

At Your Service

by Beth S. Pollak

When purchasing structural shapes for a project, steel service centers can be a good place to start.

Service centers purchase steel in bulk from mills and stock it in a wide range of shapes and sizes. Specific members and sizes usually are available with little to no waiting time, and in smaller quantities than typical mill purchase sizes.

"Jobs for service centers fall into two categories," said Jim Collins, vice president of sales and marketing for AISC-member service center Metals USA. "We'll either support a customer's entire project, with our shipment married to their fabrication strategy, or we'll fill unplanned events and spot requirements. We serve either a whole-job or a band-aid function."

Steel service centers offer an extensive inventory, and can deliver steel with value-added services, like cambering, splitting, plate-burning and cutting.

"We carry the whole wide-flange beam range and heavy structural tubing, as well as merchant bars, channels, angles, plates," said John Lusdyk, Southern Region president of AISC-member service center Infra-Metals, Co. "We offer a variety of stock lengths, but if a fabricator wants us to cut the steel to specific lengths, we provide that service."

Some service centers also offer project management services. "Sometimes our customers prefer that we manage all material on the job," Collins said. "Instead of them putting someone in charge of inventory control, they let us do the inventory control and feeding of the project."

Service centers can be a cost-effective solution for fabricators looking for specific sizes and quantities. "If you buy from a mill, sometimes in order to get the best prices, you have to buy to the nearest bundle," Lusdyk said. "At our center, we deliver the exact piece count, we don't ship until the customer needs it, and we won't invoice it until we ship it. They get exactly what they need when need it, and don't tie up their shop with inventory. This frees up capital for the fabricator."

Collins says that a majority of the structural steel consumed in North America comes from service centers. "There's a constant flow of steel—for every ton that goes out of the service center, a ton comes in. Some items move 12 times a year, some only once. It's not uncommon to have thousands of line items, some that are unique, and some common."

Lusdyk says Infra-Metals locations usually operate 24 hours a day. "Even in tight markets, we tend to have the inventory, and we could have as much as 30,000 tons coming in and out per month."

Many steel mills also have stock quantity on the ground, and can supply particular shapes for instantaneous delivery. Both mills and service centers supply fabricators, other service centers, and ship and bridge builders. Many companies have integrated computer systems to keep track of their purchasing, inventory, turnover, processing and accounting. "We have a cut list from the fabricator that we put through the computer for nesting, to get the minimum amount of waste," Lusdyk said. "We want to charge them for the least amount of scrap and give them the best price."

Collins says that service centers near areas with taller buildings tend to handle more heavy sections and jumbo sizes, and those near areas where buildings are four stories and below tend to handle smaller sizes. Unusual sizes are often available, but sometimes substitution for a different shape or size is a better solution. "There are many solutions on a steel-framed project," he said. "The service center community needs to ask the right questions. Usually, we have answers for every question." ★



Steel service centers, such as Infra-Metals in Baltimore, carry a range of shapes for both large and small projects.