

# The Retail Contractor

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SUMMER EDITION • 2014

## NEWSLETTER

## Estimating for Unfair Advantage: The Facts Behind True Costs

By Mike Clancy and Cynthia Paul

**Contractors need every trick in the book to find and win the work they need to keep their company productively employed. Many contractors find themselves bidding significantly more work to win less, while their estimating departments are smaller than ever. It simply is not a recipe for success.**

The job of estimating is to help win profitable work for the company. An estimator's highest and best use of time does not include estimating every project; it is about winning the right ones. Half of the estimating department's time and effort is simply wasted. It is working hard, but does not have the systems, information and support needed to be positioned to win projects.

By applying the following three steps, a firm will increase cost certainty, lower the cost of winning work and drive up hit rates.

### Knowing the Cost of the Project

How many times have estimators uttered the phrase, "That firm is bidding below cost?" While not all contractors are responsible bidders, many times the default tendency is to attribute this behavior even to good firms. If credible competition seems to be bidding below cost, this may mean that their estimating department has a better understanding of the true costs to execute work. In fact, about 40 percent of firms in the marketplace do not track their costs with significant rigor to conduct a detailed analysis of bid versus final profit.

Many firms are working with cost databases that are a year or more out of date. While the best firms are using real-time cost performance data, at a minimum a firm should be scrubbing its database twice a year to ensure that it is not working with old data from a bygone market.

While it would be unreasonable to expect a general contractor or construction management firm to conduct a detailed take-off of each line item on the job, simply "square-footing" the take-off is a surefire way to deny cost certainty. The best firms develop meaningful assemblies they can use to speed up the take-off process while still managing to finish with an accurate cost number in pre-construction or estimating.

Assuming a firm has identified its true costs, it is possible to analyze the competitors' mark-up strategy and, using game theory, apply optimum mark-ups that allow maximum profitability. In addition, a firm can identify the types of projects that the competition is less confident about, which might hold more profit opportunity.

What a company knows about its competitors directly affects hit rates and backlog.

1. What services do they provide?
2. Who are their Top-10 customers (those they will protect aggressively)?
3. What are their strategic initiatives for the year?
4. Who are their top managers and what are their backgrounds?
5. Why do customers work with them a second time?
6. What do they do to get positioned before the projects?
7. What guarantees or assurance do they make during the get-work process?

8. What are their new-market growth strategies?

9. How do they develop their people to support their brand and market positioning?

10. What are their true costs on average-sized work?

11. What are they doing to drive field and office efficiency?

12. What types of projects do they price more competitively?

13. What is their "sweet spot" in terms of project size?

14. Who are their key subcontractor partners?

### Knowing The Cost of Estimating

Most of a company's marketing and sales budget is spent in estimating work. It is important to ask "Are you spending that money on opportunities you have no real chance of securing?"

Assuming a firm has identified its true costs, it is possible to analyze the competitors' mark-up strategy and, using game theory, apply optimum mark-ups that allow maximum profitability.

Most contractors would never estimate work without having a good idea of what it will cost to build the project. Yet they will decide to estimate work without knowing what it will cost them to win. That makes little sense.

To determine the real cost of winning work, do not forget to include:

1. Marketing costs to keep in touch and warm a potential customer
2. Face-to-face business development time
3. Travel and entertainment costs
4. Time of estimating and operations meetings with the customer, asking good questions and creating potential approaches
5. Estimating time for take-off and pricing
6. Cost of estimating software
7. Printing and reproduction costs
8. Cost of superintendent and project management time to provide estimating support
9. Administrative costs to complete bid package, provide bid bond, track down insurance
10. Senior management time – face-to-face and providing oversight
11. Opportunity cost – what else could have been done

(Continued on page 2)

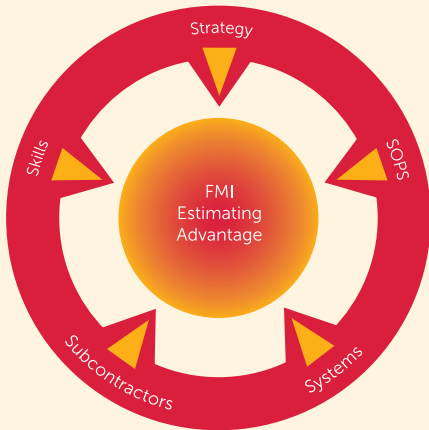


RCA's mission is to promote professionalism and integrity in retail construction through industry leadership in education, information exchange, and jobsite safety.

# The Retail Contractor NEWSLETTER

Exhibit 1

FMI Estimating Advantage Model



## Applying True-Cost Knowledge

Ultimately, everything a firm does in estimating should be oriented towards one goal – winning profitable work. The FMI Estimating Advantage (see graphic) model examines the five key inputs into the estimating function – Strategy, SOPs, Systems, Subcontractors and Skills – in order to ensure that the firm is able to be as effective as possible in estimating.

- **Strategy.** Without a strategy that provides an edge, the only way a firm can be the lowest bidder is to cut fees. Instead, focus only on project opportunities in which an advantage has been identified.
- **SOPs.** As with project management best practices, consistent estimating practices will lead to greater consistency of results, as well as provide a training curriculum for new hires.

• **Systems.** While estimating technology is not a magic bullet, it is what the military calls a “force multiplier.” In other words, effective technology use can leverage each estimator to be able to accomplish more.

• **Subcontractors.** Without the right partners, a GC cannot expect to be competitive on bid day. Subcontractor outreach and relationship development can be a source of significant cost advantage.

• **Skills.** Pursuits will cost more and be less effective than the competition if, the estimating department is over or under staffed, or does not have a balance of skills.

Use these ideas to optimize the estimating function. This investment will improve hit rates on the right work to create a backlog to stay productive and profitable.

*Mike Clancy is a principal at FMI Corporation. He works with companies across the country to help them leverage their unique organizational resources and capabilities to build competitive advantage. He can be reached at 919.785.9299 or [mclancy@fminet.com](mailto:mclancy@fminet.com) Cynthia Paul is a managing director at FMI Corporation and the practice leader for business development. She works with industry organizations to position them to capture market share and grow profitably. She can be reached at 303.398.7206 or [cpaul@fminet.com](mailto:cpaul@fminet.com).*

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# President's Message

Mike, Wolff, President, Timberwolff Construction, Inc.



Mike Wolff

**It's with much excitement that I write my first president's message.** I'm looking forward to serving RCA and its membership over the next two years, to continuing the great work done by Art Rectenwald and to starting new programs and initiatives.

The initiative I'm most excited about is the Military Service Initiative, which is being led by Board member Steve Bachman, supported by me, Mike Clancy, Scott Crissey, Carol Montoya, Bob Moore, and Pete Weiland. The committee is exploring ways to work with veterans groups to train and onboard vets into superintendent positions. This meets the needs we as contractors have for a talented and trained workforce, but more importantly, the program will provide opportunities for service members transitioning into civilian life.

Over the past few months, a Scholarship Program task force, led by Scholarship Committee chair Mike McBride, and supported by Steve Bachman, Justin Elder, Steve Olson, and Raj Singh, has had several discussions about the purpose and scope of our scholarship program. For many years we have provided scholarships to deserving construction management students at 18 schools across the country. The committee, with the backing of the Board, is looking into expanding the program into more schools, centralizing the selection process, and attending career fairs to gain more exposure for the retail construction niche.

Marketing and Communications chair Jack Grothe is working closely with our staff on a website redesign. In addition to a front-end "face lift," we are expanding the Find a Contractor directory functionality with a focus on making the site a valuable resource for retailers looking for GCs.

If you are a primary contact at a member company, you should have received an email for our Salary, Benefits and Vendor Usage Survey. Please coordinate with your finance and HR staff to complete and return a response. The survey will provide vital benchmark information about salary and benefits for field and office staff, and assist the RCA Board in identifying vendors with which to negotiate special programs and discounts for our members. Survey responses are confidential and results will only be shared with those who participate.

We will keep you updated on the progress of these new initiatives. Watch for more information in our monthly bulletin, LinkedIn group, website, and personal contact by our Board members.

*Mike*

— mike@timberwolff.com

## Milestone Memberships

Congratulations to our members celebrating milestone membership anniversaries! We appreciate your ongoing support of the RCA!

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RCA members must meet and maintain a series of qualifications and are approved by the Board of Directors for membership. They have been in the retail construction business as general contractors for at least five years; agree to comply with the Association's Code of Ethics and Bylaws; are properly insured and bonded; are licensed in the states in which they do business; and have submitted letters of recommendation.

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## RCA's 24th Annual Conference

RCA's 24th annual conference was held March 7-9, 2014, at the Gaylord Texan in Grapevine, TX, prior to SPECS 2014. With 152 registered attendees, the annual conference hit a record high. The weekend included receptions on Friday and Saturday evenings, a full day of presentations on Saturday, and an owner's breakfast Sunday morning.

The professional development portion of the conference kicked off with a presentation by Anirban Basu, Chairman & CEO, Sage Policy Group, Inc. His fast-paced session, "Back to the Future II," was informative and engaging. His tailored information addressed the economic trends that are affecting the retail and construction industries.

Dick Bayer, President, ReAlignment Group, Ltd. and former Interim Executive Director, Lean Construction Institute, discussed best practices in lean construction and provided tips for integrating lean into current projects and processes.

Roundtables hosted by RCA Board and Advisory Board members were a highlight of the conference. Attendees enjoyed the small group discussions and had an opportunity to experience each of the six topics offered: How to Stop Profit Erosion at the End of a Project; Your Worst Nightmare (Horror stories in retail construction, what happened and how did you resolve the issue); Technology in Retail Construction; Lien Law; Client Retention; and Cost Control/Cost Trends. Stay tuned as we compile the input received from table moderators and release it to our members throughout the year.

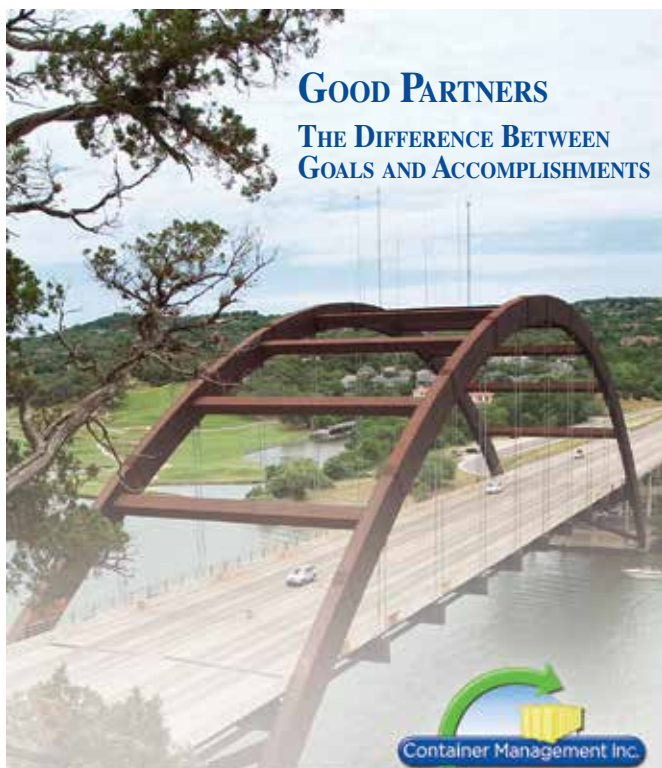
The final session of the day was a Retailers Panel, made up of RCA Advisory Board members. Moderated by Steve Olson, Vice President, CESO, Inc.,



Networking receptions were held Friday and Saturday evenings.



Art Rectenwald, Rectenwald Brothers Construction; Mike Kolakowski, KBE Building Corporation; Matt Pichette, Russco; Matthew Schimenti, Schimenti Construction Company; Jerry Rectenwald, Rectenwald Brothers Construction



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the panel featured Mike Glaser, Director of Construction, Sterling Jewelers Inc.; Jason Miller, Director of Operations, Construction Services, JCPenney; Lynn Robbins, Director of Construction, OfficeMax; and Rajnesh Singh, West Region Construction, H&M. They addressed topics that had been requested in advance by RCA members, including the deciding factors when it comes to choosing a general contractor, expectations of general contractors; and how contractors are evaluated.

During the meeting, RCA President Art Rectenwald, presented a certificate of appreciation to Matt Pichette, who served on the Board from 2004-2014. He also thanked and recognized outgoing Advisory Board member Scott Winstead, who served from 2008-2014. Rectenwald received a gift from incoming president Mike Wolff, who officially took office at the conference.

Throughout the day, RCA's Sustaining Sponsors gave brief presentations about their products and services. Most offer RCA-tailored programs or RCA member discounts.

The RCA Annual Meeting planning efforts were led by chairs Matt Pichette, Russo Construction, Inc. and Rick Winkel, Winkel Construction, Inc. Save the date for RCA's 25th annual conference, March 13-15, 2015, at the Venetian/Palazzo in Las Vegas.

### Thank You to Our Underwriters:

**Gold:** Commercial Contractors, Inc.  
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RCA's 2014-2015 Board of Directors



l-r: Rachel Brisco, Marco Contractors; Raj Singh, H&M; Shelby Roehre, Marco Contractors Inc



l-r: Wally Clark, JG Construction; Jessica Foster, Dorothy Hammel & Danny McAtee, Container Management



l-r: Murray Costello & Heather Wheeler, Murray Costello Construction; Marina & Bill Winkel, Winkel Construction



Advisory Board members Mike Glaser, Sterling Jewelers Inc. & Chuck Barnes, Barnes & Associates



Roundtable discussions



Advisory Board retailer panel



Art Rectenwald & Matt Pichette



Mike Wolff & Art Rectenwald



# Don't miss our CCRP events

**July 17, 2014 • Boston**  
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For information on joining Commercial Construction & Renovation People, contract Membership Director Kristen Corson at [kristenc@ccr-people.com](mailto:kristenc@ccr-people.com)



If you would like to sponsor a CCRP event, please contact David Corson at [davidc@ccr-mag.com](mailto:davidc@ccr-mag.com)



Speaker presentations are available on [retailcontractors.org](http://retailcontractors.org); click on Events.

## RCA Sustaining Partners

### PLATINUM

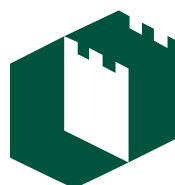


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