

INSPECTOR'S CORNER

Commercially Speaking

By Bob Lucas, Certified Inspector

It has been a while since I wrote about the hazards and rewards awaiting those looking to step into the commercial market place. The continued down-turn of the economy in the months since that article and a housing construction market that resembles the life-cycle of the 17-year locust has made the discussion points in that piece all the more apropos. Just two short years ago when everyone was working as fast as they possibly could and looking for additional installation resources behind every rock and tree did anyone ever suspect it could get this quiet this fast? Well, if you did then "hats off to you" for having good insight; I hope you also modified your business plan and methods to get "lean and mean" early so that you can make the most of what is certainly a difficult market to say the least. To say times are tough might get me an award for the understatement of the quarter. Recent articles in our professional journals such as *Floor Covering Installer Magazine* and daily comments from friends in other construction related trades put indisputable definition to the clichés.

So with all of the stark reality facing us it might seem rather odd to talk about how to "differentiate" your company in the current market. "Differentiate, surely you must be joking? We are just trying to survive!" I am not joking and don't call me Shirley (for those of you old enough to remember, that's called humor). If there is one lesson that I have learned in my few short years of living it is this: Nothing will take you out faster than turning your complete focus to survival at the cost of all else. Even in difficult times you must be looking for those opportunities, edges, and chances to show that you have more between your ears than most. Hopefully, the recent conversations and meetings within the WFSCA to discuss "GREEN" and what that means in the current market have given you some new tools in that endeavor. To that end, I would like to continue the "GREEN" dialogue and expand your commercial vocabulary to help with those opportunities for differentiation. I know, you thought this was the inspector's corner; I promise we are getting there!

If I didn't scare you off from considering commercial work with my last effort, or the commercial world is your sole focus then these two terms are something that you need to get very familiar with. "EXISTING CONDITIONS", as in the 100 year-old historical landmark government building that you have just inherited as your next flooring project. "AS-BUILT CONDITIONS", as in the concrete-and-steel now staring at you from some corner of the Seattle Metro-plex that may or may not resemble the plans you bid your job from about a year ago. What do these have to do with "GREEN" you ask? If you remember your "GREEN" principles from recent articles and seminars then you know one point reigns supreme when aiming for "GREEN": The flooring installation that lasts the longest is the "GREENEST", all other things being equal. How "GREEN" friendly is it to have to replace an entire project of synthetic flooring materials weeks or months after the project was finished due to some oversight in your "evaluation" or "documentation" along the way? Now you see where we are going! Throwing a bunch of flooring materials in a land-fill after less than 2% of their anticipated lifespan is never a good idea. However, it is especially painful when the project in question was LEED-Certified, and the architect and owner were already patting themselves on the back for all of the credits they had amassed through the construction process and are currently contemplating their acceptance speeches at some "Green-Building Council" extravaganza in the very near future. Imagine how happy they will be when they hear the price tag of the remediation process

that now must be performed due to some deficiency with the design that was missed and could have been corrected rather inexpensively long ago "if but only". Now it will cost 5 times as much. To top it off the product that you are suggesting for the "fix" does not meet any of the LEED requirements for the project! Guess who won't be getting a Christmas card from the architect this year?! You have just differentiated yourself whether you meant to or not.

As we look at our two vocabulary words let's take them in reverse (and I will cover only one in this article to help the editor with the near impossible task of reigning in my prose). As-Built conditions refer to the difference between "what was planned" and "what is". You know the scenario; you celebrated receiving that verbal confirmation informing you that you were *finally* awarded a nice project (1,500 bid responses later) and then promptly forgot about it until you get that call from some Project Engineer informing you that your scope of work is about to start in THREE WEEKS! As the paramedics leave after resuscitating you from the massive coronary that ensued you are now frantically calling to check on material availability and if your favorite installation sub-contractor is back from his month-long trip to New Zealand (hey, there wasn't much work so why not?). Lucky for you the manufacturer's rep was on the ball and tracking the project so the materials will ship tomorrow. A couple of \$1000 plane tickets and your installer will make it in time. But what about the job site? You haven't even seen it yet because it is an hour-and-a half drive one way and last time you were in that area they weren't even out of the ground (commercial-speak for "barely started"). You have no idea what the current conditions are or what the installation team will face when they arrive.

As you drive up the scene before you resembles the devastation one might envision following a 9.0 earthquake in some remote third-world country. Men in hard-hats, safety vests and work boots stroll through the wreckage and debris as if looking for victims. As you wander up somewhat dazed by all of the activity (after checking your Map-Quest printout to make sure you are in the right city) and begin to focus you realize those piles aren't debris, that is all of the plumber's supplies and pipe-fitting equipment sitting right in the middle of what is suppose to be the Conference Room where the PE is hoping you will start the carpet-tile installation in about four days! Did anyone tell them that oil and mastic don't mix? And what about the stacks of ceiling tiles in every room? The amount of drywall mud on the floor is roughly twice that on the walls, and the painters have kindly used the concrete floor over which you are hoping to install sheet-vinyl as a drop-cloth. You wonder if it is just your nausea or if you are really walking down-hill as you move to the other side of the building. The first room you check for dimensions is 12' 2" wide; the plans show it to be 12' 0" and this is where the architect specified the broadloom carpet. You know you will be lucky if the carpet is 11' 11", and this is not a stretch-in job! This reality also means you probably need to check the concrete for moisture content; however the fog from your breath tells you that the conditions required for testing likely don't exist, and further the odds of getting a device to survive even 24 hours (72, are you kidding?!) in this holocaust is slim to none. The reality of AS-BUILT, not AS-PLANNED is begging to sink in as you feel your stomach really starting to churn. Hopefully you have your digital camera, because that is where we are going to start the next time. And you might want a have pocket voice recorder; just make sure not to turn it on until after you have stepped outside and counted to ten, twice!