

BID MORE WORK

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The bid room is getting crowded these days. Whereas in years past subcontractors would find themselves competing with roughly five or six other bidders for a job, it's not uncommon these days for that number to be around 12 or 15 bidders.

Part of this can be linked to the slowdown in the residential construction market. With the pipeline of work slowing to a trickle for many specialty trades in residential, these companies are making inroads into light commercial work in order to keep profits afloat. While some would argue residential trades should not pose a big threat to their commercial counterparts due to the differing nature between the two markets-different bidding structures, for example-many of these firms are at least piquing the interest of the GC (general contractor).

Whatever the reason, the reality is times are tough. Therefore, subcontractors need to increase their odds of getting work, which means bidding as many jobs as possible.

There are many online resources available for finding work both at a regional level and national level. Given current market conditions it might be a wise investment for subcontractors to subscribe to one of these services.

iSqFt, www.isqft.com, Cincinnati, Ohio, is one such resource. Subcontractors that subscribe to the network can search for public projects in the Internet Plan Room based on the CSI (Construction Specifications Institute) codes they perform and types of projects they want to bid. Its partnership with local chapters of the Associated General Contractors of America, www.agc.org, Arlington, Va., allows subs to search online plan rooms of projects both locally and nationally.

"As we talk to subs across the country there is a bit more anxiety about the state of the economy and that heightens the need to be competitive," says Mike Reckers, vice president of marketing, iSqFt. "That means you need to have your feelers out there to know where the work is.

"Subcontractors post an online profile of their company on iSqFt which is, in essence, their company's resume. Their profile lists such things as service area, type of work, and even talks about their job history and any other factors that distinguishes them from others. When a GC does a search for bidders for a job and gets ready to send out their invitations, they are able to view that profile through our Website."

BXNetwork, www.bxnetwork.org, provides a network of builder exchanges and other construction associations located throughout the United States and Canada that provide plan room services. Its Website provides a list of regional builder exchanges.

According to BXNetwork, its network represents more than 80,000 construction-related businesses across the country. Network members provide services, including bidding reports,

plan rooms, statistical research, and assistance in locating qualified contractors. According to the organization, assistance to owners and construction purchasers is provided free of charge. (see p11 for list of resources)

General contractors are definitely using these tools to their advantage. Barton Malow, www.bartonmalow.com, Southfield, Mich., uses the online communication platform from GradeBeam, www.gradebeam.com, Chicago, Ill., to streamline the invitation to bid process.

Jeff Baxa, director of preconstruction, Barton Malow, says another benefit of using GradeBeam is having access to a national directory of subcontractors.

“When we go and bid work in areas in which we do not have a large presence, we can use this national directory of subs,” says Baxa. “The benefit of that over some of the other resources is that GradeBeam already classifies the subs into CSI classification and the type of work they do.

“You still need to do your homework-if 200 roofers are listed, for example, you are not going to invite all 200. You have to do a bit of homework, finding the (qualified) companies you want to work with, but it is a great starting point.”

GradeBeam offers a range of different services to help connect GCs and subs and is currently connection more than 220,000 contractors across North America, handling more than two million project messages in 2007.

While these platforms provide a good foot in the door, subcontractors are not assured of landing the job. Relationships are built over time, but as Reckers points out, this can help the subcontractor make a good first impression and can ultimately lead to an invitation to bid.