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Contractors Discuss the Importance of Working with Designers
Healthcare & Hospitality Becoming More Like Home
Corporate Flooring Back on the Rise



Contractors Talk About Working with Designers

The following is part of a continuing series of retailer and contractor forums *Floor Trends* is doing over the course of the year.

These “roundtable” discussions will focus on a specific topic, in this case working with designers. For this feature, we interviewed flooring contractors from around the country to get their input on various matters surrounding the topic.

The idea is to put forth a series of best practices, and while there are certainly a variety of answers that were

given, we encourage readers to pay attention to both the similarities and differences—and more important the reasons given—to give you a better perspective on what these companies are doing to forge successful relationships with local designers compared to how your company might be going about it.

The hope is you glean an idea to implement in your business strategy to better help you—and the industry—grow and profit.

In the area of how contractors work with designers we

asked a variety of questions, ranging from the importance of having working relationships with the A&D community to ways companies cultivate these relationships to thoughts on the overall knowledge of this group of people and what is done to help educate them on the flooring products being specified.

Here’s what they had to say:

• *Why is it important for flooring contractors to work with designers?*

Cheryl Acierno of Acierno & Co.: Because we truly

understand budgeting and can keep them out of trouble when pricing a job. They certainly don’t want to go back to their client and be far over budget because labor costs weren’t accurately priced and they may have only considered the price of the carpet the mill rep provided.

Many factors need to be considered when budgeting a flooring job, among them, demolition, cost to install—which varies from product to product—floor prep, over-time, etc.

Also, a flooring contractor is more objective about selecting products since we are not beholden to any one manufacturer.

Doug Auer of ReSource Arizona: There are three main reasons:

1. Saves the designers time; less time is spent than meeting with individual suppliers because we represent many manufacturers.
2. Establish accurate budgets.
3. We can help them select the correct products for the application.

Working hand-in-hand with the designer allowed Acierno & Co. to turn the offices of Antero Resources into an inviting atmosphere for its employees and clients.



Steve Bernish of Business Flooring Specialists: Flooring contractors are an integral part of any construction project based on move-in, installation timing, logistics, floor preparation, design elements and product specifications.

Jenelle Dockery of Golden State Carpet Service: One of the main reasons is to bridge the gap between the design and installation process. If the flooring contractor can be involved early on in the design process, it will be easier to communicate to the installers in the field what the design intent is.

This is even more critical now with intricate carpet tile collections that manufacturers are coming out with. These collections are very flexible with multiple design options and installation methods, but if this is not communicated to the installers correctly, there is more room for error on the job site.

It is also very helpful when the flooring contractor has a relationship with the designer and is able to communicate directly throughout the construction process. This allows design and installation questions to be answered quickly.

Sylvia Edmonson of ReSource Colorado: As a flooring contractor, I know what the bottom line price of an installation will be, whereas many times a designer will specify beyond what the budget will allow.

We also represent a large variety of products from many manufacturers that we can pull from. This has become more important since the recession as many design firms downsized so they have a smaller selection



Doug Auer, partner with ReSource Arizona, assisted the A&D firm Ayers Saint Gross with the University of Arizona's Health Sciences Education Library in Phoenix.

from which to choose.

Time frames are also tighter so we can save a designer time by not having to go to five or six reps to see what products they have that might fit the project they are working on. Because we represent a large variety of products and manufacturers, we can save them time by being that one-stop resource.

Sheri Gorman of RD Weis Cos.: Flooring is such an important part of any interior. Floors are where you can make a statement. It is usually the first thing people notice about a space.

As designers are designing entire spaces, they can't always know everything about every product they have to specify. By working together to make sure the right specifications are met, it can make or break a project. Carpet, for example, can be such a huge investment so making sure the right type is chosen is important.

It's also important because

we can help them with things such as making sure the right conditions are met for flooring choices, making sure all the accessories are specified, and making sure the correct floor finishes and maintenance are specified.

Dave Ruggieri of Ruggieri Brothers: When the flooring contractor works with the designers, he makes sure the space will be designed within budget and makes sure the product is the right fit for the space it will be in.

The worst thing is when the wrong product is specified, and you get callbacks for maintenance and performance issues.

•At what point in the job cycle do you typically begin to interact with the designer?

Acierno: Usually as soon as the designer begins selecting finishes for an interior space.

Auer: We work with architects and designers during schematic design to help establish budgets and floor-

ing layouts and then again during design development to select finishes.

Floor finishes are usually the first finishes selected in the interior finish selection process.

Bernish: I like to get involved in the conceptual stage where/when the design is becoming a reality. Unfortunately, what I like and reality are sometimes not the same, so getting involved at several different points during the specification process is usually the norm.

Dockery: As early as possible. Ideally, if I am not the one specifying the material, it is best if the manufacturer brings me in during the design process.

Edmonson: Immediately; once they begin to do a budget; prior to going to bid with the general contractor. The earlier we can interact, the better the opportunity to keep the focus on the budget.

Many times they have no clue what it takes in terms



RD Weis Cos. needed to work with designers to ensure New York's M&M store not only was finished in time for Thanksgiving but that the floors matched the iconic M&M colors, all while making sure the products in this high-traffic store were durable and safe.

of costs to get a product installed correctly. There's shipping, floor prep, installers to pay, adhesives—which is a big line item that isn't considered. We also find that many times taxes are not factored in—that alone can take a project over budget.

We let them know what the true cost will be before going to bid. We'll do take-offs so they know how much product will be needed.

By doing the legwork upfront, they can then show their client a product that is on budget. It makes them look good with their client and also gives them strength when dealing with the general contractor, as they have a leg to stand on about knowing the product.

Gorman: Ideally I like to get involved at the very beginning before they made any decisions. Typically, though, they will come to me when they have an idea of products they want to use but might be looking for something new and differ-

ent that they are not aware of yet.

Ruggieri: I typically like to get in as early as I can, because the sooner you start working with the designer and owner, the easier it is to get them to trust you. And it gives you more control over the selection process. I really like to get in there at the pre-construction stage.

•*How do you go about cultivating relationships with designers?*

Acierno: I built my business in the early days with these relationships, so some of it is from reputation—and the fact we have a full-service showroom.

We're always looking to strengthen our relationships with designers, which isn't as easy as it once was since most manufacturers have so many reps on the street.

Many of the designers we work with know they can come to us not only for product, but for technical information.

Auer: We have a dedicated specifier that visits design firms regularly and a showroom manager who assists architects and designers in our showroom.

The designers must see value in your expertise or they may choose to work directly with the manufacturer's representatives.

Bernish: We do not have an A&D rep today. It is the responsibility of each of our salespeople to develop some relationships within the firms that we touch.

We have to explain our role in the process to A&D firms. What is the advantage to working with a company like mine versus working with a mill only.

These relationships with the A&D generally start with an experience that each has had working with one another. This could be a very positive experience or even an experience that didn't go as planned but respect and knowledge were shared with each other in

the end. Gaining the trust of your client or designer is what we are talking about.

Another good way to build relationships is to introduce designers to leads on projects with clients/end users that you already have who may be in need of an A&D firm's services.

It is important to remember that many of the principals, partners and head designers or management within the firms are responsible to bring in new business. They are responsible for P&L within their organizations and this only enhances our business relationships if we can find them another client.

Dockery: Due to my background as a mill representative, I have pre-existing relationships with A&D firms since that was my prior focus.

However, I continue to cultivate those relationships by partnering with vendors to do lunch-and-learns, attending/sponsoring IIDA events and being involved in other industry organizations such as CREW (Commercial Real Estate Women).

Edmonson: It's difficult nowadays to just walk in to a design group and chitchat. I'll drop off pastries; something that keeps us visible and in front of them so they will remember us.

We'll host lots of lunches. We also host a lot of spa days and pedicures—even for the men. Anything that will be fun with them outside of the workplace is a great way to build a relationship.

I do more one-on-one lunches than a group one. I find they will talk more when by themselves than if they are with a group of other design-

ers. We used to do a big cocktail event with upwards of 150 people, including mill reps, but we found it didn't allow us to speak to the designers on specific projects.

We'll still host special occasions, such as a weeklong educational event over lunch. Each day we'll host about two dozen people. We recently did one where we taught designers about Antron fiber. We included our mill partners who use it in their products. Overall it was very successful. But you need to be particular when spending these kinds of dollars in order to get the benefit you want.

Today, there is a lot of movement between designers and firms so suddenly a person may be at a different firm, which is why it is better to cultivate relationships one-on-one.

Gorman: We do have a specific A&D representative, however all of our sales reps work with them as well.

We open up our library for designers to use. We see design firms' libraries shrinking while ours maintains all aspects of flooring from carpet to resilient to wood, rubber, cork, etc.

We host in our office as well as designers, CEU classes and lunch-and-learns. We do a lot of evening entertaining, such as a post-NeoCon show (RD Weis Annual Flooring Expo).

We also do a lot of social media.

Ruggieri: In my market, we have a great relationship with the design community, and architects, so we do talk to them about upcoming projects on a monthly basis. They also call us to help or use our library as needed.



Golden State Carpet Service (GSCS) worked with both the designer and mill rep for the offices of Medrio in San Francisco. This allowed GSCS to communicate to the installers how the designer wanted the hexagon tiles to flow throughout the office. It worked with the designer to approve a mock-up on site prior to installation, as well as collaborated with the designer, end user and installers during installation to make sure the pattern was laid out to meet the client's vision and expectations.

• *Do designers come to you when they have a job; do you approach a designer if you hear about a job?*

Bernish: Designers do come to me, many times when they have a project and, yes, I do approach designers when I know of a project. Contacting a designer concerning a project is part of our job. This is one of the main ways to build relationships with the A&D community.

Dockery: Some designers will reach out to me for assistance in specifying different flooring material, or ask for my assistance to help evaluate different materials they are considering.

If I hear about a job and there is not a flooring specification yet—maybe there

is just a materials allowance noted on the drawings—I will contact the design firm to see if I can offer assistance in helping them with the specifications.

Edmonson: It's a combination of both. Some designers rely on us to research and find the right product or products for the job. A&D people need to know a lot about many things so they come to us as experts on floor covering to find out what's good and what's not.

Sometimes a general contractor will contract us to do a budget. If a designer is listed we will contact them and let them know we are doing the budget. It gets you in the door, and it also allows us to ask if we can be of help with offering them options.

Gorman: I'd say both. We will actively reach out to designers if we would like to work with them. We explain the value we can bring to their projects.

We also have many designers who will come to us right away to help specify products.

Ruggieri: Both. We call them if we hear about something and know they are involved, and we also get calls when they want assistance with specifying the correct product, or need to hit a certain budget number. **ft**

Editor's note, To read the rest of what these contractors had to say on the topic of working with designers, visit our website, floortrendsmag.com, or see the June digital edition of Floor Trends.



Business Flooring Specialists utilized its expertise to help create a whimsical carpet design for the public library in Richardson, Texas.

•Do any of your suppliers help connecting you with designers? How so?

Acierno: Yes, on occasion. It could be they want to meet a designer in our showroom to show their products, or perhaps they're asking us to help them budget to make sure their product will fit a particular project.

Auer: Usually the flooring contractor brings the appropriate suppliers into the project. Most suppliers don't want to bring a flooring contractor in because they would like the general contractor or end user to make those decisions.

Bernish: Yes, the suppliers who we have better relation-

ships with will connect us all together. Happy hours, lunches, presentations and other social settings are all ways that this networking occurs.

This is generally something that happens after there is a large trust factor established with this supplier. The goal of these connections is to explain the role of a flooring contractor and how we can help with the process.

Dockery: Many of the suppliers I work with will ask the client—end user or designer—if they have a flooring contractor on board yet. They will refer me when appropriate and bring me in early on in the design process, especially if they

are looking at a complicated flooring design.

Some of the suppliers I partner with also include me in their lunch-and-learn presentations to designers.

Edmonson: There are product lines from certain manufacturers we actively take to market and the reps from those companies are more apt to bring us in if they are with a project at the start.

We'll do a combined lunch and other events with suppliers to help strengthen our relationships with both the supplier and designer. Again, it's about getting yourself in the door.

Gorman: Yes, I do a lot of joint sales calls with manu-

facturers. We will team up on entertaining. We do joint CEU session.

I am always willing to make an introduction for someone and I'm not afraid to ask someone to make one for me.

Ruggieri: Yes, they give us insight on jobs that are being specified, as well as sending us Dodge Reports.

•Do you get recommendations from designers to work on their jobs? If so, how often would you say you end up getting the job because of their recommendation/your relationship with the designer?

Acierno: Yes. Sometimes the designer will refer us



By working with the architect and designer on the Salve Regina University's Miley Hall Cafeteria, Ruggieri Brothers was able to save the end user nearly \$80,000 from the original specifications by offering alternative products that would do the job as well or better than the ones originally specified.

to the general contractor involved, so we may at least submit pricing. Other times, our name might be listed on the drawings as a resource.

Auer: There are usually three decision makers in each project—the designer, general contractor and end user. It usually takes two of the three to recommend to be awarded the project.

Bernish: Some designers will tell suppliers who or which flooring contractor they want to work with on a particular project. I've done work with end users based on recommendations from the designer. If a designer recommends me to an end user then I will get that proj-

ect more than 90% of the time. Other times, designers will bring us in on more of a consultant basis during the specification process and this also works well.

Dockery: I have designers refer me to the general contractor. However, often times, the relationship with the general contractor is equally important in being awarded the job.

Edmonson: If we have previously worked on a project with a designer they'll want to work with us again. Many times they will ask the general contractor if it has us on the bid list—and if not will help put us on the list.

Gorman: Every job is

different with different situations. Sometimes the designer will say we are the flooring contractor of choice, then we will do the work.

Ruggieri: We usually get referred to as the go-to flooring contractor in the area. I would think, usually, if a designer is involved and we have been helping them from the beginning we usually get the project 90% of the time. There are the few we don't get because of price.

•*Do you find designers in general are knowledgeable about the floors they are specifying? Or flooring in general? Or do you often have*

to educate them about why one floor is better than another depending on the application?

Acierno: I think designers have so many more products available than in past years that it's difficult for them to know about everything—they have a lot they need to know.

For example, I find many of them are unaware of the differences in carpet fiber. We love the opportunity to discuss why one product may be better than another for a particular job.

Auer: Most designers are very visual, which weighs heavily on their product selection. They often need a little education on which



At Resource Colorado, projects such as the Mission Hills church in Littleton show how working with the A&D people can create a stylish, functional space.

products are appropriate in certain areas and situations. They almost always need assistance with pricing.

Bernish: The more experienced designers obviously have the knowledge to get the process started but everyone needs people and companies that they trust to give them correct information, especially with new products and new installation procedures.

Dockery: I find designers are always open to being educated on why one floor is better than another based on the application, especially if we can offer an un-biased opinion on the flooring specifications. They also rely on us for our technical

expertise.

Edmonson: Back in the 'old days' we spoke with A&D people about full specifications (construction) of a product. Today, much of the product is selected for its color.

There are so many products—the mills have such wide lines, whereas in years past the rep had 10 to 12 products in his bag.

They do need educating and it's a key reason why they call us, as they realize they need that knowledge we can provide. They see something pretty but don't realize it won't hold up to the setting that it is going in so it is up to us to point this out

and provide a more suitable alternative.

This is another way of enhancing our relationship with them as they really appreciate you helping them out.

Gorman: Most designers are knowledgeable. The manufacturers do a good job educating them.

I think today designers are eager to learn on their own. As I too, learn of new products, I enjoy being able to educate designers as well. I love getting called in to talk about new products and services.

We recently started to do a lot of polished concrete work. One day I got a call from a design firm asking if

I could come in and teach them about it as it was something they wanted to be able to start specifying. They ended up specifying a polished concrete job to be done by us.

Ruggieri: They know the basics, and what they had learned from manufacturer reps, but they do rely on us as being the professionals.

•Concerning the previous question, has this changed much in recent years—meaning they are more educated or you are finding you need to provide more education?

Auer: Education comes with experience. Most new designers lack the confidence

an experienced flooring contractor brings to the project.

Bernish: The experienced designers know when they need some advice or help. The less experienced people are in desperate need of knowledge in both product and installation. Unfortunately, they sometimes do not know when or who to contact when the need arises. Continuing education remains extremely important.

Edmonson: It has changed drastically over the years. It used to be there was not as much to know, with all floor coverings—hard and soft. Now you have more moisture issues and there is a great deal more technical information to deal with, and not just with the product, but the adhesives and dealing with moisture.

Gorman: I think because so much information is on the Internet, people are self-educating themselves. It is much easier to go on someone's website and get all the information you need.

In a way, we lose that personal interaction. I think some of it is the "I need it now" mentality.

Ruggieri: I think they are less educated, because during the recession so many designers and architects were let go, and now they are all being re-hired, or coming out of school, and really are green behind the ears.

•What kind of education would you say is most needed—or is being sought after the most by designers themselves?

Auer: Product application.

Bernish: That question should start with the design-

ers and what they think is needed. We then can answer those needs and ask more questions.

Dockery: Technical questions related to installation—suitable transitions between flooring materials, underlayments, moisture remediation treatments, etc.

Edmonson: I don't really think they are seeking specific product education, as they are working in an environment of just getting the job done.

The type of education that is most effective is when you can offer a CEU course, or do a factory trip. Also, holding educational events with smaller groups and on a specific topic is appreciated.

For us, any time we have an opportunity to talk about product specs we do. It's a daily task because there is so much out there than there used to be.

Gorman: I think the most important part of an installation is the floor prep. Without proper floor prep, your floor won't look good. There are so many conditions that can affect that. I don't think designers are aware of those issues.

Ruggieri: I think they need to learn more about the fundamentals of products—why they perform, maintenance, seam layout. They sometimes get so caught up on just the look and colors.

•Do you hold any type of designer appreciation events?

Acierno: We throw a good party. Sometimes we partner for an event with a manufacturer.

Auer: NeoCant—a local version of NeoCon. We also host happy hours, cooking classes, painting classes, craft

shows, taking them to ball games, etc.

Bernish: We use dinners and lunches along with sporting event tickets to thank our clients.

Gorman: I'd say our annual RD Weis Flooring Expo is one. We pick a night in early fall and we invite all the flooring vendors to come in and set up a mini trade show for the A&D community. It is always a great event and a great way for designers to see what is new. A lot of times reps will go into firms but because of how their day is going they might not always get to make it in to meet with them, so this gives them that opportunity.

Ruggieri: We do invite them down to our showroom once a year to see products and review new things. We usually will have appetizers and wine, and it generally turns out to be a good event for us and the designers and architects.

•Do you open your office to designers—meaning do you have a dedicated space for them to come in with their clients to work on a project?

Acierno: As often as possible.

Auer: We have a showroom and a showroom coordinator to assist them. We also have a conference room they can schedule time in if their meeting requires it.

Bernish: Our showroom is open to the trade only and is used by A&D on a regular basis.

Dockery: We have a full library in our office with ample room to lay out products that we make available for designers/clients to utilize.

Edmonson: We're a full

service showroom, and we encourage designers to not only come in but to bring their clients with them to work on the project. Many times, especially the smaller, single designer operations, don't have a good meeting place and we offer that.

Our showroom is set up so it is very easy to see what they are looking at. We have vignettes throughout and each is dedicated to a particular mill. We also have our individual offices dedicated to a specific manufacturer we work with.

Sometimes a designer brings in a client and we'll leave them alone, and sometimes they want our input. Whatever they want, we'll work with them.

Gorman: We moved into a new office about 18 months ago. One of the key elements was for us to have a bigger library/conference room. It was designed specifically to have people come in and use it to select products. We can have more than one group using it at a time, as the table is made up of four parts, which can be separated.

We also have two small meeting/conference rooms, which we always welcome people to use. And we have a few touch-down stations as well.

Ruggieri: We have a library and showroom, and designers are open to use it anytime to see products or grab architectural folders. Many times they will also bring their client with them so they can look at lots of different options without having to run all over town. **ft**