

# Should I Recommend My Competition?

*For a manufacturer, an A&E program is a commitment to the future*

**T**oo often, people sell what they have instead of focusing on solving the customer or client problem. It takes moxie to step out of the box and, if necessary, recommend a competitor's solution. For a manufacturer, an A&E program is a commitment to the future, and a short term 'hit' can yield big long term benefits.

Let's start at the beginning. What's the real purpose of an A&E program for manufacturers? The expected answer is to get products specified. But, if given the choice between the following expanded answers, which would you pick?

- A. Get products specified on a current project
- B. Get products regularly specified

Answer A is winning the battle. Answer B is winning the war.

Winning the war requires building a serious long-term trusted relationship with a security consultant or engineer. Just as good friendships and marriages take time, hard work, and addressing problems head on, that same commitment is a must for establishing long term consultant relationships. Solid relationships are bi-directional and need a spirit of commitment on the part of each partner to make them work.

A consultant's time is valuable, but some of that time should be allocated to understanding the product and technology solutions available to them, in addition to applying those solutions in a project environment. One representing a security product should be sensitive to the consultant's time and needs by consistently delivering the goods -- timely, accurate product and application information.

## **Making the design phase work**

In the design phase, a product rep should make sure that the consulting firm has a full product "care package" that includes:

- Properly formatted specifications
- Current data sheets, with specifications consistent across related documents
- Operation and installation manuals
- Design guides

- Applicable reference standards and codes
- CAD libraries
- BIM libraries
- Training videos
- Technology tutorials

In the old days, much of this would be resident in a three-ring binder sitting in a conference room or hallway bookcase. Today, however, companies should be focused on myriad vendor web portals providing access to totally up-to-date information.

The Construction Specification Institute (CSI) recently published its Practice Guide for Construction Product Representation. Its Task Items cover the following areas spanning several project stages:

- Meet with designer/design team; learn and understand project design intent.
- Determine project's product/system/material needs.
- Recommend product/system solutions/applications to meet project requirements.
- Provide timely and accurate responses to product selection questions.
- Provide/edit specification sections for project specific products/systems/materials.
- Provide drawings and calculations to address project requirements.
- Provide budget pricing.
- Suggest ancillary products compatible with specified products/systems/materials.
- Estimate product/system/material lead-time.
- Identify codes, rules, regulations, and jurisdictional requirements applicable to the product/system/material.

Provide product/system/material storage, handling, installation, and maintenance requirements.

- Provide and interpret applicable product/system/material warranties
- Inform customers of proper and

improper applications for product/system

- Communicate identified market trends to product/system manufacturer
- Nurturing the consultant and product rep relationship

All of the above action items suggest that the Product Representative can be a valuable member of the project team; a position achieved through helpful actions and not hollow sales promises. A good product rep

- knows his product
- knows his completion
- understands his company's roadmap
- has management's confidence
- gets answers in a timely fashion
- tells the truth

Good representatives provide this. Good consultants demand it.

So, let's envision a scenario where a consultant has been provided by a large client with an unusual set of circumstances that demand some very specific product features. As it so happens, his favorite product rep is due in for a meeting that day. The consultant relates his need, and the rep realizes that not only does he not have a product with the required features, but a key competitor does. What are his choices?

**Fib** - Tell the consultant that the product can do the job. This is really a problem if the representative has no idea what his products can do. Unfortunately, this happens too often, and lack of product knowledge benefits neither party. Message to manufacturers: train your people on product and conduct.

**Fib** - Tell the consultant it's coming out next quarter. Manufacturers must provide accurate product roadmaps to their representatives to avoid overcommitting to a schedule. Conversely, reps must bring feedback back to their manufacturers on schedule and emerging technical requirements as critical inputs to roadmap planning.

**Fib** - Say nothing like that exists nor

*"A consultant's time is valuable, but some of that time should be allocated to understanding the product and technology solutions available to them, in addition to applying those solutions in a project environment."*

is likely to exist. Product reps must understand the current technology and competitive landscapes. This requires not only manufacturer training, but also personal diligence and study. What is the current state of the art in technology? Where does my product fit? How will these evolve over time? Discussing these issues with consultants and getting their perspectives can lead to fruitful discussions, mutual respect, and areas for further investigation.

**Stall** - Commit to get something designed in time for the project. This is easier said than done, since few reps can commit to a project on their own. Bringing in one with the authority to commit or getting it on the company agenda for product discussions are feasible, and may lead to a viable approach that will address the current need. Also, valuable new products may emerge from the dialog.

**Engineer** - Review the project requirements to determine possible alternative solutions. Rarely is there only solution to a security project requirement. If consultant ego is not a factor, the rep can play a valuable role

by listening and really understanding the nature of the requirement. Through his knowledge, experience, research, and company resources, he should attempt to put alternative solutions on the table for discussion.

**Engineer** - Persuade his company to develop and meet the technical and schedule requirements of the project. Generally, this will only happen if the technical hurdles are modest, resources are available to address them, and the product rep has enough internal credibility to stimulate action. It may also occur if someone has made a strategic judgment that the company must participate in the project for competitive position, prestige, marketing, or future business reasons.

**Partner** - Convince his company to collaborate with a third party to license, private label, or technically cooperate to present a viable solution. In today's world of API's, standard interfaces, and protocols, it might be possible to append a capability to a product that delivers a solution. Engineering resources are still required and companies with strong partner programs are in the best position to pursue this avenue.

**Recommend** - Point out competitive products that meet the consultant's need. Let's digress to the title of this article. This takes guts (or stupidity, depending on your point of view) and isn't likely to happen very often. And a product representative probably wouldn't tell management if he went this route. However, this could be great way to build trust and confidence, not to mention taking a giant step in the relationship's development. And what has really been lost? The company's product has not been unknowingly mis-specified or misapplied. Promised time schedules won't be broken, the company avoids an opportunity to fail, and the opportunity may come back around in another way.

On the consultant's part, when a product rep takes the riskier higher path, his behavior should be recognized and valued. Most consultants have been burned by "slick sales" behavior in the past and may be skeptical of a manufacturer's claims that something is just around the corner or will soon be in production, ready to roll in time to support the project.

However, successful consultants recognize and

value when a rep is truly trying to do the right thing. Rewarding his honesty and good intention by placing him in the role of a trusted advisor encourages the right kind of behavior and enables a potentially valuable resource. This is enhanced even further if the company he represents has a track record of successful projects and products that work; useful literature and design information and tools; design support; strong integrator partners; and a collaborative attitude.

That's a company and a representative you can work with.

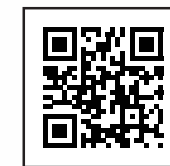


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