

Marketing to the A&D Community



Being Effective in a Challenged Economy

By Trish Brock

Dealers recognize the importance of strong relationships with the A&D community, but some have more meaningful alliances than others. Even though it's a challenging economic climate, now is an opportune time to solidify relationships and build new ones with designers.

Instead of presuming to know what the A&D community wants from their dealers, I asked! I spoke with a number of designers from large firms to small independents, seasoned and experienced designers and younger designers anxious to make their mark.

They were all generous with their time and their thoughts and were pleased to share their opinions with the dealer community. They all wanted to help. Here is what they had to say.

Big Question

what do you want and expect from dealers?

"I want educating, I want to learn. I want information on new products and emerging trends. I want a trusting relationship" was the reply from one very experienced designer. "Dealers have to remember that it's not all about the dealer—it's about ideas that are shared with the designer. I want dealers who listen and then make good recommendations."

Another designer commented, "Dealers should be well versed and have access to GSA and US Communities contract information. They must know and understand those contracts and help designers navigate the process. We're on tight time lines and need information fast from dealers—we often don't have time to wait while they research something." This is particularly true in this economic climate.

And while we're on the subject of the economy, another designer said, "We all know the major manufacturers' products. But in this economy, I'm really interested in smaller, interesting and cost-efficient manufacturers. I have to work with smaller budgets now so I want value without sacrificing good looks. This is a great time for dealer salespeople to show me new and less costly options."



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In matters of service, “I want calls returned fast – at least within 24 hours or less. We are always under tight deadlines. If a sales person is out, I want a back up available. I expect the dealer salesperson to really know their lines and be able to make good recommendations. I can’t possibly know all the products and I want to use the dealer as a resource.”

There were several comments regarding installers. “The installation crew must be professional—no boom boxes, no swearing, clean and identified with the dealer and not a random crew.” Another designer commented that, “I like it when a dealer has their own crew, or at least a consistent contact.”

What are some challenges you have had with dealers?

This question got a lot of attention! “We want to partner with dealers, but sometimes dealers compete with A&D. Some dealers do end-runs, take our clients to manufacturers and change design specs. How can we develop trust as a team when that happens?” Another designer commented, “Don’t go around designers and don’t be adversarial. Dealers need to evaluate their attitudes.”

Another designer said, “We can partner with dealer designers, but we expect dealers to take responsibility for the details of products and the pricing must be checked.”

What is the best way for dealers to communicate with you?

Said one designer, “I don’t use dealer web sites because they usually aren’t helpful; I will go to the manufacturer’s site instead.” Another designer said, “I will try to use a dealer’s site. But many aren’t very informative. Few give me a reason to go back.” When asked what designers want from a dealer web site, one replied, “It should be easy to navigate, be fast, and well designed (both site design as well as graphic design!). I will go to a dealer’s site to see what lines they have and then hope they have a link. I like it when the line list is also sorted by types of furniture.” Another designer said, “I go to a dealer’s site to find contact names and numbers. Don’t make it hard for me to figure out who I should talk to.”

About e-mail blasts: “They are irritating and not effective—I don’t open them. The manufacturers do it and sometimes they’re good. Too often dealer blasts are hokie.” Other comments: “I don’t even look at them. I get too many and there is often too much information. I usually delete them without opening them.”

One designer commented and others agreed, “There are 2-3 smaller manufacturers and one dealer that send really well designed and beautiful e-mails. The messages are simple—I will open those because I know they will be interesting.”

On direct mail: “I don’t get much mail anymore.” Another commented, “I will read post cards but wish they were more eco-friendly.” One designer said that she “finds direct mail irritating” while another said she “likes receiving pieces that are well designed – I’ll keep them and tack them up in my office.”

On lunch ’n learns and events: “Lunch ’n learns can be good, but must be meaningful and worth while. They can be great for seeing new products.” Another helpful comment was, “It’s important to stay on time and within schedule. It’s very awkward when a rep goes over the time limit and people have to walk out.” Another designer suggested, “Quick pop-ins can be good. One rep usually brings a snack so we always look forward to seeing her.”

“After hours events can be good if there are interesting products – early breakfasts can be helpful and so can after work events. It’s nice to network.”

Any other comments or advice you would like to share with dealers?

“I appreciate it when dealers have room for me to come in and work in their library and I can spread out plans and samples. I really like to be able to use their showroom as a resource.” Another said, “It’s good when dealers offer their showrooms for meeting space to ASID, volunteer groups, community groups, US Green Building Council etc. It’s great to get the community in.”

Another designer said that she “likes to work with a dedicated person within a dealership. I like having that trusting relationship and really don’t want to work with a bunch of different people from the same dealer—it’s too confusing and I have to re-establish a relationship each time.”

And lastly, “I like dealers who have a good showroom. It makes it easy for me to bring clients in.” This sentiment was echoed by all.

As dealers look for ways to thrive in this economy, so do design firms. For dealers to be effective, approaching the A&D community is as much about having the right frame of mind as it is about marketing budgets.

Spending both time and money in a thoughtful and focused manner will reap dividends. Understanding designers’ needs, acting on their comments and forging mutually beneficial relationships will certainly help strengthen everyone’s ability to succeed.