important for the project team to function properly.



Ty Morrison

August 25, 2015 at 11:54 am

I am starting to teach a class on Construction Communication. I could not agree more with your insight and plan to share your viewpoint in my class.

Keep up the good work.



Michael King

August 27, 2015 at 10:05 am

Excellent article. Your points have application to more than just the communications between design professionals and building product representatives. They apply generally to the way human interaction is going. People have fewer face-to-face encounters, evidenced by watching couples at dinner texting on their smart phones rather than talking to each other. There seems a trend to use electronic communications when face-to-face would be not only more efficient, but more comprehensive and less time consuming.

Technology is changing society in this regard, and not necessarily for the better.



Mark Hubert

August 28, 2015 at 2:50 pm

Great article. Being a baby boomer myself i agree that personal interaction is the best way to communicate technical information and the use of my products for you situation.