



Bidding for Large Contracts *October 23, 2007; Page B4*

Q: I started a company that does cabling installation for new residential and commercial buildings. How does someone in my line of work, dealing with builders and contractors, get in on the bidding process for larger contracts? I do not have any past or present projects to help establish a reputation.

-- Craig Ganssle, Atlanta

A: Though a good reputation and work experience will help win bids, a new subcontractor can offer a builder or general contractor things many others don't: an energetic personality, newly trained expertise and solid work ethic.

"The biggest mistake you can do in the beginning is not show up when you say you're going to," because timeliness and reliability issues plague so many building companies, says Tom Silva, general contractor for PBS's "This Old House" series.

Mr. Silva auditions prospective contractors by walking through a project and asking them to explain how they would handle a particular job to make sure they're well-versed in their trade. But he also looks for an upbeat attitude, a willingness to be "at his beck and call," and honesty about what they can -- and cannot -- do. "If they say to me, 'Well, I'm not sure about that,' right away I like that person," Mr. Silva says. "I know they're being honest."

He also hires only subcontractors who carry their own liability insurance and worker's compensation.

Of course, to meet builders and contractors you must network and form alliances since building is a close-knit industry. Most builders keep a short list of people they solicit bids from on projects. To get on those lists, you need to be persistent and join local trade groups. Introducing yourself at project sites is a good way to get on builders' radar screens. You can compile a list of builders and contractors working in your area by checking out building permits at town hall.

Bill Cosman, project executive for F.H. Perry Builder Inc., of Hopkinton, Mass., says one benefit of hiring upstart contractors is that they often charge less than more-established companies. So you might think about keeping prices lower as you try to build clientele -- as long as you maintain quality work.

Also, many new contractors take on small projects, even for relatives and friends, to build up work history and gain clients through word of mouth.

But in the end, Mr. Cosman says, it's a strive-to-please attitude and work ethic that count most. "I'm always looking for that diamond in the rough," he says.