

Selling Quality

BY BRIAN W. MILLER

Sales and estimating excellence: homegrown in your AISC Certified quality management system!

WORK BACKLOGS HAVE SHRUNK drastically for many firms as a result of the recent economic downturn. You may find that your firm, like many fabricators and erectors, is looking to increase prospecting and sales activity to secure work.

When times are lean as they are now, your company's regular sales and estimating force will need additional support. Opportunities are fewer in number and securing work from the projects that are available requires greater effort and skill. It's critical that sales representatives use estimating resources to the maximum result.

Of course, increasing sales and estimating efforts quickly is a tough challenge for management. Hiring additional staff in a downturn adds overhead cost at a time when being lean is important to your ability to offer the best pricing possible. It is also not easy to identify and hire individuals qualified to do this work without training. A new hire with strong sales experience will still need time and training to get to know your company's market focus and customer base, and be able to represent your firm effectively.

Looking Within

So how can you quickly ramp up sales and estimating effort and effectiveness? A team approach using current employees who support your company's AISC Certified quality management system may be the answer. The folks who maintain the day-to-day focus and discipline needed to understand and consistently meet your customer's requirements are a deep and rich pool of talent waiting to be tapped. Although initially perhaps obvious, a closer look will show that many of these individuals possess the skills and enthusiasm needed to be effective in sales and estimating.

Quality-focused individuals are goal-oriented, creative problem-solvers likely to welcome the challenge of a cross-functional assignment in the face of a shrinking work load. They have been a large part of the success your company has achieved to date and will likely be eager to pitch in and continue the progress. The skills that individuals gain supporting AISC Certified quality align very well with the skills and expertise needed for effective sales and estimating, skills such as being:

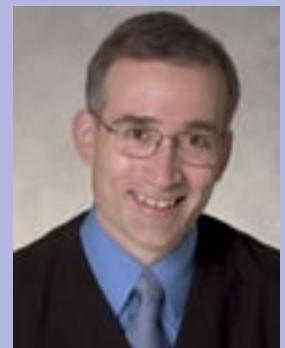
Customer-focused. A commitment to understand and consistently meet customer requirements is fundamental to AISC Certified quality management. This focus provides individuals involved in quality management with regular

practice in observing and evaluating what customers value and what they find objectionable. Quality-focused individuals who interact with your customers—from project managers to accounting representatives to delivery truck drivers—are key candidates for providing additional support to sales and estimating.

Management-driven. In an AISC Certified company, management drives communication and commitment to established company values, policies, strategies, and goals with respect to quality. Individuals involved gain a strong understanding of the solutions that can be offered to customers and are confident in management support and commitment for those solutions. Management also actively supports continual improvement. Individuals involved in quality know that past failures to fully meet customer requirements are actively addressed and they are confident in telling customers that appropriate action is being taken to make changes and prevent recurrence.

Process-based. Sales and estimating can benefit greatly from the experience and skill in process-based methods ingrained in individuals engaged in AISC Certified quality management. Individuals gain appreciation for the importance of understanding and managing variability to make progress toward an objective; they build a commitment to a consistent process approach that includes established and recorded goals and performance metrics. Regular work with the corrective action process and quality tools helps to equip individuals with the ability to identify and overcome obstacles as well as recognize and exploit opportunity.

You can see the potential, so now you'd probably like to have a way to become more confident that this idea will succeed. Try this: Select new sales and estimating recruits from your quality management system and engage them in a proof-of-concept exercise with internal customers. Your internal audit process, required for AISC Certification, provides a way for individuals to further increase understanding of your organization's processes and capabilities—critical to success in preparing proposals and estimates. The internal audit also offers an excellent



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way to sharpen the confidence and people skills needed to be effective in sales.

Individuals may be anxious about participating in sales based on negative stereotypes and apprehension about having to make a pitch. Fears are reduced with recognition that an effective sales approach relies on a defined process and is more about listening than presenting. Effective sales professionals may not close a sale with each customer contact, but they use a process approach to draw the sale closer

with each customer meeting. Each step in the following five-step sales process can be applied to an internal quality audit:

1. Lower resistance. As in sales, participants in internal audits are likely to encounter and need to overcome resistance. Effective ways of overcoming resistance focus on providing a safe and constructive forum for exchanging ideas. This takes practice, but inviting someone to share a success or best practices story often goes a long way toward lowering resistance.

2. Ask questions. With resistance lowered, asking questions paves a way to learn more about your customer's business and identify their needs. Customers in an internal audit are encouraged to describe both what improves and impedes their productivity and effectiveness. The acquired knowledge is then used by your management to make decisions and allocate resources. The goal is similar in a sales call with particular attention given to assigning value to factors related to the customer's needs and confirmation that the individual representing the customer in the sales call is authorized to make purchasing decisions.

3. Present solutions. In an internal audit, individuals combine understanding of quality goals with problem-solving tools to develop solutions. A sales call is similar in that solutions are offered that match customer needs with the capability of your company. Interaction is important here, encourage and address reaction as you proceed to gain the customer's full engagement and support for the solution.

4. Close. Confirm with your customer the value and acceptance of your solution. The close of an internal audit may lead to a commitment to a corrective action or improvement initiative. Ideally, a sales call results in purchase agreement. Avoid high-pressure tactics, but don't be afraid to ask for the sale!

5. Agree to your next contact. Internal audits and sales calls are steps in an ongoing relationship and establishing a plan for the next step communicates positive direction and commitment to that relationship. Subsequent internal audits may target advancement in improvement objectives and include evaluation of methods, metrics, and timetables for achievement. Agreement to the next sales contact cultivates critical customer relations and provides the sales representative with further opportunity to position your company for future work.

Challenge the quality-focused, creative problem-solvers in your company with the goal of improving your work backlog. The individuals who support your AISC Certified quality management offer a pool of talent, expertise, and enthusiasm well matched to the needs of an effective sales and estimating effort. You may find this decision a key to prosperity in this economic downturn.

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