



# Matchmaking 101 — making the connection

**FIT WASN'T** for subs and clients, I'd have a great business."  
"If I ever find a general contractor who pays me on time, lets me know when a job isn't going to be ready and appreciates how I bust my butt for his company, I'll think I died and went to heaven."

Can you detect any frustration in these comments? The first one was overheard at a National Association of Home Builders convention. Two custom-home builders were commiserating (whining) about the difficulties in finding good trade contractors, as well as the eccentricities of their clients.

A plumbing contractor made the second comment to a guy working the supply-house sales counter. He evidently had had more than one less-than-delightful experience with a GC.

Are these comments and feelings of frustration common in our business, or were these particular guys just having a bad day? Probably some of both.

But the underlying problem is all too real — how do "good" trade contractors and general contractors find each other and make a positive connection? That question was put to me after my last column appeared in this space ("What can go wrong? A builder's perspective," November 2003, pg. 34).

More than 30 years in the construction industry have taught me that there is no magic well that I can dip my bucket into and pull out the perfect subcontractor, but that there is a process to finding and retaining quali-

fied trade contractors. This is true for radiant and hydronic heating contractors, and it applies to other trades too.

Here are a few good places to start the search whether you are a GC or a subcontractor on a job:

### Meeting other contractors

My current plumber recommended the HVAC contractor I now use. They have known each other for years and work well together. If you are a trade contractor and you really want to

"We have a very open builder community here," Ray told me. "If I need a new trade contractor I can call any number of other builders and they are always happy to share their guys with me."

Trade contractors should also ask GCs whom they trust to make recommendations. Most of us want to see our subcontractors stay busy and be successful. I've never been afraid of "losing" a sub to another builder by being a matchmaker. If anything, I believe I've gained more respect and loyalty from

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know about a particular builder or GC, just ask some fellow subs — they will probably tell you all you want to know.

Are you considering taking on a new builder, but don't know anyone who currently works for him? Call the local building department and ask who his mechanical guys are. They should be listed on any permit he has pulled.

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that particular trade contractor by sincerely helping him when he asked.

### Trade organizations

I am convinced that trade contractors do not use their local organizations enough, if at all. These groups are excellent opportunities for networking and making connections with quality general contractors.

I know, I've heard all the excuses. "I don't have the time — I'm busy making a living"; "they'll make me volunteer for a committee or something"; "the fees are way too high"; etc.

Many excellent organizations are

begging for good, professional trade contractors to join them. Contact your local chapter of the Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors, Radiant Panel Association or NAHB with its affiliate, the Remodelers Council. Or, try NARI, another national group of professional remodelers. These are all dynamic gathering places of reliable individuals.

By the way, many builders I know refuse to use a subcontractor who doesn't belong to a professional organization — they prefer to give their business to someone who supports the industry like they do.

### Supply houses and architects

On many occasions I have called a supply house and asked them to recommend a good trade contractor. I usually speak to a counter guy or an outside sales rep and tell them what I am looking for. Have these guys ever actually seen the work of someone they are raving about? Probably not, but they do have a good feel for who can walk the talk.

After getting a few names, I have them patch me through to their accounting department. I want to find out how these subcontractors pay their bills — credit or cash account, pay on time or always late, just opened the account or a long-time customer?

Trade contractors can also use this same process for discovering financially secure general contractors. Don't be shy about asking a builder where he buys his framing materials or what bank he borrows from. Use the same questions above to do a little investigative research.

It may seem odd to suggest that trade contractors get to know various architects, but as a custom home builder, I have had several architects virtually insist that I use a specific subcontractor on a project.

Maybe they got to know the plumber or radiant heating contractor on the last job they designed, and now he is the "only" guy they trust.

Find out who the architect is on your current job and introduce yourself. He will be very impressed.

These are just a few sources I have successfully used to find compatible trade contractors. It all comes down to how much time and effort you are willing to invest in the process.

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