

# Quality Management

## A look at the tools and tricks of the trade for staying on top of things and producing the best work possible.

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The term “quality management” is a broad one, to say the least. Most, if not all, consultants strive to produce the best quality product they can for their clients, but the ways in which they do so can vary. This brief article examines just a few different tools, practices and standards some consultants take to stay organized, maintain consistency and achieve a successful end-result.

**Checking, Re-checking and Checking Again**  
“It all begins simply with communication,” says Michael Johnson, principal of Hilliker Associates. Sounds obvious, but one thing Johnson does to stay clear on the client’s goals and also on track throughout a project, is to create checklists of what’s needed in the kitchen.

In developing such a checklist, some of the questions Johnson asks include: “Are they going to use gas for equipment? Are there certain brands they prefer? Are they going to have a pastry chef? If so, will the chef do a lot of baking? Where is the dishwasher going to go? Where are we going to store the soap for the dishwasher? Is there going to be a clock on the wall? If so, where’s the electrical hookup for that?” Discussing every detail, no matter how major or minor, Johnson says, helps him and his client stay on target. Typically, Johnson will create an initial list with the client during the first meetings. Then, he’ll use that same list while working on the design.

It’s important to establish a solid understanding of the client’s needs early on, he says. “The client may say he wants a specific thing, but he may really mean something else,” Johnson says. “We’re only separated by the English language. It happens in families, with your children, and as a consultant among clients. Both parties need to understand what each wants.”

The last step in the process, and a final way to ensure your project is high-quality, according to Johnson, is testing the equipment once it’s been specified and installed. “Some people don’t always make sure the equipment is ready. They leave that up to the salesperson or equipment supplier, but I believe it is our responsibility as consultants to make sure everything is working so you don’t have a major problem if it’s not.”

**Back to School**

No, that isn’t a repeated headline you’re reading, it’s three words that make up the basis of excellence for Mike Lawshe, owner of Paragon Solutions. When it comes to quality management, Lawshe says that constantly learning and educating himself on industry

trends, issues and best practices not only keeps him abreast of competition, it also helps him do his job the best he can as a consultant.

Aside from intensive listening to the client's needs and goals, Lawshe says, "My job as a consultant is to be the bearer of information for the client so they have all the information they need to make informed decisions. I go to eight or nine conferences and trade shows a year, and that covers a broad spectrum from restaurants to convenience stores."

In addition, he says, reading the numerous magazines he gets each week and month also helps him stay abreast in the industry. "Attorneys, doctors, nurses, architects — these professionals all have continuing education courses that are required," Lawshe says. "To me, that's just a minimum."

What's another great source for information? The clients themselves, he says. "They have a tremendous base of knowledge that I don't have. I try to incorporate my knowledge with theirs to come up with the best concept. It's a team effort."

**Tools of the Trade**  
E-mail, cell phones, voicemail — these technologies are essential for consultants trying to stay organized and maintain communication with clients and project team members. But James Camacho, president of Camacho Associates, says he's got another cool new toy: a digital voice recorder that he uses during project meetings.

The tiny, three-inch recorder records up to five hours and plugs into a computer via a USB port so Camacho can download the entire meeting. "I still take notes in the meeting, but if I have a question about something, then I can go back and listen to the meeting on my computer," Camacho says. "I can even convert the file to a CD and send it to the architect or client so they can use it."

Staying organized, Camacho says, remains key to producing quality work. Close coordination with a great staff that includes e-mails, and follow-up phone calls helps in this effort, he says.

**Building a Relationship**  
Loyalty and trust are the names of the game for Howard Stanford, president of Kamau Sage & Associates, when it comes to maintaining the highest standards, for himself, the client and other project team members.

"For me, the important thing is face-to-face communication, and that doesn't necessarily take a whole lot of meetings," Stanford says. "I just want the client to have a good comfort level with me so I can get them what they're looking for, and they don't feel that I'm treating them like just another project on my list."

To accomplish this, Stanford says, he makes it clear to the client at the very start of a project, that he's available at any time if they have questions or concerns. He also encourages them to get a second opinion if they so desire. It's best to be honest, he says.

“There are a lot of people who will take a project because it’s a project, and figure it out later if they don’t have the expertise,” Stanford says. But, in his opinion, “It’s better to be up front and say, ‘I’d love to do your project, but I really don’t have the expertise to do that,’ and give a suggestion of someone you trust who can do that job.”

Clients, he says, “come to appreciate that a lot.” Such honesty also helps ensure trust. “Nowadays, most clients have already established some type of opinion about the people who do what I do, and that can be the result of a good experience or a bad one,” Stanford says.

To further build relationships, Stanford maintains consistency in his actions, and sticks by his word. He also sticks by other teammates’ sides. “Kitchen equipment contractors, fabricators, architects, manufacturers ? it’s the consultant’s responsibility to make sure you have a good reputation with them, too,” Stanford says. It only takes one person to tell others you’re not doing a great job; then your reputation is on the line, he says.

In the case of manufacturers, Stanford says, keeping his word to them means holding spec. “If you use a manufacturer or a rep and they do all this work for you, and then you don’t hold spec, you tend not to get their support,” he says. “I hold my spec and then they know if they get on my job I’m going to do my best not to get that equipment substituted.”

This consistency in his actions from client to client has helped him put forth high-quality service. “If you can’t back up what you say you’re going to do, your quality goes down the drain, and the quality your client gets goes down the drain,” he says.