A Job-Site Office

From client meetings to tool storage, a fully wired and heated trailer helps this GC manage a complex, long-term project

by Steve Nickerson

I'm a second-generation custom home builder, responsible not only for day-to-day production, but also for estimating, purchasing, scheduling, crew management, coordination of subs and material deliveries, troubleshooting, and daily decision making. Although my crew and I normally take on one job at a time, the large, high-end homes we build often involve the complications of a long-distance relationship with both the architect and the homeowner, as well as suppliers and designers. Our current job has a projected two-year construction schedule and thousands of decisions to make to get to the finish line. Because of the scope and scale of the job, not every detail has been finalized, and we're proceeding on a time-and-materials basis, which means I'll be spending plenty of time at my desk as the job progresses. Over the years, I've contemplated investing in a field office trailer to narrow the gap between paperwork and site work. On this job, with the architect in British Columbia, and the homeowner miles away and traveling extensively, it finally made sense.

At first, I looked into renting a field office trailer. At $175 per

month, the price seemed reasonable enough — only about 50% higher than leasing a port-a-potty. The rental outfit would also provide storage for the trailer when not in use, which solved another potential problem. (They advised me that the trailers tend to take a beating, so it's best to hang on to your original rental if you know you'll need it again, and especially if you've made interior modifications.) As it happened, I heard of a developer who was selling his trailer for $1,000, so I jumped at it. Instead of assigning a monthly charge to the job-cost accounting, I posted a one-time rental fee for the purchase amount.

I take some ribbing from subs and colleagues when they get wind of my field office, as if I'd become a high-falutin' big shot. Admittedly, its typical home may be on a heavy construction project, but at rock bottom, the jibes are nothing but green-eyed envy. After all, I've got a fixed, calm center to run the job from, immediately accessible, but out of harm's way.

Justifying the Cost

We parked the trailer in the path of the service trench and buried a pvc electrical conduit from the temporary meter pedestal at street side to the trailer. The pair of 10-gauge electrical wires and the phone lines we ran in the conduit would eventually be used to pull the permanent power cables through the conduit.

About one third of the trailer was already partitioned off for an office, with the remainder set aside for storage. A side door gives access to the office, and a roll-up door at the rear gives full access to the storage. There's an interior door between sections.

Bonus benefits. We installed electric baseboard heat in both sections and added shelves in the storage section for tools and supplies. The heat keeps caulks and compounds pliable for use in cold weather and provides a suitable climate for prepainting trim components. The crew also appreciates the warmth for storage of extra layers of winter clothing.

At the back end of the storage section, we installed a kitchenette, including a small refrigerator, a microwave, and a coffee maker. Although this setup has all but eliminated trips to the coffee shop, we still lose a little time, because it's tough to drag yourself back out into the cold after a break.

We set up the compressor inside the storage end and ran all the air hoses from the trailer. This helps prevent freeze-ups in the pressure tank, lines, and filter during cold weather. The lines are partially buried between the trailer and the house to prevent trips, snags, and disruption.

Heated storage keeps caulks and paints pliable, collated nails dry, and prevents equipment freeze-ups. It also provides a place for crew members to hang extra layers of winter clothing.

Office Layout

I've got a desk and a plan table, a phone and a fax machine, an answering machine, a laptop computer, a file cabinet, and various reference books, catalogs, and forms for purchase orders and job-cost tracking. The office is also the collection point for the myriad material samples under consideration. When the owners are in town, we have a warm, relatively comfortable place on site to discuss, compare, and make selections. This proves to be far more effective than standing together in an unheated shell, hopping from foot to foot and putting off decisions because you're all too cold to think straight.

Pickup posts. We keep a dry-erase board in the office for posting daily notes on pickup items. Whenever we run low on supplies or materials, or anyone needs a specific piece of hardware or a tool, it generates a note on the board. Any crew member making a supply run knows to check the board for pickup items, copy the note to a shopping list, and wipe it off the board. I also check the board when making routine calls to suppliers.

The kitchenette provides a gathering place to restore circulation in cold weather and eliminates time-consuming trips to the coffee shop.

Improved Communications

The fax machine has proved to be a highly effective, hard-working piece of equipment. I use it to send purchase orders to suppliers, along with a dated cover sheet. After faxing, I staple the sheets together and file them for reference. This provides irrefutable proof when questions arise as to who ordered what and when, and keeps me and the suppliers literally on the same page.

Plan updates and shop drawings also flow back and forth via fax. The architect and I resolve many details quickly with an exchange of sketches. But, recently, I've been coming up to speed with AutoCAD LT, which brings a high degree of accuracy to the shop drawing process. Because the architect generated the building plans using the same program, we've begun to communicate by drawing on the computer and e-mailing the updates back and forth.

Plan book. Along with a set of full-size blueprints, we keep a tab-organized three-ring binder — we call it the joke book or bible, depending on the situation — of detail drawings for every plan and elevation in the building. The CAD program enables "zoom-window" printouts or close-ups of any section of the plan. Because CAD drafting allows the inclusion of intricate, real-world detail, zooms reveal information that's nearly invisible on a 1/4-inch-scale print.

Each tab section begins with an overview sheet of a plan or elevation section, then breaks that section down in a series of detail sheets, all on legal-size, 8 1/2x14-inch paper, protected by plastic sleeves. It's a very durable, effective way to keep the plans organized and accessible to my crew and subcontractors. At the end of the job, I leave the binder with the client as a functional record of the building and mechanical systems.

Telephones. Obviously, the telephone is a central piece of office equipment, and we've got one, hard-wired at the desk. It's connected to the answering machine, which I check periodically throughout the day. This item alone shortens the time lag between call and response — calls otherwise left at my home office wouldn't be dealt with until the following morning. I also carry a cell phone, handy if I'm on the roof and someone needs information in a real hurry, but I give that number out on a need-to-know basis only.

Although we're doing this job on a T&M basis, formal change orders are still necessary. You can't beat the immediacy of conducting a phone discussion from the job site when plan changes arise. I can troubleshoot a proposed change while viewing

At the administrative end of the trailer, the author and crew review the plans and note needed supplies on a dry-erase board (left). A tab-indexed three-ring binder provides close-up details of the CAD-generated plan in protective plastic sleeves (above).

the area in question, instead of trying to visualize things from a remote office. One of the most important issues to the owner is the schedule and the effect of any deviations from it. A faxed change-order form substantiates schedule revisions on the spot. I handle most discussions with the owners by phone. I've found it's best to have a written record of what transpired between us, whether the topic is a technical question to be answered, changing insurance requirements as the work progresses, or neighborhood politics. I write up the appropriate notation and fax it to the owners for their signature. When it comes back, I file it. Eventually, I'll transfer all of these records to my home office, but not until the end of the job. Keeping them at hand on site for reference streamlines the ongoing process of Q&A that gets the job done.

Time tracking. Because most of my jobs are long term, both the crew and I tend to be week oriented, rather than by the hour. We all end up filling in the blanks from memory on Thursday, the end of the pay cycle. I take the cards home for payroll processing and disburse checks the following day.

In an ideal world, we'd all complete our time cards daily, breaking down tasks into hourly increments for later analysis and application in a unit-cost database. I once gave that concept a trial run but found the computer program I was auditioning too cumbersome and the data input too time consuming. However, the field office makes accurate time tracking too convenient to ignore, so I plan to have a unit-cost database up and running in the near future.

Overhead factor. Unlike those of a permanent business office, the expenses incurred maintaining an on-site office may seem to blur the line between fixed overhead and direct job costs. I've kept things simple by ignoring the issue. The trailer cost went down as a one-time equipment charge, early on, and office power usage is undifferentiated from general site consumption. The power company bills the owner directly. The phone and fax lines are specific to the job, so there's no need to cull unrelated calls. Technically, that leaves my unbillable administrative time, but again, since I'm only on the one job and constantly alternate between desk and task, there isn't a present need to keep track.

No Place Like Home

The job-site office doesn't replace my home-based office, where I maintain my permanent records and do the bulk of my preparatory and long-term planning. But it's a far cry from huddling in the front seat of an idling pickup in the dead of winter, buried under a crumpled stack of E-size blueprints, trying to work up an order over an unreliable cell-phone connection.

With all the tools and supplies safely stored, and nearly everything I need to stay in touch and run the job immediately at hand, it's just a little easier to go to work in the morning. It's almost like a home away from home.

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