

Smart Shopping Plans and Specs Part One

In our last column, we talked about smart shopping the construction numbers game. There are two essential elements to every successful project: the right team of people, and good plans and specs. An ideal, "apples to apples" comparison of construction costs is possible only in theory. In the real world, no matter how complete your plans and specifications, it is important to carefully consider the person you are hiring to execute your project. Plans and specifications are critical starting points, however. Without them, even the best contractor will be inefficient and ineffective, which means some of your resources (your time, your money) will be wasted.

So how do you go about smart shopping the cost of developing those plans and specifications? If kitchens, baths, or for that matter, entire houses were as standardized as TVs, you might consider flipping through the yellow pages under architects, designers or drafters and spending time on the phone getting "bids" for the "plans" for your anticipated project. As you suspect, however, things are not that simple. At this point, your project probably is a somewhat vague notion in the back of your mind. It may even be that each time the subject comes up with your spouse, you describe the project differently. It's not hard to understand that you couldn't get a fixed lump sum construction bid from a Contractor on that variable and vague notion. After all, what would they base the bid on? Likewise, you shouldn't expect to get a definitive simple fixed cost on transforming that that vague notion to hard lines on paper.

The plans and specifications that you need to clearly describe what you intend to produce are legally termed "instruments of service". In other words, they are tools to help you accomplish what you are really after, which is to build

something. You need the information contained in and communicated by the plans and specs. The actual paper can't even be used to wrap fish when you are done - at that point, it's virtually worthless. When you hire an Architect or designer, what you are buying is the services needed to get information put into a form that is useful to you and other members of the project team. The paper that results is not what you are 'buying'.

Unlike products that come off an assembly line, service is not uniform. Service is totally dependent on the quality and nature of the provider. Numerous factors will influence how well a particular provider's service fits you. Even if the service is good, if there is a mismatch in terms of personality, perception, even history, it can make it difficult to communicate, which might make it impossible to get those vague notions down to something concrete.

Let's just say you are ready to very clearly and precisely describe what exactly it is that you intend to do. You want those intentions reduced to lines on paper. It might seem that you should be able to call around and get quotes over the phone for the plans you need. Besides the service aspect I've already alluded to, this is also complicated by the fact that there is no standard in the construction industry as to what exactly should go into a set of plans. Designers, contractors, architects and all the various other people who prepare plans all have their own ideas about plans and specs, and as you probably guessed, they are all different. Ah, but wait a minute, you think - doesn't the building department determine what is needed in a set of plans? Well, they do have some standards. Those standards are based on them carrying out their mission, which is to enforce prevailing

codes. That mission is not exactly what your mission is -to construct a usable and fit addition which meets a specific set of design, functional, maintenance, aesthetic and other criteria.

So how can you quantify what the cost of developing plans and specifications will be? Is it a hopelessly arbitrary process? No. Fortunately, there is a logical and rational process to go through. First, decide *why you need the plans and specifications*. Then, you decide whether you need anything else in the way of service to supplement the plans and specs. In my next column, I'll walk thru this rational process step by step.

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