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Selling Metal:

Tips On How To Close The Deal

The market share for metal is increasing in both segments.

By Mark Ward Sr.

The selling points for metal roofs are well known: longevity, aesthetics and eco-friendliness. Yet the higher cost of metal vs. other traditional roofing materials, which is the chief objection from potential customers, is also a fact of life.

How to sell the benefits and overcome the objections differ on whether a contractor is selling metal roofs to the commercial or the residential market.

Commercial Challenges

The challenges of marketing metal roofing to the commercial construction sector are a daily reality for Dan Smeja, a principal in Metalmaster Roofmaster of McHenry, Illinois. A sheet metal and metal roofing contractor, the company serves a 150-mile radius around Chicago and has worked on projects ranging from schools and churches to big-box stores and municipal buildings.

Unlike residential projects in which the contractor must pitch the benefits of metal roofing directly to a homeowner, in the commercial sector “we come on the scene to bid on projects where a metal roof has already been specified,” explains Smeja. Success depends on “establishing a reputation as a premium, high-quality metal roofing contractor,” he adds. “So when projects with metal roofs come along, we’ll be invited to bid.”

Metalmaster Roofmaster markets itself for commercial roofing projects in two ways. First, the company builds rapport with general contractors.

“Our reputation starts with the GCs



Commercial roofing projects are primarily bid on, where a metal roof is already specified. Success is dependent on the company’s reputation as a premium, high-quality metal roofing contractor. Metalmaster Roofmaster, Inc. has a staff dedicated to searching for projects.

and then works its way up to the architects and owners,” Smeja says. When the project team is confident that Metalmaster Roofmaster can meet the prequalification requirements and handle the job, an invitation to bid is likely.

But more commercial projects are being done using a design/build process, Smeja says. Thus, if Metalmaster Roofmaster is known as a dependable source of information on the design and pricing of metal roofing options, it can enjoy a competitive edge.

Nevertheless, says Smeja, “We can’t survive only on what we’re invited to do.

The market goes in waves. Metal roofing goes through cycles of popularity, sometimes more and sometimes less. So jobs won’t always fall in our lap. We have to search every day for potential new projects.”

Metalmaster Roofmaster has a staff dedicated to this search. Leads are found in project bulletins published by BidClerk and Reed Construction Data, as well as by monitoring government agency websites for new public construction announcements.

In the end, however, Smeja says his company gets much of its work from

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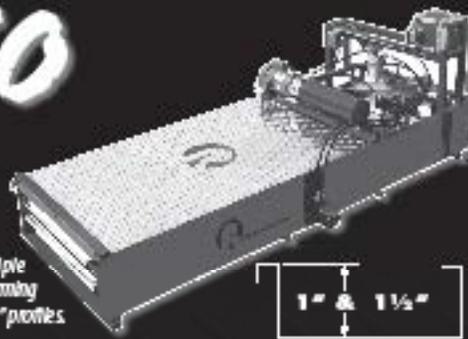


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projects whose architects already have a preference for metal roofs “or when the owner—for example, a church or an office complex—is involved in the design and has a preference for metal. As the economy improves, we’re seeing that the desire for unique buildings is coming back—and unique means metal.”

Ongoing advances in metal roofing paints and coatings help contractors such as Metalmaster Roofmaster keep up with owners’ and architects’ changing tastes.

“In the past, warmer tones were the most specified. But now we’re seeing a trend toward a more contemporary look—maybe silver, black, or panels that are prefinished to resemble specialty metals,” Smeja says.

But the main draw for metal roofs in the commercial construction sector remains their longevity.

“Metal roofs are one of the only exterior building products that can last the entire service life of a building,” Smeja says.

Though projects installed by Metalmaster Roofmaster average between \$100,000 and \$250,000, the higher up-front cost is offset by savings in life-cycle costs. Moreover, the cost of a metal roof is a comparatively small fraction of the total building cost.

Metalmaster Roofmaster depends on its sources for metal roofing systems, including Firestone Building Products and Berridge Manufacturing, to keep the company abreast of technical advances and aesthetic trends. These and other manufacturers, along with the Metal Construction Association, do the actual work of “selling” the benefits of metal roofing to commercial building owners and architects.

“Educating architects is a big priority for us,” says John Ryan, director of marketing for the Chicago-based Metal Construction Association (MCA). “We offer courses approved by the American Institute of Architects and we work with universities. A metal roof may be a premium cost option for a commercial building. But you’re looking at a service life of 60 or more years, vs. 20 to 30 years for traditional roofing materials.”

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To sell the aesthetics of metal roofing, MCA publicizes a gallery of signature building projects.

“We show architects that they can achieve any look they want with metal,” Ryan says. The association also generates technical data to document the performance of metal roofs, including energy savings that come from a surface that reflects rather than absorbs heat like dark asphalt.

In its continuing advocacy for commercial metal roofing, MCA last year launched a course to certify installers.

“That will help give architects confidence to specify metal,” says Ryan. “In fact, metal roofing contractors may find in the future that to bid on a project, the owner or general contractor is going to ask if they’re certified.”

By the same token, Ryan advises contractors to source their metal roofing “from manufacturers and suppliers who are leaders in the marketplace as far as educating architects, participating in research, improving their products and actively advocating for metal.”

Residential Realities

In residential metal roofing, manufacturers and the Metal Roofing Alliance (MRA) are going directly to homeowners with their educational efforts.

As respondents to a *Metal Roofing Magazine* poll published in February on the state of the industry in 2015, education remains the key. As one manufacturer put it, “People aren’t flipping houses anymore; they are choosing to stay where they are. They want value in their homes and you get that with a metal roof.”

MRA executive director Bill Hippard says his organization focuses on residential replacement roofing rather than new home construction because the former accounts for about 80 percent of the demand for metal roofs. An estimated 7 million North American homes need

re-roofing each year and, in the United States, metal accounts for about a 9 percent share of that market.

With growth, however, has come an unexpected challenge.

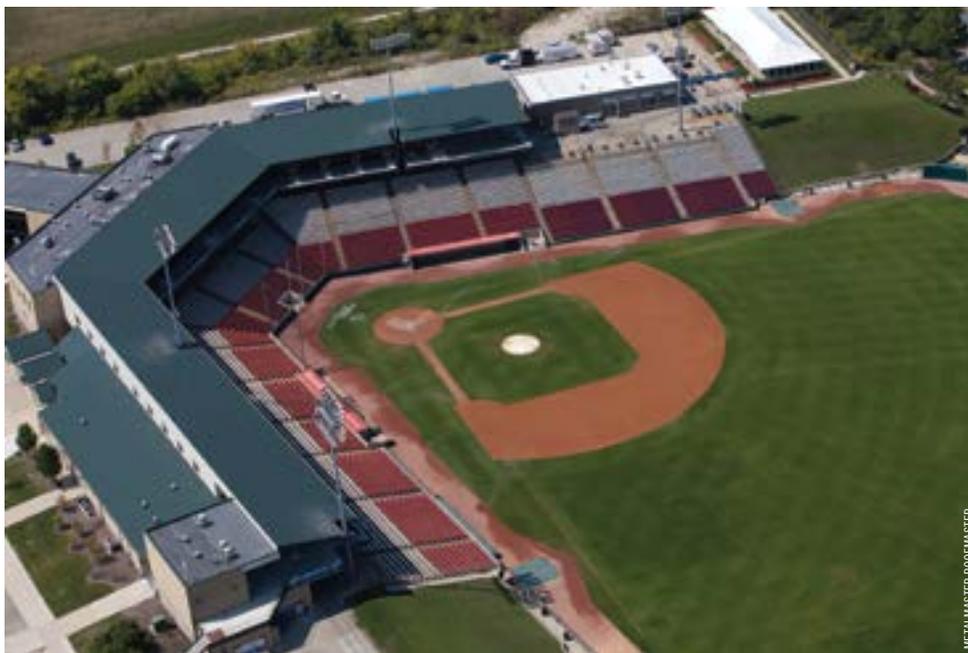
“Metal roofing manufacturers are spread around the country. So there’s a good distribution system. Contractors in every region can be serviced with good delivery times,” explains Hippard. “But if anything, there are places in the country where there aren’t enough contractors to do the installations.” MRA is actively recruiting new installers.

features print and radio advertising plus spots on 20 cable television channels.

Contractors looking to boost their sales of residential roofs can obtain promotional literature from their suppliers plus a host of marketing tools from MRA.

“We’ve obtained demographic and psychographic research on who are the likeliest potential customers for a metal roof—generally Baby Boomers who own homes valued at \$150,000 or more,” reports Hippard.

Thus, installers who join the alliance can obtain prospect lists sorted by zip



Metalmaster Roofmaster is seeing that the desire for unique buildings is coming back—and unique means metal. In addition, the main draw for most metal roofs in the commercial construction sector remains their longevity.

“Residential metal roofing is a good business,” Hippard states. “The product isn’t just a commodity. It’s what we like to call ‘investment grade roofing.’ So profit margins are fairly robust. In fact, for about two-thirds of contractors who install metal roofs, that’s all they do.”

MRA offers a suite of marketing and sales tools.

“We generate leads for contractors through our MRA website and do a lot of consumer advertising to drive traffic to the site,” Hippard says.

At present the organization is conducting a seven-month media campaign that

code, as well as contact information on homeowners who have visited the MRA website in search of local contractors.

Installer members of MRA can also obtain print, radio and TV advertisements that can be tagged with their own contact information and circulated via local media outlets.

Homeowners who visit the MRA website can now upload photos of their homes and actually see what different types and makes of metal roofs would look like.

“This tool is also a tremendous asset for contractors, since a customer doesn’t have to guess what the home would look

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METALMASTER ROOFMASTER

Ongoing advances in metal roofing paints and coatings help contractors keep up with architects' changing tastes.

like," adds Hippard.

While the benefits of metal—longevity, beauty, energy efficiency, recyclability—may be the same for commercial and residential roofs, customer objections may vary. Both commercial and residential customers consider the higher cost of metal, but commercial building architects and owners are generally more savvy about the offsetting benefits in roof performance and design. On the other hand, homeowners can be influenced by hearsay.

"Homeowners may need to be educated on certain myths they've heard about metal roofs," explains Hippard. "Contractors may need to explain that metal roofs do not increase the likelihood of lightning strikes, are not noisier than other roofs in rain or hailstorms, and do not rust like the

roof on your old red barn. Also, metal roofs can withstand decades of hail, wind and snow without denting, and they can be walked on without damage."

In contrast to selling a commercial metal roof, which means getting on a bid list, selling a residential metal roof means getting into a homeowner's living room. The latter requires a mix of advertising, marketing and public relations. Advertising influences the buying behavior of targeted consumers, marketing promotes a product or service to those consumers and public relations secures goodwill from the various stakeholders in the company, from consumers to suppliers to local officials.

Integrating these three activities—advertising, marketing, public relations—into a single plan involves

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four steps: research, planning, communication and evaluation. The first step, research, identifies the target audience, its attitudes toward metal roofs, messages that may change those attitudes and available media for conveying those messages.

The goal of the second step, planning, is deciding a mix of media outreaches that give the most bang for the budget (which is usually set as a percentage of annual sales). Communication, the third step, is executing a “creative strategy” geared to consumer education. Then the final step, evaluation, actually launches the research phase of the next campaign.

These steps mirror on a local level the consumer education campaigns of the manufacturers and the Metal Roofing Alliance. National advertising and marketing creates a “brand presence” for residential metal roofs, while contractors’

local efforts win opportunities to make the pitch in person and close the sale.

Respondents to the 2015 *Metal Roofing Magazine* state-of-the-industry poll agreed that such multilevel education remains the key. “As people know more about it, they see the benefits of the quality products, the greener aspects and the more sophisticated options,” said one manufacturer. Added another: “The industry . . . [is] making great strides to educate consumers about the benefits of metal roofing and I think that effort trickles down to everyone.”

The good news, though, is that the market share for metal is increasing in both commercial and residential segments.

A study by the FMI Corp., a construction industry management consulting firm based in Raleigh, North Carolina, reports that between 2009 and 2014 the

market share for commercial metal roofing grew 9.7 percent. Meanwhile, market shares for metal in new and replacement roofing rose 7.1 percent and 4.1 percent, respectively, since 2004.

“Though construction in general hasn’t rebounded as strongly as expected since the 2008 recession,” says Ryan of MCA, “the market share growth for commercial metal roofing has continued, despite the higher cost of these roof systems.”

Similarly, says Hippard of MRA, the market share for residential metal roofing more than tripled between 2000 and 2008, climbing from about 3.5 percent to 11 percent.

“It took a dip after the recession,” he continues, “but has climbed back up to about 9 percent. With this upward trend, we believe metal can eventually reach a 20 percent share of the residential roofing market.” **MR**

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