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# Engaging the A&D Community Pays Dividends

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Today, luxury plumbing showroom traffic has slowed to almost 50 percent of pre-July 2009 levels. So how do good luxury showrooms consistently produce great sales results?

Throughout my career, I’ve seen many different kinds of showrooms experience success. As a showroom consultant, I’ve come to understand how two people at desks 10 feet apart could have such different results in the same showroom.

It always seemed that it was the same competitor across town that was showing up on project specifications. These occurrences are not a coincidence, and below is what I have observed from great showroom consultants.

First, the showroom needs to be partnered with the right manufacturers that are taking the hard steps to ensure that all sales originated in their showroom stay in their showroom. Showrooms need to be selective regarding products they display.

Since 2009, due to changes in the market, it appears that many manufacturers have shifted from selective distribution to a commodity distribution model or mindset. The Internet can cause issues as well. These are big, scary scenarios that could cause showroom consultants to sit on the sideline and circle the wagon while trying to protect their project.

However, doing business that way will not produce great results. Showrooms partnering with the right manufacturers who have taken the steps to address and solve these issues still need to take action to produce great results. A key element for consistent growth with the value-added showroom consultant is asking questions that lead to business beyond the current project.

For example, let’s say Mrs. Jones’ project is $30,000 and will happen sometime in the next six months. I have observed consultants ask Jones to name their plumber, contractor, designer and architect. This typically leads to two or three names. These talented consultants often tell Jones that they want to open lines of communication, provide needed specifications and help side step construction and/or other design issues.

A plumbing showroom manager in Highland Park, IL, told me that one well-done project typically leads to opportunities for three or four additional projects that the plumber, architect and designer will do in the upcoming months. In comparison to the Jones’ example, the Highland Park showroom made sure a $30,000 order went smoothly, and it led to around 10 projects with a projected $250,000 plus sales volume.

Great showroom consultants also direct trusted reps to call on their project’s plumber, designer and architect to serve these professionals. From personal experience, reps love these opportunities.

Another trend in the Chicago, IL area has been the big remodel/design consumer, who remains active regardless of the economy. These clients engage luxury showrooms before they hire an architect or designer to get cutting-edge design, technology and – more importantly – bigger bang for their buck.

This trend gives showrooms more power and allows them to help shape projects with the best-suited products. Showroom consultants should rejoice that projects are starting in their showroom and take the appropriate steps to communicate early with the other players in the project. This consumer typically takes their project to the designer or architect and has the product selections plugged into the project plan.

For example, a design build firm in Chicago recently completed a Clive Christian-style bathroom with greater customized options and substantial savings utilizing a U.S. manufacturer out of Canton, GA. First, the manufacturer did not sell to the design build firm directly; rather it opted to support a trusted displaying dealer, thus doing what it could do to keep the order at the specifying showroom.

The showroom consultant requested door and finish samples to be sent to the homeowner and communication throughout the process included the homeowner’s input. Even doing this as a three-step project, the homeowner secured greater quality and saved thousands of dollars.

Other factors that assist great showroom consultants are manufacturers that define themselves and advertise. The consumer typically researches by surfing magazines or Web sites for trends. One designer I talked with reminded me that everyone likes to make their own bread. If one does not have time, one uses a professional. It’s certainly true that it’s easier than ever to obtain product information, and this empowers the consumer. Even so, the showroom consultant needs to hug every project’s plumber, designer and architect (add value to consumer’s project) as this will lead to further sales opportunities.

**COLLABORATION FOR DESIGN PROS**

Another interesting and upcoming notable trend is the collaboration with design professionals integrated into the luxury showroom staff.

A plumbing showroom in Atlanta, GA is currently opening a beautiful new showroom. They are aggressively advertising and going the extra mile to reach out and engage the design community. They recently hired a registered interior designer and the current president of the National Kitchen & Bath Association (NKBA) Georgia Chapter to supplement a talented existing luxury-minded showroom staff.

This person may be considered overqualified based on pre-2009 definitions; however, today her skill set represents the key to health for all showroom salespeople. This showroom is also looking to partner with and display the up-and-coming luxury lines they perceive to enhance 2011 and beyond for the architect and the design community in Atlanta, as well as nationally.

For example, they opted to partner with a custom hand crafted plumbing manufacturer out of Brooklyn, NY. This manufacturer has an incredible YouTube video factory tour and production story. This tool emphasizes “crafted in the U.S.,” but also emphasizes the melting pot nature of the artisans working in Brooklyn each day. Pride in U.S. manufacturing, ingenuity and collaboration as well as a variety of products add bold value beyond water simply coming from a fixture. It doesn’t hurt that the manufacturer is engaging the design community and is setting the new standard for keeping business where it was specified.

It’s important to reach out to the design community and to partner with manufacturers who provide the showroom consultant high-quality products with meaningful support, including advertising, selective distribution and additional tools that define their company and excite the consumer in their search to make their project perfect. These steps help to ease consultant fears about providing information for a job that they may or may not get.

With the rep, showroom and manufacturer engaging the architect and design community as one, sales consistency and production has proven to follow.

 Greg Libbey grew up in a Midwestern family plumbing business and has been in this industry for more than 30 years. After graduation from UW-Madison in Wisconsin in 1987 with a BA, Libbey has worn the hat of an installer, showroom consultant, showroom manager and manufacturer’s representative in addition to his newest endeavor of developing national programs with Watermark Designs.