

Building BLOCKS

Secrets of Successful Restaurant Construction

Secret #8: Love at First Sight? How the Right Contractor Relationship Can Make or Break Your Next Project

by John Klakamp

For just the second time in our company's history, every project we are currently building is a negotiated contract. One of these projects is for a start-up frozen yogurt business in Washington, D.C. with whom we've established a great rapport and successful working partnership.

Examining this positive relationship gave me a great idea for this month's article: "When hiring a contractor, what are owners really looking for?"

Looking for Mr. (or Mrs.) Right

More often than not, meetings with owners begin by focusing on price and then quickly navigate towards schedule and quality. And while these requirements may be the price of admission, other factors can be equally or even more important.

Thirty years of experience have convinced me that owners, both corporate and independent, are looking for their contractor to be their partner. Restaurant construction is a complex process that requires both artistry and acute problem-solving skills. Which means that to fit the bill of Mr. or Mrs. Right, a contractor needs to do more than just provide a favorable initial price and schedule.

So what are the other requirements for the "right" contractor? He or she needs to be able to:

- Work well with all stakeholders, including the owner, architect, subs, inspectors, etc.
- Be an advocate for the owner, looking out for the best interests of the project
- Keep track of the many moving and unique pieces of the project
- Respond to challenges that arise to keep the project on budget and on time



John Klakamp

Working Through Common Problems

Just as many couples struggle with everyday challenges, project teams face an array of day-to-day problems that need to be resolved during the construction process. These can include matters involving engineers, landlords, permit expeditors, municipal or third party plan reviewers, fees, bonds, insurance, inspectors for every trade, numerous sub-contractors, material vendors and many more.

Some of the most typical issues include:

- Unavailable materials that require substitutions to be found and made.
- An unanticipated requirement from an inspector.
- An unanticipated requirement from a landlord.
- Discovery of an unforeseen condition.
- Owner-requested design changes.
- Delays that force the consolidation of the schedule.

Any combination of the above can wreak havoc on a project and keep an owner up at night worrying. But in the hands of an experienced restaurant contractor, these common problems can be addressed pro actively, quickly and effectively, minimizing the impact on cost and schedule.

So while the initial bid and schedule is certainly important and one thing to consider in selecting a contractor, equal

weight should be given to his or her ability to control costs and scheduling issues and respond to whatever challenges inevitably arise.

Happily Ever After

In the case of the yogurt chain mentioned above, since the project was negotiated, our focus from the beginning has been on making the project a success rather than on beating the other contractors in a bid process. The owner's expectation is for us to look out for him every step of the way, to bring our experience to bear on his behalf and to guide him through the construction process.

In addition to cost, quality and schedule control, the owner benefits from our relationships with restaurant industry experts and companies that offer the right product at the right price - such as seating manufacturers and equipment and specialty vendors. We also provided pre-lease and pre-design services at no extra charge in an effort to further control costs and ensure a successful outcome. So while this is a start-up concept, the service they receive is on par with what our large corporate customers expect. And once again, what started out with focus on cost, quality, and schedule has turned into a true partnership that's based on value and trust.

In closing, take the time to find the contractor with the right experience and knowledge needed for your project. He or she just may turn out to be the partner you need to make sure your project has a happy ending



John Klakamp has more than 30 years experience in restaurant construction and is owner of Annapolis, Md.-based Encore Construction (www.encoreconstruction.net), a firm that specializes in providing pre-construction, construction and project management services to the restaurant industry.

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■ Capital Meat39	■ JJ McDonnell37	■ Solutions Sales & Marketing11
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■ DePalo & Sons33	■ Maryland Food Center13	■ Triple C Wholesalers37
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■ ESS27	■ Micros15	
■ Firehook27	■ Ocean City Hotel, Motel & Restaurant Association9	
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