

It's your move, Mr. Contractor

There is an active role open to the concrete contractor who wants to see his business grow

BY JAMES M. SHILSTONE,
MANAGER MARKETS DEVELOPMENT
TRINITY DIVISION,
GENERAL PORTLAND INC.
DALLAS, TEXAS

Who is marketing concrete? This is not just an academic question when you consider that the business success of thousands of contractors depends directly on whether concrete is successfully marketed in the face of competitive materials.

To many, marketing is thought to be the same as selling. But it's not, when in the context of promotion of business. No sale can take place unless the proper atmosphere or situation has first been created. For example, the best and most efficient concrete contractor in the country has no chance to sell his services on a project designed to be built in steel and glass. A good marketing effort would have had that building designed in concrete thus creating the selling opportunity.

The essence of marketing is creating the selling opportunity. In terms that are meaningful to concrete contractors and those who supply them, this means making certain that an increasing share of new construction gets designed in concrete. It's as simple (and complicated) as that.

Some people feel that it is the structural engineer who decides whether a building will be concrete or steel. This is a dangerous oversimplification. When the designer

shows a building in his drawings to be a glass encrusted monolith, the probability is greater than 90 to 95 percent that a steel structure will be built. When the designer depicts an exposed concrete structure, our industry will probably have a concrete building to construct.

So it is safe to say that the designer is a pivotal person who must be reached by anyone who is out to market concrete. But even the designer is subject to the instructions of another party: the owner. And owners, in turn must meet the demands of tenants who decide whether a given building meets their needs and budget.

The chain of decision makers is a long one, but each link can be influenced—and this influence can come from many sources. It may come from firms like General Portland Inc. through our national advertising, educational seminars, noncommercialized concrete promotion, tape-slide programs, and articles written for architect- and owner-oriented publications. It may also come from association activity where the resources of many firms are brought together in a concentrated effort. It could certainly come from the efforts of individual contractors whose execution of each job has the greatest influence of all whether tenants, owners and designers are satisfied with the performance of concrete. We would like to see our industry follow the policy of conservation oriented foresters: plant two for each one cut.

Attitude of architects

A recent survey by a prominent architectural magazine revealed that only 21 percent of the architects who responded expected any increase in the number of plain reinforced concrete building projects in the foreseeable future. A larger number, 26 percent, foresaw increases in composite steel and con-

crete construction, 26 percent anticipated increases in the use of architectural concrete, 33 percent expected more conventional steel frame construction and 62 percent looked to a greater use of precast concrete. For the man whose livelihood depends on site-cast concrete this survey does not predict a bright future.

The objections to concrete raised by these architects include concern about unpredictable quality, construction time and the higher cost of designing a concrete structure. (Although the availability of design data is about the same for steel and concrete, engineering design for steel in major buildings is on occasion provided through steel company computers at no cost.) Some architects also argue that steel has a slight overall advantage over concrete in regard to cost.

These items of criticism provide one line of attack for those who want to market concrete. They reveal areas where the concrete industry needs to put its own house in order or, in some cases, to educate the decision makers to the realities of the situation. The supposed cost advantage is often an illusion—as will be illustrated in this article.

New developments in such areas as flying forms, gang forms, systems building, high strength concretes and others, as well as the growing sophistication and efficiency of contractors, have led to dramatically faster construction in concrete, but the industry has done far too little on letting decision makers know about these changes. The advantages must be cited in the context of the impact upon an entire building. No concrete frame by itself will suffice for an office tower; an inexpensive concrete construction which defies economical installation of heating, ventilating and air conditioning systems is surely no solution.

Unpredictable quality is by far the industry's most serious stumbling block. Answering this criticism comes right down to the men in the field who plan, execute and supervise the work. When concrete work is botched—and this even includes a residential foundation or sidewalk—the concrete industry's marketing effort takes a step backwards. Day in and day out many concrete contractors are creating their own bad publicity before the public, usually just in order to save a little on the cost of a current job. What false economy.

Accentuating the positive

When the architects in the above-mentioned survey were asked, "Would you prefer to use exposed concrete which has inherent visual characteristics?" about 78 percent answered yes. And many took the time to tell why. Natural materials, unlimited design, texture and character, honesty, pure, fireproof, and low maintenance were among the words used. Some of this may sound a bit gushy, but it is important to understand that these comments reveal motivators present in the minds of decision makers. When you are trying to market a product you had better know what it is that motivates your audience.

Concrete with its plasticity offers the architect great freedom of design. Its use of natural materials, often those native to the area, and its ability to reveal these materials in an endless variety of ways leads most architects to describe concrete as offering a better expression of the structure. The creativity and originality possible with concrete represent a powerful influence on designers—a positive influence that is inherent in the material, one that could singlehandedly do much of the marketing job if it weren't for one thing: unpredictable execution. The artist who paints a lousy picture just hides it in the attic. The architect who sees his work of art turn into an eyesore is stuck with it and too often resolves not to experiment with concrete again.

The question of cost

Table I illustrates what happens costwise when architectural concrete is substituted for plain reinforced concrete. For this example, we assume a 10- to 12-story building to be constructed in Dallas, with exposed columns, down-tumed spandrel beams and walls on which construction joints and tie holes are articulated. The premium comes out to \$1.74 per square foot, representing such factors as the extra care needed in erecting the reinforcing and placing the concrete, higher quality forms, a brush blast and two coats of sealer. This premium of \$1.74 per square foot of exposed concrete translates into a 60 percent increase in the in-place cost of plain structural concrete. To the price-conscious individual this sounds prohibitive.

Yet look at the cost comparison in Table 2. To produce a brick finish for this building the cost of that ex-

terior might run about \$3.50 per square foot—almost \$2 per square foot more than the architectural concrete.

Market before you sell

What can any segment of the concrete industry do to improve the use of its product? What is it that should be marketed? The item to be marketed is concrete. If the project is not concrete to begin with, there is no use in fighting over whether it should have been prestressed, post-tensioned, bar-reinforced, site-cast or precast. The public certainly doesn't care how it's done. The entrepreneur is interested in the salability and the ultimate durability of the product; he has little immediate interest in what to him are minor factors: what metal should be embedded in the concrete or how the concrete is put together; but he does want it to meet his aesthetic objectives. Why should we fight over the

TABLE I A breakdown of typical costs for replacing regular concrete with architectural concrete

(Based on 40 square feet of surface per cubic yard of concrete)

	Cost premium per square foot
Concrete: \$15 premium per cubic yard.....	\$0.38
Reinforcing steel: labor premium (10 percent).....	0.10
Forms: better quality and care.....	0.70
Placement: \$4 per cubic yard (100 percent increase).....	0.10
Cleaning: brush blast.....	0.30
Sealing: two coats.....	0.16
TOTAL PREMIUM.....	\$1.74

TABLE II Cost savings achieved by using architectural concrete

	Cost per square foot
Brick: Alternative design solution.....	\$3.50
Concrete: premium for architectural quality.....	1.74
Savings from using architectural concrete.....	1.76
Total number of square feet.....	200,000
Savings per square foot.....	\$1.76
Cost reduction.....	\$352,000.00

method of concrete construction at this level? Market your type of construction to the engineer but market concrete to the prime decision maker. Never forget that the engineer cannot make a decision to design in reinforced concrete if he does not have a concrete building to design. When you approach the architect, recognize that he has his own point of view. If you don't motivate him from his point of view you will have failed. Self-made men from the concrete industry have strong personalities and tend to tell others the information they want to transmit. Telling is seldom an effective technique for marketing an idea.

How is it done? I suggest organizing the RAM program—research, analysis, motivation. The first step is to undertake market research to find what is wanted in the market place. With the survey results in hand the next step is to analyze the findings and determine in what manner your products can meet the needs of the decision makers. From this analysis should come a plan to motivate—not sell—decision makers to accept your solution to their needs. This motivation must come from the decision maker's own point of view.


Our company advertises to decision makers in a soft-sell manner

and through exhibits at industry meetings and conventions. It contacts the major design architects and the major corporations with continuing building programs. It promotes concrete buildings before it promotes our company's products. It is only later that the question of using concrete for visual purposes arises. Only then can the company architectural cements be considered. We promote many concrete buildings which don't use our cements but we accept this as part of the game. Naturally we hope to have our selling opportunities improved by the efforts of others on some occasions.

We are concerned that many architects cite quality problems and lack of field know-how as a deterrent to the use of concrete and we are therefore communicating determinedly at seminars conducted at our facilities and in many cities over the country. We prefer to conduct these sessions at major universities as part of their industry-oriented continuing education programs. To date 35 have been conducted and 16 are being scheduled for 1974. We author articles for publication that tell many things never before presented in writing on the subject of how to construct architectural concrete. We have many other pro-

grams and try to show the way to others at marketing seminars conducted under the title "Creating the Selling Opportunity." Six of these are planned for 1974.

Our company policy is "Though we sell cement, we market concrete;" we would like to see the philosophy behind this slogan adopted by others. This is a large nation and a large industry and there is room for everyone to make a major contribution to the marketing of concrete.

Significant results from such a program cannot be expected instantly. The minimum building planning and construction period is a long one but the results will be obvious to you as you walk down the streets. The buildings will not be unknowns, hiding their steel skeletons, but will tell you proudly that they are concrete, the free forming plastic material than can be cast to meet almost every need of man. "Creativity in concrete" is not just a catchy phrase; it is a fact. Any segment of the industry can capitalize on this if it markets concrete in order to sell its product. 

PUBLICATION #C740053

Copyright © 1974, The Aberdeen Group
All rights reserved