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Bidding for Free a Losing Battle

I thoroughly enjoyed the article by Dan Kolbert (Business, 4/11) touching on the fallacy of "free" estimates and "competitive" bidding. That so many consumers and contractors won't grasp a basic axiom of business — that the bitterness of low quality will linger long after the sweetness of low price — is mind-boggling.

Some years back I adopted a policy of politely informing potential clients that free estimates are one of the professional courtesies I reserve for established customers. Quotes on work for all others are billed at my regular hourly rate with a three-hour minimum, the exception being a 15-minute gratis consult, by appointment, in my shop. Should I be retained to do the job, the estimate fee is deducted from my first payment.

Works like a charm. Over the phone I can refer tire-kickers, crybabies, and tightwads to the low-end hammer-swingers and tailgate-slammers who they will likely hire anyway. My time is then freed up to spend profitably with reasonable folks who understand the wisdom and mutual benefits of compensating a professional tradesman fairly for all of his time, estimate through cleanup and final payment.

Mike Shannahan
La Porte, Texas

A Better Way Than Bidding

I enjoyed the article "Still Bidding After All These Years?" by Dan Kolbert (Business, 4/11). I've been going through the same process for years, bidding jobs for architects who routinely pass out the plans to several contractors. The builders in turn typically provide wildly different bids, for a variety of reasons, including their willingness to work at lower margins or with low-bid subcontractors, or simply their own inexperience. It's rare that a set of plans provides enough detail for the bids to be compared apples to apples, and, anyway, most experienced builders don't need that much specification.

When a client approaches me before a project has been designed, I recommend architects based on fit and past referrals and advise them to choose the one they're most comfortable with. I promote my own services in the same way. The best outcome is when the client chooses an architect and decides to work with me early in the process; the architect and I can then work together to value-engineer and estimate the project. But if the client feels the need to send the job out to bid, I have to decide if it's worth my time. I always ask the client who the architect is (it may be someone I've worked with before), what the budget is (to see if it's reasonable), and who I'm bidding against (which helps me know whether the client is interested only in price). If it's obvious that the project goals are far beyond what the budget allows, I don't waste my time on a bid.

Eric Dickerson
Dickerson Construction Inc.
Ridgway, Colo.

Using Mastic to Seal Poly

Upon reading the article by Patty McDaniel about sealing a crawlspace liner (12/10), I ordered a gallon of RCD #6 Mastic to solve our ongoing problem of sealing crawlspaces reliably, once and for all. I ran a bench test with a clean piece of 6-mil poly to see if the stuff really sticks. This would be a big discovery for our weatherization company. Unfortunately, the stuff peels right off with hardly a fight. Am I missing something?

Clark Todd
Evergreen Building Contractors
Brattleboro, Vt.

According to customer support at RCD Corp., the maker of RCD #6, polyethylene sheeting is indeed a listed substrate for the mastic. In a follow-up call with Patty McDaniel, she too confirmed that the mastic stuck well to the sheeting. You mentioned that the 6-mil poly you used was clean, but it might be worth trying again with some fresh poly that has been cleaned with mineral spirits. Another thing that you might have done wrong was to use too thick a coating; only a very thin application is needed (.7 to .9 mils). The problem with a thick layer is that if you tried the peel test when the surface of the mastic was dry to the touch, it's possible that the mastic at the bonding surface was still wet. Use a thin layer, and allow your test seam to dry for at least 24 hours. — The Editor

Don't Tape That Bottom Flange

In the article about Zip System sheathing (2/11), it appears that the window may be getting flashed improperly. It is clearly shown in the installation directions for the windows I install that you do not flash over the flange at the sill. More and more I see experienced builders failing to look at instructions for any product. Things

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change, though, so you should occasionally look; otherwise, you may be denied a warranty claim.

Dan Hansen
Byron, Ill.

Thanks for the letter; as the photos below show, author Tim Uhler does in fact install the windows correctly, first flashing the rough sill (1), then installing the window with the bottom flange nailed snugly so that water can still drain out (2). The side and top flanges are then sealed with flashing tape. — The Editor

West Coast Perspective on Tile Roofing

The article on tile roof replacement (4/11) was very interesting and detailed. I'm on the West Coast, and there are definitely some regional variations in tile installation methods. One example is that local roofers use vertical lath strips to align and anchor the tile. The use of nails to hold the lath and the tiles has always been a bit unnerving to me so I was interested to learn about the use of the foam adhesive. One comment I often hear is that no water should be allowed beneath the tile, and any that does get under must be routed back to the surface. So, for example, at pipe penetrations, the flashing boot is lapped over a flexible flashing (sheet lead is one type) that is laid over the course below. This flashing "skirt" then gets covered by the next course of tile. Above the pipe boot a second skirt is installed and similarly covered, bringing the water above the pipe back onto the surface of the tile. A similar detail is used for skylight penetrations.

The roofers tell us that these details keep water off the underlayment. If you do get a leak, you might be told that the water got under the tile after all and rotted the felt paper. In a typical repair, they'll pull off some tiles, fix the paper, put the tiles back, add a different flashing or a lead skirt, and submit the bill.

Bob Dorazio
Avila Beach, Calif.

The Florida approach recognizes that water will indeed get under the tile and that the underlayment is the real waterproof roof surface — the tile just protects the underlayment from sun and hail and other weather. Rain that does get under the tile will run freely down and out at the bottom, through weep holes in the closures. As the authors point out, screws through the underlayment are kept to a bare minimum, used only for edge tiles, per code, and always driven through a bed of asphalt mastic. The nails used to fasten the vertical battens in a traditional West Coast tile roof would compromise the carefully installed underlayment described in the article; it's perhaps not a problem in California because there's less rain and, to date anyway, infrequent hurricanes. The photo below shows tile being fitted around a flashed vent pipe; no additional woven flashings are required. — The Editor

Gluing Sheathing Improves Air Sealing

I'm writing in response to a recent post in the *JLC* online forums that gluing OSB to studs causes the OSB to buckle. I've been building houses with advanced framing methods since 1998 and successfully gluing the OSB or plywood sheathing to the studs since 1999. Buckling is most often caused because the panels are not properly spaced. When using construction adhesive, you still have to leave a gap. The glued sheathing provides additional shear resistance and also, if done correctly, helps to make the sheathing an air barrier. The last wood-framed house I built (in 2009) tested at 55 cfm at 50 pascals.

Tony Grahame
Tifton, Ga.