

Guide to Specification Selling

Executive Summary	1
Why Specification Sell	2
What is a Specification?	2
Market Dynamics	4
Customer Dynamics	5
Product Categories	6
The Decision Making Unit	7
Influencers and Specifiers	9
Specification Sales Tools	11
Switching Specifications	12
Recruiting a Specification Salesman	14

Executive Summary

Specification selling provides a means of reducing the influence of price by creating product awareness and demand. It is particularly important in supporting added value products. All of the decision makers in the project team must be identified, their needs and influences understood and inter-relationships monitored throughout the life of a project.

It is not just the architect who is a specifier. Increasingly, other members of the project team specify – from client to sub-contractor. It is necessary to understand the different types of specification, who is responsible for writing these, and how they are influenced. Influence is determined by many factors; type of client, project, product and the stage the project has reached.

Market dynamics are increasingly influencing product specification, introducing new factors for consideration when selecting products such as ease of installation, lifetime cost and sustainability.

Specification switching is an issue where it is both necessary to defend existing specifications as well as taking the opportunity to change your competitor's. An understanding of the issues and influences is important both in the role of poacher and gamekeeper.

A variety of tools are available to sell-in specifications; sales leads, seminars and technical advice as well as the more obvious literature and samples. All need to be used effectively to achieve maximum benefit.

The skills to achieve this are varied and not surprisingly good specification salesmen are hard to find. As well as technical knowledge they need to demonstrate interpersonal skills and self management. Finding such a person is not easy, and developing people from within the organisation can often be the most effective solution.

Guide to Specification Selling

Why Specification Sell?

In the construction sector specification selling offers an alternative to selling purely on price. It allows companies to charge a premium based on product performance, benefits and reputation.

Demand pull through creating awareness and explaining the benefits of products and services to specifiers stimulates a desire for these features, reducing the importance of price and making alternatives less attractive.

While price will always be a factor, it is not the only influence. By working with specifiers to introduce products to them with the aim of creating awareness and desire, we encourage a climate of demand pull with customers who recognise benefits and are less prepared to accept a lower cost alternative, helping to maintain or improve the business' profitability.

Involvement throughout the channel (Influencer, Client, Designer, Contractor, Distributor) leads to an informed understanding of what is happening with a project, at each stage. Each player in the channel has his own agenda and perception of the situation. By building relationships throughout the channel it is possible to gain accurate knowledge of the true situation at each level, to influence the outcome and to identify and exploit further opportunities.

By maintaining a dialogue with decision makers at each stage of the project we gain understanding of the quantities of each product type required on the project. We will also learn of any changes to the work programme that could advance, or delay the delivery date for our materials. This information helps the company to accurately anticipate demand, manage manufacturing, identify opportunities for other products in the range and hence provide a better service to customers.

Through relationships with specifiers we can identify new influences such as changes in legislation, product applications or even size or colour at an early stage. This information can be used by the company to create product enhancements or new developments to respond to these trends.

This can develop as a reciprocal arrangement as specifiers will also be interested in the company's views and advice concerning legislation and product developments.

What is a Specification?

"A detailed description of the construction, workmanship, materials, etc., of work done or to be done, prepared by an architect, engineer, etc."

Oxford English Dictionary

A specification is used to give a clear written indication to the contractor of which items are required and how they are to be installed.

Prescriptive: In this ideal situation, a specific manufacturer's product is nominated by name. It has the benefit that the specifier knows precisely what he will be getting and has clear reasons for being so specific. It is generally used when a product is unique or has special characteristics required for the project. Reasons could also be that the product has been specially tested or developed for a project, that there is a desire for consistency with previous or future projects or that special supply arrangements have been negotiated with the manufacturer. The author of the specification will be liable should a performance failure occur with the specified product. He will also have to justify his decision should it lead to delays on site due to availability problems.

There has to be a good reason for an architect to use a prescriptive specification as in doing so he risks delaying the project should there be any problem with availability. Frequency of use will depend on the type of project and type of product, usually it is reserved for unique products or those with very special performance or aesthetic characteristics. One reason for a prescriptive specification is because it is linked to planning approval.

It should be noted that under EU legislation the public sector are not allowed to use prescriptive specifications.

Performance or Descriptive: Here the specifier defines the design intent and performance requirement leaving the contractor to use his expertise to select a product. Should a problem occur the contractor carries the liability for failure. This approach is often used with Design & Build projects, where the product is perceived as generic or where there is a specialist requirement which the sub-contractor will be required to interpret.

There is a danger with performance specifications that the specifier will select the best features from a number of products he is familiar with, creating a specification which is impossible to achieve.

On occasions, a specifier will intentionally use a performance specification which describes a particular product to overcome restrictions on the use of a nominated product.

Equal or Approved: The most common form of specification is "Equal or Approved". It is similar to prescriptive, as a product is named, but the choice is extended by adding the caveat "Equal or Approved" meaning that it is acceptable to use an alternative product with the same characteristics if it is approved by the specifier. For the specifier it is a convenient way of saying "I want that product or something like it."

Sometimes a list of acceptable products will be provided. However it is very difficult to define what is equal. If the product has been made in a different factory can it be considered the same? Many contractors consider "Equal or Approved" to be an open specification, which they can easily switch.

Guide to Specification Selling

Recently “Equal or Approved” has started to be replaced with “Equal or Equivalent” as this transfers the liability for changing the product from the architect to the sub-contractor.

Very often specifications are presented in a standard format. In the UK the most commonly used are CAWS (Common Arrangement Works Specifications). These are available on a proprietary basis via organisations like NBS (National Building Specifications).

Best practice requires the specifier to either give explicit instructions, or if he has confidence in the contractor, to define the performance requirements. Equal or Approved is an easy option for the specifier which may lead to an unsatisfactory situation for the client.

There is a tendency for specifiers to recycle specifications from previous projects as they know it works and it saves time researching new products or writing specifications. If the specification is old, or the specifier unfamiliar with the product there is a risk that an out of date specification will be used. This provides an opportunity for the salesman to work with the specifier to help ensure an effective specification.

Market Dynamics

The decision to specify a product is based on many factors, some of them conflicting. The overriding concern is that it is fit for purpose, performing its role effectively and throughout the design life of the building.

Legislation is also an important factor. In the past this has been directed principally by the Building Regulations, and planning requirements. A further factor, which is becoming increasingly important is sustainability. Although this is incorporated in both Building Regulations and planning policy statements, it is also having an impact through other vehicles such as BRE's Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM), the Code for Sustainable Homes and the Energy Performance Certificate.

In the housing sector there are government initiatives to reduce construction costs and increase output. Principally driven through social housing, Modern Methods of Construction (MMC) involve a series of less traditional construction methods including off-site manufacture. Although principally in the public housing sector they are not restricted to this and have been used in sectors such as retail, hotel and leisure for many years.

The contractor will also have an influence on the specification. The extent of this will depend on the type of project (PFI, Design & Build, Management or Traditional). In the case of Design & Build or PFI the contractor is responsible for developing specifications and selecting products. He may have an in-house team to undertake this but in many instances the architect will be employed by the contractor selecting products based on factors of importance to the contractor. These include speed of installation, ease of maintenance and lowest cost.

Guide to Specification Selling

Logistical efficiency is also driving product selection as clients and contractors seek new ways to take cost out of the construction process. This has led to the formation of supplier partnerships, which can restrict the choice of products available to the specifier.

All of these factors place restrictions on product selection, but also represent an opportunity for the manufacturer who is informed about new developments and practices and can adapt his products and strategies to service these new requirements.

An emerging new trend, which has still to impact upon specification, is the practice of off-shoring. Larger international design practices are starting to recognise the benefit of using lower cost workers in some of their overseas offices to undertake the more mundane tasks. Leading this trend amongst clients is Tesco who now use architects and quantity surveyors based in India to work on the early stages of projects.

The advantage of this approach is that it reduces costs and the time difference means that decisions made at the end of the working day in the UK have been implemented by the following morning. As this trend develops specification sales activity may have to take place in one country to achieve benefits in another.

Customer Dynamics

In construction the end customer, or client, will have varying levels of influence on product selection. This can be grouped into five broad categories.

Large property portfolio client: It is in the best interest of a client who has a large number of properties which he is operating (e.g. Retailer, Hotels, Restaurants, major Landlords) to have a high level of involvement in the selection of building products, perhaps employing his own in-house architects. These clients wish to ensure that the products selected will project the right image for their company and meet their safety and performance standards, which may be higher than national standards. They will insist on prescriptive specifications for products which might impact upon the operation of their business.

Although not quite the same, PFI projects can be considered in a similar manner, with the PFI contractor, not the end client, taking a close interest in the selection of products which best meet their needs. However, products will be selected using a different set of criteria.

Property developer: Both commercial and residential property development involves companies who commission many projects. They build speculative developments to sell-on (residential) or rent (commercial).

These organisations understand construction, have in-house expertise and work closely with independent specifiers and contractors to develop properties

Guide to Specification Selling

which are marketable. They will often employ the same team on all of their projects and with Commercial projects this will probably be on a Design & Build contract.

Performance requirements will differ from the large portfolio client as the tenant will often make a number of decisions about fit-out.

One-off client: He does not have an extensive property portfolio and consequently does not have any in-house expertise to call upon. When he has a requirement to construct facilities he will employ external expertise.

Usually a Traditional contract, the external design team will develop a brief which will take into account the performance needs and aesthetic requirements of the client. Product specification will rest with the design team, working with the contractor.

Refurbishment: Refurbishment will be required by all of the above categories. Assuming there is to be limited structural changes, product selection may become the responsibility of a Building or Quantity Surveyor working in the capacity of project manager or of a specialist fit-out contractor. The client will probably be involved in aesthetic choices, and if a major image change is taking place, design consultants will be involved.

Product Categories

In terms of specification, products fall into three broad categories; Tight Specification, Specification Influenced and Commodity.

Where **tight specifications** can be achieved, success in securing the business is driven by the following factors;

- The complexity of the specification makes it harder to find alternative products which are acceptable to the specifier.
- The product has been carefully selected for its look or performance by the specifier.
- In developing the specification it will have been necessary to provide good technical support, either from the technical advisory service, or the technical salesman. This may have been a joint approach by manufacturer and contractor.
- Having written a specification it will be necessary to ensure that the different products required are available for installation on time. The manufacturer will have to project manage the contractor's requirements against product availability from the factory.
- Very often there will be changes on site, which will affect both the quantities of product required and the build programme. To be successful a manufacturer must be flexible with supply to ensure that this does not cause problems for the contractor.
- Clients will want to be confident that the contractor understands how to install products correctly. This requires a close relationship between

Guide to Specification Selling

manufacturer and contractor with provision of training and may even require the manufacturer to underwrite the contractor's work.

- Finally, with a high value installation the specifier will want to be confident of ongoing product availability. This is required both to replace damaged items and to allow for future development of a building.

If all of these criteria are met there is a high probability that a specification can be converted to an order.

Where there is a technical requirement but a choice of similar product alternatives exist (**Specification Influenced**), success in securing the business is driven by different factors;

- Pricing becomes more important although a small premium can be justified if there are superior products or service benefits on offer.
- Specifiers will require good levels of product information including access to samples.
- Products will be required to offer good overall quality and durability, often supported with proof in the form of a BBA Certificate or independent test report.
- Ease of installation will be important as it reduces the need for a contractor with specialist skills.
- Products must be readily available, if not, an alternative will be used.
- Successful products will quickly be copied, commoditising them unless unique features can be retained and demonstrated. Product innovation is thus necessary to maintain an element of differentiation.

The chance of a specification becoming an order is very much lower in the **commodity** segment. Matters are simplified, as products are perceived as similar and they are selected on low price and good availability. There is little point in specification selling this type of product. However it could be linked to a system or tied into a purchase agreement for other specified products when negotiating with a contractor who has supplier partnerships in place.

It is important to recognise the category the product is in before committing effort to specification selling. If the category is influenced by specification it is worth committing effort, but if it is commodity driven then minimal effort should be invested.

Very often, the stronger the influence of the specification, the higher the product value. This is partly due to the level of competition and available alternatives. As competition lessens, it allows prices to increase, reflecting the high costs of developing and manufacturing customised product solutions – including the cost of providing technical advice and support via specification selling.

The Decision Making Unit

The construction sector's Decision Making Unit (DMU) is far more complex than many business to business markets. This is because the team

Guide to Specification Selling

responsible for designing, selecting, purchasing and installing products is formed for a single project and then disbanded.

To further complicate matters, the nature of the relationship between the members of the project team will depend on the type of contract used (Traditional, Design & Build, Management, PFI or Prime Contracting).

To effectively specification sell it is necessary to understand the type of contract being used and then identify the organisations in the project team. These will comprise Client, Architect, Engineer, Quantity Surveyor, Main Contractor, Sub-contractor. There may be other members of the team such as a Building Surveyor, Acoustic Engineer, Interior Designer or Landscape Architect. There may also be multiple organisations, for example one Architect's practice may be responsible for taking the project to outline planning approval, another will be responsible for detailed design.

The decision making process goes through five key stages. First of these is when the client defines the brief for his building. This will be based on his functional needs and will probably include some aesthetic and performance requirements. Although not directly selecting products this stage can have a significant influence on the products used. Those clients with a large portfolio of buildings may also define specific products.

The second stage will involve specialist consultants responsible for areas such as fire, acoustics, security and sustainability. They will define the performance requirements for their area of interest, but at this stage will not nominate products.

Next is the architect who will be responsible for taking the client's brief and combining it with the advice of the consultants to develop the building's design. At this time he may take advice from consultant and contractor on detailed aspects of design and possibly product selection. Working with the architect will be engineers responsible for structural, mechanical and electrical design.

The fourth stage involves the main contractor who may be responsible for product selection. He will also indirectly influence the product selection process by appointing the specialist sub-contractors.

The final stage is the appointment of the sub-contractor. Depending on the nature of the architect's specification he may be responsible for making the final decision concerning product selection. He will be influenced by availability and price, trying to achieve cost savings within the scope of the specification.

A developing sector is off-site manufacture. This involves the assembly of large building elements or modules in a factory environment for delivery to site. Costs are reduced through standardisation and efficiency which could also influence product selection. The off-site manufacture will usually be responsible for product selection.

Guide to Specification Selling

Each organisation may also have a number of decision makers and influencers:

- Within the Architects practice a Partner may be overseeing the project and making policy decisions, while an Architectural Technician could be responsible for detailing and product selection.
- Within a Sub-contractor the Estimator will make initial product selection when putting together a proposal, once the work is secured the Project Manager will influence the choice of product used.

As organisations have become larger they have tended to broaden their expertise, employing other specialists. A large Architect's practice may employ structural engineers and a PFI contractor will employ architects. It is thus important to differentiate between the role of the employing organisation and the employee. Then it is necessary to understand who within each organisation has an interest and responsibility for your products. It is also necessary to understand the strength of influence and the interplay between the different team members. Some will claim to have more authority than they do. As a general rule it is very rare for a single individual (except the Client) to have the power to force through a selected product. However many individuals in the project team will have the power of veto.

It is paramount to recognise that an individual's influence will change as the project progresses. For example, at the start of a project the architect may select certain final-fit products (e.g. sanitary ware, door furniture, ceiling tiles). These products may have been selected because they meet all of the client's requirements and the architect has every intention of keeping to the specification. As the project progresses there may be cost over-runs and as final-fit approaches there is a need to make cost savings. At this point a sub-contractor may suggest alternative products, which although a compromise, would constitute a cost saving. No matter how committed the architect is to his original specification, his influence may now be superseded by the sub-contractor and the product specification changed.

The role of the Specification Salesman is to understand this interplay of influence and monitor the status for each product as the project progresses. He must ensure that everyone in the project team is happy for his product to be used. He needs to identify objections and concerns, understand and overcome them. His job is only complete when the products are installed on site (and paid for).

Influencers and Specifiers

Influencers are principally those working on behalf of local government to ensure buildings are constructed to meet legislation. They include Planning Officers, Building Control Officers and Fire Officers. In addition, there are commercial organisations such as Insurance Companies that will influence the specification and Sustainability Consultants who may be advising the client or architect.

Guide to Specification Selling

While not directly involved in product selection they have a very strong power of veto and can prevent products from being used. In some instances, for example planning approval, the process of changing an already approved product is expensive and will be avoided if at all possible, protecting a specification.

It is important to ensure that influencers are informed about a company's products and their approvals. If they are not satisfied they can refuse to accept a specification. This process is particularly important with new products when it is necessary to inform all of the influencers about the product and demonstrate how it meets the regulations.

Influencers will try to work in the best interests of their organisation. Those employed by local government will not promote specific products or companies. However they are busy people and if there is information available explaining issues which they can refer specifiers or contractors to then they may do so.

The obvious **specifiers** work in professional practices as Architect, Interior Designer, Engineer, Building Surveyor or Quantity Surveyor. Some or all of these people may be involved in a project depending on its nature and complexity. They can also be employed within the Client, Main Contractor or Sub-contractor organisations. For example, an architect may be employed by a Client or a quantity surveyor employed by a Contractor.

Research shows that different type of people have different behavioural styles and like to receive information in different ways. Although a generalisation, it is fair to assume that because of the nature of their work Architect and Interior Designer have a creative approach and prefer information to be presented with pictures and illustrations. Engineers and Quantity Surveyor have a much more logical approach and prefer to receive information supported by data and evidence. It is important to appreciate this when presenting information on websites, as literature or seminars.

Their selection criteria will also depend on who they have been commissioned by. An architect working on a Traditional form of contract will be employed by the client and make selections based on criteria which he considers to be in the best interests of the client (image, durability, lifetime costs). The same architect working on a Design & Build contract will be employed by the contractor and make decisions in his best interest (price, ease of installation). Depending on the circumstances different products could be selected for a similar project.

Most specifiers have to be generalists with a broad knowledge about the complete construction process. The constant revision and introduction of new legislation makes this role increasingly complex. As a consequence they rely on manufacturers to give them advice on product selection and design so that they can meet new legislation.

Guide to Specification Selling

The specifier wants an ongoing relationship and having started to build that relationship with someone who can be relied on, with sound technical knowledge and a comprehensive range of products, he will turn to him for advice on all projects, big and small. The reward is that once established, the Specification Salesman can expect to be involved in each new project.

Specifiers are generally receptive to new products but they often lack the time to fully evaluate them. They tend to stay with solutions they have used successfully in the past or draw on colleagues' experience recycling past specifications. This is partly due to lack of time but also because their practice will win work based on previous projects and their brief will be to create similar designs.

There is no doubt that the internet is now the principal form of communication, delivering vast amounts of information at the click of a mouse. Not surprisingly, Google is the principal route to obtaining information, even if a web site address is known. Product data is available from a number of online directories and many Google enquiries will land on these.

We are also seeing the development of a number of online journals and web sites. Expect to see an expansion of web services. Online CPD, webinars and virtual exhibitions are all starting to be adopted although in a small way at present.

Although regular magazine readership is declining, it is still an important source of ideas and information for specifiers, especially project stories and technical articles.

CPD is probably one of the most effective means of building relationships with architects. When well delivered it gives credibility to the presenter, the company and its products.

Because of this vast array of on-demand information, if a specifier does request technical advice or a meeting it is likely that he has already selected your product and his enquiry should be treated as a buying signal.

The **Main Contractor** and **Sub-contractor** have become increasingly important as specifiers. With the development of Design & Build, Management Contracting and PFI they have started to take the lead in design. Even with Traditional contracts they still play a role in specification.

The main contractor will guide product selection in terms of product suitability, speed of installation and ease of maintenance as well as the more obvious issue of price.

At design stage the architect may take advice from specialist sub-contractors and in Management Contracting and PFI the sub-contractor may be responsible for designing the complete installation.

Specification Sales Tools

Sales leads detailing the stages of a project from outline planning approval to completion are an important sales tool. However they tend to be underused by many companies. Typically an organisation will receive details of a new project and immediately contact the specifier. Often the timing is wrong and the specifier is not ready to discuss that particular product. More critical is the fact that most of the companies subscribing to such services will be making contact at the same time. Consequently the specifier will be inundated and will not be receptive to calls.

Project data can be used more effectively to segment the market and identify those specifiers regularly working on the type of project of interest to the company. These should then be targeted for relationship building. If this has been done effectively the sales lead notifying a new project will merely confirm what is already known.

In a similar way project data can be used to build a picture of relationships between Client, Architect and Contractor indicating which companies tend to work together.

CPD seminars are an effective tool for creating a new relationship or enhancing an existing one with a practice. Most professionals are required to complete 35 hours of CPD (Continuing Professional Development) each year. CPD approved technical seminars, held at the practice over lunch, are an effective method of achieving this. Seminars should have good impartial technical content and be approved by one of the certification bodies. If well delivered they provide the Specification Salesman with an opportunity to present himself as an expert on his subject and encourage enquiries from multiple contacts in the practice.

Technical advice is the key reason for a specifier to have a relationship with a manufacturer. If the manufacturer has an in-house advice service this will encourage enquiries and build the manufacturer's reputation. Often enquiries received can give early notification of a new project and a common failing is for the technical advisors to answer enquiries without establishing what other product opportunities exist or even failing to gather details of the project. Each enquiry needs to be turned into a hot sales lead for further development by the Specification Salesman.

Samples represent another important sales tool. A request for a sample is an indication that the product is being considered for a project. A second request may mean that it is being put forward for approval. Supporting specifiers with samples is an opportunity to build the relationship as well as following up a potential sale. The relationship can be further developed by offering to visit practices to review and update samples, removing any that are out of date or surplus to requirements. Such a visit will also provide a valuable insight into the competitor products being considered by the specifier.

Guide to Specification Selling

Standard **specification clauses** provide a means of saving the specifier time and ensuring that a product is correctly described. With thought these can also be written to minimise the opportunity for specifications to be switched. Companies can create their own clauses, or work with organisations like NBS who will promote product specifications as part of their service to specifiers.

Specification Switching

Specification switching occurs when the product originally specified is changed for an alternative. It usually takes place once a contractor has been appointed. It is a double-edged sword. When creating product specifications they need to be protected, however it also provides an opportunity to generate sales with a shorter sales cycle. Companies can be involved in both aspects, but their products usually suit either original specification or specification switching.

There are several reasons for switching a specification. A specifier may choose to change the specification if he is subsequently introduced to what he considers (or is persuaded) is a superior alternative or because of lack of technical support and increasingly because of sustainability issues.

Sub-contractors may offer alternative products when bidding to lower their bid price and secure the project. In these circumstances costs may be reduced because the alternative product is cheaper or because it can be easily installed. Sometimes a sub-contractor will propose an alternative product because of the strength of the relationship he enjoys with the manufacturer.

Working closely with sub-contractors can help to reduce the incidence of your product specifications being changed and identify opportunities to switch your competitors' specifications.

If a "Nominated" or "Equal or Approved" specification, any change will usually have to be approved by the original specifier and it is important to understand the type of contract and who has the strongest influence at the time. If this is fully understood it may be possible to protect a specification.

A common reason for specification change is poor availability of the specified product. A sub-contractor can usually get quick approval for a change if this will avoid a delay to the build programme. The specification salesman needs to monitor this closely and demonstrate (or ensure) that product is available.

As a project progresses there are often cost over-runs. The project team will then be looking for opportunities for cost savings. Products at the final fit stage are particularly vulnerable to specification switching or degrading. In this situation the best a specification salesman can do is to propose a lower cost alternative from his own range.

Unacknowledged changes can also occur. This is particularly common in house building where the developer may have a partnership arrangement with a manufacturer, but sub-contractors are not adhering to it. It is then necessary

Guide to Specification Selling

to regularly visit sites to monitor product usage and work with both developer and sub-contractor to prevent this.

A factor influencing a contractor's attitude to unacknowledged specification changes is the unit cost of the product and the ease of correction. If it is relatively easy for the contractor to rectify an unauthorised change, should it be detected, he is more likely to take a risk. Conversely if the product is built into the structure and the cost of rectification is more than the value of the product then he is less likely to make the change.

Recruiting a Specification Salesman

Many Specification Salesmen start their career in non-sales roles and progress into sales. They might start in an architect's practice, working with a contractor or in a technical department with a manufacturer. This early experience gives them relevant technical and industry knowledge, which they can use to good effect when selling.

The specification sales role is one of business development first, selling second. The specifier will be looking for advice and support, and will involve the Specification Salesman if he can provide timely and accurate information.

Yet to be successful he, or she, must also understand the relationships within the project team. They should know who the decision makers are and be able to influence decisions.

There are a variety of skills required in a Specification Salesman, many of which can be developed with training. Skills can be grouped into three broad categories; Interpersonal, Self-management and Technical Knowledge.

People buy from people and a salesman has to be able to create a strong relationship with his customers. Most important he needs to have **credibility**, which is achieved through demonstrating **honesty** and **reliability**, to secure **trust**.

Fact finding using **questioning** and **listening** skills to identify opportunities is important. With a complex project it is necessary to identify the issues that will influence product selection for the client, designer and contractor and present only the product features which represent real benefits. The Specification Salesman must be able to **influence** by identifying doubts and concerns and addressing these to overcome objections.

To present these benefits effectively requires good **communication** skills, both on a one-to-one basis and in group presentations (i.e. a technical seminar). The ability to **present** effectively contributes to the customer's perception of credibility. Very often **enthusiasm** for the product and its benefits will reinforce this.

Finally the Specification Salesman must have the ability to **recognise buying signals** and achieve the specification (**close the sale**).

Unlike an office-based role a sales role can be lonely and difficult; to succeed the salesman needs to be **self-motivated**. A bad day on your own suffering a series of knock-backs is very difficult. **Perseverance** (and good support from the company) is needed to maintain the drive and enthusiasm to continue.

Commercial awareness is another skill required. This is necessary to ensure that unrealistic promises are not made, and that the company's opportunities for profit are maximised.

The Specification Salesman must be able to **manage time** effectively, recognising the priorities and focusing effort where it will give the best return. Although demonstrating perseverance it is also important to **recognise lost causes** and move onto better opportunities.

Specification selling is a complex process and can take 18 months or more to progress from initial enquiry to order. There is a need to **monitor** and **follow-up** projects regularly over that time and with many projects running in parallel there is a lot of information to process. This requires strong **organisational skills** and as contact management or CRM systems are increasingly used, good **IT skills**.

IT skills must include the ability to create and present PowerPoint presentations, as well as managing email and the company's other reporting processes in a timely way.

Although a good Specification Salesman will have an impressive list of projects secured, he will also have lost some projects. Often for reasons beyond his control. If he is good he will have learnt from the experience of losing projects, using this to improve his performance. When recruiting ask for examples of projects lost, why they were lost and what was learnt from the experience.

Specifiers want technical advice and will only deal with a salesman who can provide it. Good **product knowledge** is thus a very important sales skill. Of almost equal importance is an **understanding of the construction industry**, including contractual relationships, the roles of the different members of the construction team and knowledge of the legislation.

If a Specification Salesman is to effectively deal with objections and present strong benefits they also need to **know about their competitors'** products, their strengths and weaknesses. But demonstrate professionalism by not openly criticising competitors in front of customers.

When recruiting an established Specification Salesman you will expect him to have a **network of specifier contacts**. Be aware that if he has been working with a different category of product these contacts may not be relevant to your company.

Guide to Specification Selling

Recruiting someone with all of these skills will not be easy. Candidates should be asked to provide examples of projects secured, volume of product, profitability, who they dealt with and the tactics used to secure projects.

There is still a leap of faith to be made in recruiting and because of the long duration of a project poor selection may take time to become apparent.

One way to identify suitable candidates is to ask architects or contractors if they can suggest any good Specification Salesman that they deal with from other manufacturers. These can then be headhunted.

Alternatively, consider taking an existing employee and developing them into a Specification Sales role. In this way you have someone who's technical, interpersonal and self-management skills are already known. Developing their skills will often carry less risk and cost less than external recruitment.

About the Author

Chris Ashworth is a Chartered Marketer and a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing. He is founder of Competitive Advantage Consultancy Ltd and has more than thirty years experience in the construction industry working with blue chip manufacturers in sales and marketing roles. He has formed and managed specification sales teams promoting premium products for a number of companies.

Chris delivers training programmes on marketing and sales issues in the construction industry. He has worked as an Associate Lecturer at Oxford Brookes University and is a member of the organising committee of the Chartered Institute of Marketing Construction Industry Group. He is a regular contributor to industry journals such as Construction News, Building and RIBA Insight Bulletin.

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About Competitive Advantage Consultancy Limited

Founded in 1999, Competitive Advantage specialises in providing sales and marketing support to the construction industry. Services include developing and implementing strategy, market research and training. The team can deliver complete projects or work within a client's organisation supporting their existing team.

Web site: www.cadvantage.co.uk

Competitive Advantage offers a number of sales training courses including:

- [Construction Industry Overview](#)
- [Construction Industry Sales Skills](#)
- [Effective Specification Selling](#)
- [Marketing in the Construction Industry](#)
- [Key Account Management](#)
- [Marketing Building Products into a Sustainable Market](#)
- [Customer Service Energiser](#)
- [Effective Telemarketing](#)
- [Effective Presentation Skills](#)
- [Delivering CPD Seminars](#)
- [Effective Merchandising of Building Products](#)

Open training courses are held in collaboration with the Building Centre, see <http://www.cadvantage.co.uk/CategoryTemplate.aspx?catID=2>