



Building a career in specification sales

A guide to specification sales

- What is specification selling?
- Who is the specifier?
- What stages does the specification decision process go through?
- What are the biggest mistakes that you can make in specification selling?
- What skills do I need to succeed in specification sales?
- What are the main differences between specification selling and account sales?
- Why do people love specification selling?
- What career development opportunities are there?

Specification selling is now more important than ever for a manufacturer of building products. It is an exciting and rewarding role that should be considered by anyone looking to develop a sales career in the building products industry.

As the industry continues to focus on sustainability and with the tightening of building regulations, specifiers are looking primarily at product benefits on-site and factors such as, lifetime building operating costs and durability, rather than just purchase price.

A more expensive and higher quality product can offer greater value and ensuring the correct people are aware of these benefits is the foundation of specification selling.

Successful specification selling enhances brand loyalty and competitive advantage; it also gives the manufacturer more control over their own product, rather than the control being with the distributor. Although, truly effective specification selling will improve the manufacturer/distributor relationship and the level of business put through the stockist.

Specification selling requires a different approach and skill set to traditional account sales. In this special guide, developed with Shaun Davies of Rockwool, we provide essential advice to those looking for a career in specification sales.

What is specification selling?

The best place to start is to gain an overview of specification selling and how it works. In essence, a specification is a documented advice note informing a contractor which products and materials should be installed, the standards that they should meet and guidance on their installation.

Specification selling is about influencing the nature of this advice note and then making sure that it matches the attributes of the product you are selling and then working with the specification chain so that your product is selected.

This requires you to offer the specifier a large amount of readily available and relevant technical information and advice. To do this effectively, you will need to be supported by your

internal sales and technical support departments, your website and/or marketing materials, and those involved in testing and product development. This will help to open dialogue with a specifier and, if you make their life easier, it is easier to make contact with them for future projects.

However, it is a huge sales and marketing challenge and can be a very long process, involving many people, who all require different messages for their particular specialisation or area of focus. You need to remember, as different people control the specification during the process, to ensure you are fully aware of the stage the project is at and who is in control.

A specification can be broken at any time and this is why you need to be involved from start to finish. In an ideal world, the best form of specification selling is when your product is the only product that ticks all the boxes needed for the project, as there is no 'or equivalent' available for the specifier to select. However, this rarely happens, so you should be prepared for a long slog.

Specification selling requires a great deal of skill and hard work to be truly effective and to understand what is involved; it is useful to know what the specification process is and the functions involved.

Who is the specifier?

A number of people can contribute to the specification decision that is traditionally made by the client, architect or engineer. However, the people that influence their decisions are just as important, particularly when it comes to brand selection.

A building project will usually have a special 'project team', which usually includes: the client, consultant, architect, engineer, quantity surveyor, main contractor and sub-contractor. Other specialists may also be called upon if required.

The project contract type will also vary from project to project e.g. Traditional, Design and Build, Management, etc. and may affect your approach.

As you can see, a specification specialist has lots to control, understand and influence, and on top of this you will normally have multiple projects to deal with.

What stages does the specification decision process go through?

The specification process goes through four main stages:

- **The client's brief**
This usually details the functional needs of the building and other details such as overall look and required performance. This stage will drive the products that will eventually be selected.
- **Specialist consultation**
In order to define some of the requirements set out in the client's brief for the building's performance, specialist consultants in areas, such as; fire, acoustics, security, HVAC and sustainability, are usually involved during this stage.
- **Architect's input**
The design of the building will now be developed from the information contained within the client's brief and the specialist advice provided by the consultants. It is at this stage when the project gets more detailed and product selection may be indicated – certainly in terms of product specification, performance and approvals, etc. Mechanical, electrical and structural engineers are likely to work with the architect during this stage.
- **Appointment of the contractor**
It is often the main contractor that is responsible for product selection, although the actual decision is also often made by the sub-contractor (appointed by the main contractor) particularly in terms of brand.

However, the role of the specification salesperson does not end at the appointment of the contractor, as you will be expected to advise and assist during the installation and construction process, even once your product has been bought and delivered to site.

You have control of the project in your hands - don't drop it.

What are the biggest mistakes that you can make in specification selling?

There are a number of small errors and oversights that can have a huge impact on your effectiveness in a specification sales role. These include:

- **Not telling the truth**
Never lie; it destroys trust in you and in the company that you represent. You could end up costing your company a lot of money as well as your job. If you do not know the answer, consult a colleague who is an expert in that particular field and get back to them with all the information and data they need in a mutually agreed period of time. Then educate yourself on that field and enhance your knowledge for the future.
- **Misleading or being woolly**
This can be as bad as lying, as it shows that you lack knowledge and confidence and this often breaks trust for future health of long-term relationships. It can also lead to misunderstanding from the client's point of view, resulting in a wrong decision being made, based on lack of detail given in your advice. Once again, it is best to inform them only what you are 100% sure of and send the rest at a later date or bring in a member of your specialist team to enhance the sell. You can actually turn a negative into a positive.
- **Not using evidence and practical examples**
In any situation it is always easier to convince someone that something will work and solve a problem if you can prove that it has worked in a similar situation. As you build your experience you should also build your database of examples to use in your negotiations. Where possible, without breaking any confidentiality clause, back your examples up with photographs, testimonials and data from previous projects.
- **Not following the whole process through**
A specification sale can be lost as quickly as it can be won. It is a long-term process and one that you need to keep on top of. You must ensure that you provide the correct information to all involved and at the right time – otherwise your hard work can be undone and you could lose the specification.

In Design and Build projects the specification is particularly likely to change, whereas it is more stable in a traditional build.

The stage that you should be most alert is at main contractor tender, where the specification can be very vulnerable.

- **Not keeping up-to-date with changes in regulations and standards**

This is a schoolboy (or girl) error and can destroy the trust and respect that you have developed. You are consulted for your knowledge and it must be up-to-date and relevant. Don't put yourself in a situation where the person you are dealing with knows more than you.

If you avoid making these errors then you have the right attitude to develop and flourish in specification selling.

What skills do I need to succeed in specification sales?

Success in specification sales demands perseverance and certain skills. If you have them, or the capacity to develop them, then you have the ability to develop a career in specification sales in the building and construction industry.

- **Understanding of standards and regulations and the ability to explain them**

Impress by applying your knowledge to the issue faced; this demonstrates real understanding rather than just theory.

- **In-depth knowledge of your product and your competitors' product**

You need to know exactly what you have to offer and what counter arguments to use against a competitor's proposition or solution. You should always focus on the benefits that your product will bring and their key differences. It is vital that the advice should always be honest and demonstrate your integrity - you are an industry specialist and need to communicate this by your behaviour. However, feed back comments – good and bad – on your products to marketing and product development teams, along with feedback on competitors' products.

- **Hard work and perseverance**

There is rarely an easy sell in specification selling, so you must be willing to put in the time and effort researching, traveling, meeting and phoning people. If you are not willing to do this then it is unlikely that you will succeed.

- **Practical experience on-site**

Although this can only be gained over time,

we recommend that you spend as much time on-site seeing and dealing first hand with real issues. This gives you a distinct advantage in your ability to assist the specifier and ultimately develop a favourable view of your product.

- **Ability to communicate**

You will be dealing with many different types of people at many different levels and size of organisation, and all have their own particular requirements. Some will not want to see you and some will be grateful to see you, but the one common theme is that people's time is limited and you need to be succinct and clear in your meetings to have a lasting impact.

- **Provide the information that specifiers need**

You should know what information and advice people require; generally, specifiers like architects, engineers, interior designers do not want to talk to salespeople, so when you get the opportunity, you must make the most of it. An architect will need information such as technical reports, assessments and possibly CAD and BIM drawings. They need to be kept informed of changing regulations and standards, so make sure that they are given copies and are aware of the latest information. The contractor is more likely to need reports, test information, certification, installation guidelines and pricing and availability information.

Whereas the sub-contractor is usually open to being made aware of other projects and potential sales, so keep them informed and make sure that you make the most of your time with them. It is important to keep everyone pro your company and aim to help contractors generally as well as encouraging contractors to use your product. It is also worth considering providing courses and training offering CPD points to all concerned.

- **Relationship building skills**

You will see a lot of people, although, normally only for a limited period of time. Therefore it is vital to build a relationship with them on a personal and professional level.

Remember that specifiers rarely deal with just one project and you will want to be called upon for future projects.

- **Ask questions and keep your ears and eyes open on-site or in meetings**

There could be further opportunities for your company or even just for you to demonstrate your specialist knowledge, so don't be afraid to ask questions on what they are doing in other areas, the rewards could be huge for your company and you might solve a problem and make life much easier for the specifier - which is good news for you in the long run!

By developing and focusing on these skills and actions, your chances of succeeding in specification sales will be considerably enhanced.

What are the main differences between specification selling and account sales?

A specification sales position is quite different to a traditional sales job in the building industry, although many make a successful transition. The key differences that you can expect to find are:

- **You are very much seen as a trusted person**
Think of yourself, not a salesperson, but a consultant and a consultant is not viewed in quite the same way as a salesperson. What you say is taken on trust and your reputation relies on it. Keep the trust and you will keep your contacts and reap the reward. Your company will benefit from increased brand loyalty and gain competitive advantage that will lead to repeat orders and enhanced business relationships.
- **You are working on multiple projects at the same time**
This can get very confusing and excellent time management skills are needed as well as careful preparation for each call. It is not something that you can do 'off the cuff' as can be the case in account sales.
- **You are selling on value, benefits, regulations and standards**
This is different than dealing with buyers, pricing, codes, stock, merchandising, promotions, lead-times, missed delivery problems and having a more basic product knowledge.

In specification selling you will need to have an excellent technical understanding of your

products and the standards and regulations that apply.

- **You are dealing with many people across multiple job functions**
This means that your ability to be flexible is paramount. You will not get an instant high and boost from an order on a daily basis, but you will see a much longer-term benefit, which is much more rewarding. The order that you are responsible for getting will usually be very large.
- **Your efforts feed account sales**
Specification sales should build a close relationship with accounts sales, as you will be responsible for giving a particular merchant the opportunity to provide the stock for the project that you have secured the specification on. The relationship between the contractor, salesperson and the merchant is an important part of the whole specification process.
- **You need to prove everything you say and have the evidence to support it**
It is vital that your company provides you with the resources to do this. When something is 'specified' it adds a lot of value and with this comes responsibility.

Hopefully you are still interested in specification selling and feel that the key differences appeal to you and don't forget you will spend much of your time on building sites!

Why do people love specification selling?

There can be many reasons, you will look forward to each day due to the complete variety it offers and it will keep you interested and your brain switched on with up-to-date knowledge.

It gives you control as, more than any other type of sales; you have a greater ability to influence the decision for your product to be used.

It also allows you to believe as though you are making a difference to people and the environment, as many products will improve people's standard of living, reduce energy bills and help to create a greener and more sustainable world. It might sound corny, but it does make you feel that you are contributing.

Specification selling is a safer and more reliable environment than standard sales, as you are measured on other factors, rather than just orders. Also as you are not so reliant on commission, due to a higher basic wage, this allows you to take a long-term approach to the role and develop the job and yourself.

What career development opportunities are there?

Many are lucky enough to progress their career so they are in a position where they are at world-leading companies that offer superb training and development opportunities and moving to companies with larger product ranges and greater opportunities on a worldwide basis is open to everyone. A number of companies have excellent trainee or graduate opportunities.

However, we would say that loyalty and stability in a specification role is viewed with much more respect than it is in a regular field sales job.

There are many opportunities to manage specification teams on a regional, national or worldwide basis or to specialise in a particular sector. Many also develop a career in product development or as a Technical Manager or Director, some even end up sitting on trade bodies and advising on regulations within the industry.

You can make the role your own and should always be learning and acquiring new knowledge, which is key to the role and through owning this knowledge your value in the industry grows.

If you would like to discuss a career in specification sales, please call one of our building and construction industry consultants on **01480 405225** or email us via **recruit@pinnacleconsulting.co.uk**

www.pinnacleconsulting.co.uk



With many thanks to Rockwool, a leading supplier of stone wool insulation materials for thermal, fire and acoustic protection for allowing us to speak to their Technical Consultant, Shaun Davies, and for his expert and specialised input into this career guide.

For more information on Rockwool www.rockwool.co.uk



© Pinnacle Consulting UK Ltd 2014