



Task an innovator in construction management

Construction management firm provides “pure” management services

Brian Martin

(The traditional ways in which construction is sold are changing. This is the first in a series of stories in which Construction in Vancouver will look at different companies noted for marketing their services.)

In the first 30 seconds of the interview John Hiebert sums up the gist

of what he has to say: “We are,” he says, “a different kind of company”.

Hiebert is the president of Task Construction Management in Burnaby. They are not general contractors and they do not bid on tendered jobs.

Their specialty is what Hiebert calls “pure” construction management. They act as agents for owners. This involves managing the construction process and managing all the various subcontractors needed to build a project. At the end of the day, however, the subcontractors work for the project’s owner. They do not work for Task as they would if Task were a general contractor.

The company is one of very few in Canada offering their type of service.

Construction management allows Task to offer completely unbiased advice to owners, says, Hiebert.

It is considerably different from the type of construction delivery that is normally used in either public construction or private construction. In public construction some 80 per cent is still handled through open tendering. In private construction the tendering is normally confined to a closed group of invited general contractors.

In the middle somewhere between general contracting and construction management is a hybrid called “construction management at risk”. It is more common than “pure” construction management and is offered by many of the major players

in the industry. In “construction management at risk” a contractor comes in initially as an advisor but during the process will offer to do a project at a fixed price. At that point the contractor has assumed the risk for bringing the project in on budget, just as he would in any tendering process. In the jobs Task takes on the risk remains with the owner of the project.

“This,” says Hiebert, “empowers owners to build for themselves with our kind of input and expertise.”

Task has built in many parts of the province and is now slowly moving into Alberta. In recent years, though, they have carved

out a special reputation in the Southern Interior.

They have been particularly successful in managing the construction of municipal recreation

and arts facilities

includes an aquatic centre in Trail, an upgrade to the Memorial Arena in Trail, a \$22 million Cranbrook Recreation Centre; and a new recreation centre and performing arts centre in Vernon with a combined value of about \$25 million.

It is apparent that Task is doing something right.

In its 15-year history it has yet to be sued even once – something that is almost unheard of in the construction business.

Task’s challenge when it comes to “selling” is to convince an owner to go with construction management in the first place. To accomplish this the company likes to get its message in early – the very minute someone starts to even think about a project. By the time a job hits the point of calling for tenders it’s no longer of interest to them.

“On the other hand” says Hiebert, “marketing, as opposed to selling, means that if we have been doing our job an owner should already know who we are. So, it is not even a cold call when we contact them.”

Task is active in industry associations and trade shows. Hiebert regularly makes time to speak to different groups and his company has won five awards and one honorary mention in the Awards of Excellence program run by the Vancouver Regional Construction Association. Two of the awards were for a zero accident frequency record. The rest were all for excellence in building.

In addition Task is very savvy when it comes to understanding how business is done in small town British Columbia – an important factor when dealing at the municipal level.

While Task does not deal with preferential tendering; nor do they hire directly, they do make sure the components of specific jobs are broken down into segments small enough that local trade contractors have a good chance at successfully bidding them. In this way the projects ensure the opportunity for hometown employment. Hiebert describes this as a “big, big thing” for his company.

“We’re in the reputation business,” says Hiebert. He readily provides prospects with lists of satisfied clients. Those clients are, he insists, his best selling point.

“The Number One way of improving your marketing is to improve your service. We are a professional service company. We believe construction is a service. It is not a product. It is not a commodity. The project we’re building is not my building. It’s not my concrete or my steel going into it.

“If you start out with the premise that construction is a service then how you market is totally different.”

Very few companies in Canada offer their type of service