

# CONSULTANTS AND CONTRACTORS:

Respect? **YES.** Trust? **NOT EXACTLY.**



By David Harrison

**I**n rivalries, the two sides don't like each other. And that's not just true of the teams on each side of the rivalry — it's also true of the friends and fans who support them. Remember back to high school or college and the feelings you had about rival sports teams? Think of professional sports, and there may very well be a team that you love to hate.

Rivals and their supporters often complain about one another. They say nasty things about their rival. They have jokes that poke fun at the other team. They compete. But sometimes, rivals actually respect one other, and the competition creates a healthy tension that actually makes both sides better.

Anyone who has been exposed to the roofing industry knows that there has been a longstanding and often intense rivalry between roof consultants and roofing contractors. However, there is a legitimate question that should be asked: Is it a respectful rivalry that makes each group better, or is it a bitter rivalry without respect in which both sides attempt to tear one another apart?

I feel personally blessed to be in the roofing industry. Over the past 10 years, I've met with literally thousands of contractors, consultants, and property owners involved in the industry. During that time, I've witnessed an industry that is increasingly filled with people who contribute to "raising the bar," which results in an industry that we can all be even more proud of. While the perception outside of this industry (and sometimes inside it, too) is that the roofing profession is "filled with convicts and scam artists," I'm continuously amazed at the passion and dedication of so many people I meet. Even with these improvements, I constantly hear examples of the rivalry between contractors and consultants and the impact it has on the industry.

A few years ago, I found kindred spirits interested in the relationship between contractors and consultants and the implications for the industry. Rick Damato, editorial director for *Roofing Contractor* magazine, and Kristen Ammerman, director of publications for RCI, both wanted to explore this issue, too. Comprehensive support came from a host of people from both organizations and resulted in a study that was con-

ducted in 2003 to explore the perceived "feud" between contractors and consultants. The purpose of that study was to gain insights from contractors and consultants on how they feel about each other and suggest recommendations that might lead to improvements within the industry.

What did we learn from the 2003 study? In articles that *Roofing Contractor* and *Interface* published in 2004, I concluded from that initial research that there is a rivalry between consultants and contractors; but, in general, there is respect between the two professions for one another. Yes, there is evidence of unfair generalization about each other's negative effect on the industry, but below the surface, there is mutual respect. Despite minor annoyances, interdependence between the professions is evolving, and overall, perceptions of the quality and value of both groups are generally favorable.

So Rick, Kris, and I talked about a year ago and wondered — have things changed? Are the continued growth, sophistication, and consolidation of property management, distribution, consultants, and contractors leading to greater interdependence between



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the contractor and consultant professions — or are things deteriorating?

So, in the early Fall of 2005, we decided to essentially repeat the initial 2003 study. We invited about 900 RCI members and about 1,500 roofing contractors subscribing to *Roofing Contractor* to participate through a direct mail survey format. The response rate was 28 percent for consultants and 16 percent for contractors, for an overall 20 percent response rate. By industry standards, this is a healthy response. This article shares the results, analysis, and comparisons demonstrating trends from the previous study, as well as some thoughts and suggestions to help both parties improve their businesses.

### HOW SHOULD PROPERTY OWNERS CHOOSE A CONTRACTOR?

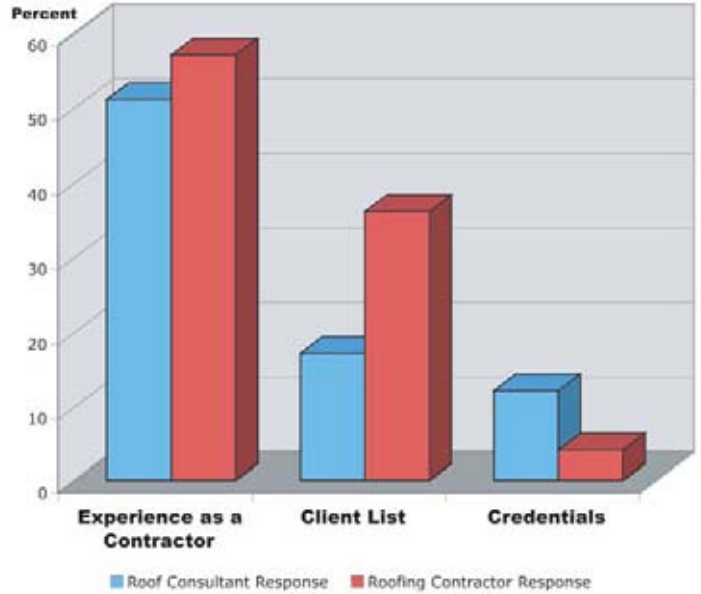


Table 1 – Attributes respondents ranked most important to consider when a building owner chooses a contractor (top three responses).

#### Advice for Property Owners

Contractors and consultants know one another well. We wondered: How did they think property owners should choose a contractor or consultant?

Both consultants and contractors view experience as the most important factor for a building owner to consider when choosing

a roofing professional. (See Tables 1 and 2.) Client lists and credentials are the next most important criteria suggested by respondents from both professions. In general, consultants view credentials as more important than contractors do when choosing a consultant; conversely, contractors put more weight on client lists overall than consultants do. These attitudes are relatively similar to those reflected in the 2003 study.

### HOW SHOULD PROPERTY OWNERS CHOOSE A CONSULTANT?



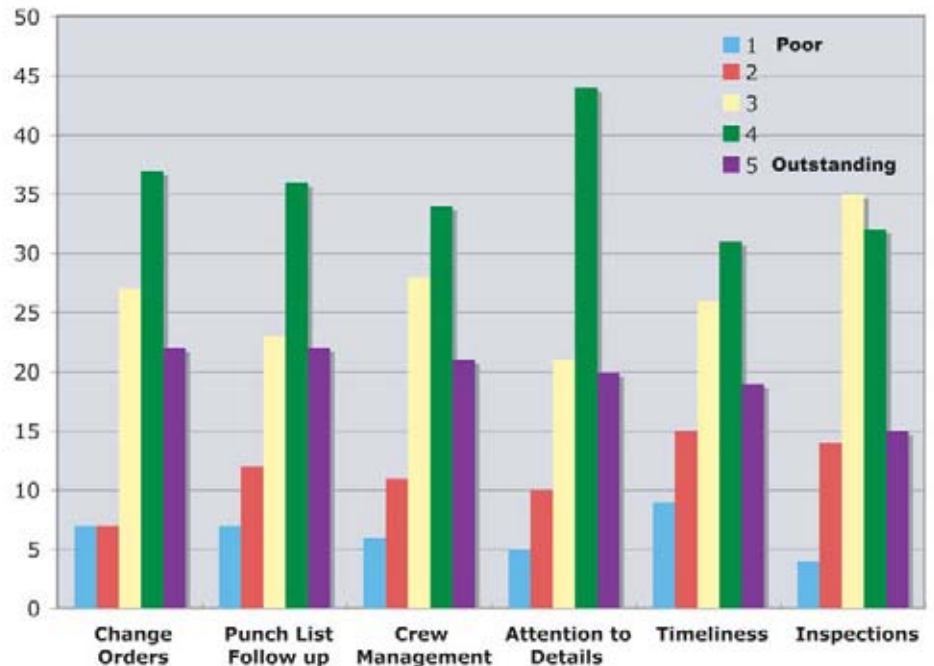
Table 2 – Attributes respondents ranked most important to consider when a building owner chooses a consultant (top four responses).

When asked what attribute was the most important factor building owners should consider when choosing a contractor, 51 percent of consultants and 57 percent of contractors responding to the survey point to experience as the most important criterion. (See *Table 1*.) Both consultants (17 percent) and contractors (36 percent) believe the contractor's client list is the second most important attribute to consider when choosing a contractor. Credentials emerged as the third most important factor for both groups, with 12 percent of consultants and four percent of contractors responding that credentials were the most important attribute for building owners to consider.

The attitudes of consultants in this survey were similar to those in the 2003 study, but the results for contractors in the two studies differed. Specifically, compared to 2003, contractors in the 2005 study were less likely to rate experience as most important (the 2005 response of 57 percent was down 6 percent from the 2003 total of 63 percent); more likely to rate the client list as the most important factor (the 2005 response was up 16 percent from 2003's 20 percent); and less likely to rate credentials as the most important attribute (the 2005 response was four percent, down from the 2003 survey's 17 percent).

Conversely, when asked what attribute was the most important factor for building owners to consider when choosing a consultant, experience again emerged as the most important factor — although, in this case, experience was split into two categories: “years of experience as a qualified roof consultant” and “past experience as a roofing or building contractor.” Combining the totals for both of these responses, 51 percent of consultants and 68 percent of contractors believe that experience is the most important criterion to consider when choosing a consultant. (See *Table 2*.) Consultants, however, believe that experience as a roof consultant was a more important factor (38 percent), while contractors believe that a consultant's past experience as a contractor was more crucial (40 percent). Credentials are more important to consultants (22 percent) than contractors (12 percent). A minority of respondents from both professions viewed client lists as the most important criterion (14 percent of consultants, versus 16 percent of contractors).

## CONSULTANTS RATE THE LAST CONTRACTOR THEY WORKED WITH



*Table 3 – Consultants were asked to rate the last contractor with whom they completed a project.*



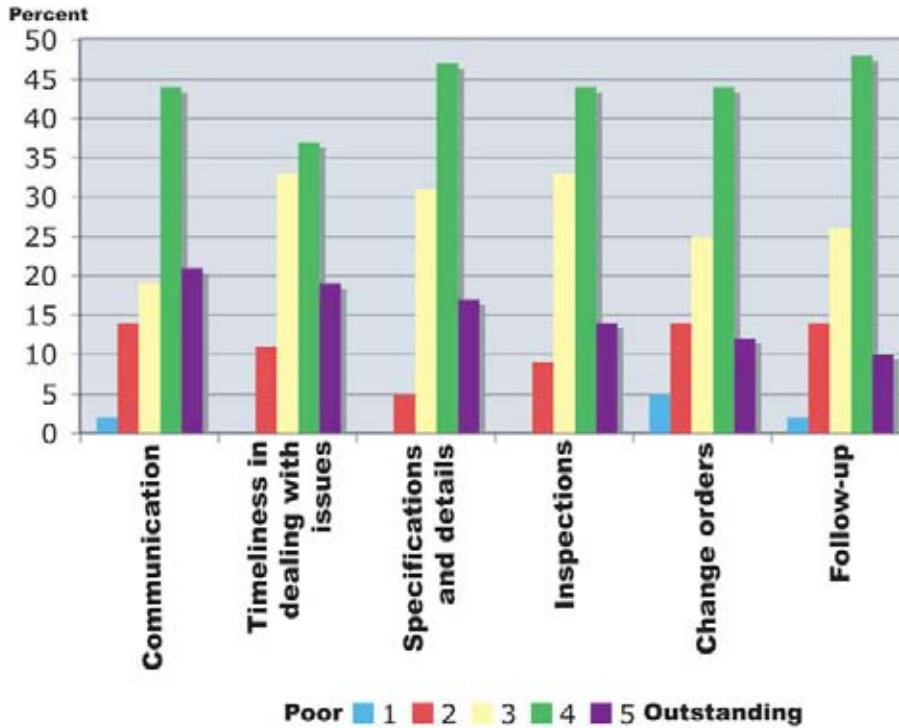
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## CONTRACTORS RATE THE LAST CONSULTANT THEY WORKED WITH

### Consultants Rate Contractors, and Vice Versa

Consultants were asked to rate the performance of the last roofing contractor they worked with in several categories on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 equating to “poor” and 5 to “outstanding” (see *Table 3*). While the overall results were favorable and many areas saw improvement over the 2003 survey, the study reveals there is still room for improvement.

Consultants believe that contractors perform best on attention to details in specifications (64 percent of consultants gave contractors a 4 or 5 in this area). Performance by contractors on change orders was viewed as unsatisfactory or poor by 14 percent of consultants, who gave contractors a 1 or a 2 in this category. The consultants’ last experience with contractors related to follow-through on punch lists was considered unsatisfactory by 19 percent, but this figure was down from 21 percent in the 2003 study. Seventeen percent of consultants believe contractors do not manage their crews well, but this was an improvement compared to the 2003 study, where 21 percent found crew management unsatisfactory. The study shows the greatest areas for improvement by contractors are in



*Table 4 – Contractors were asked to rate the last consultant with whom they completed a project.*



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## Do CONSULTANTS TRUST CONTRACTORS?

timeliness (24 percent gave contractors a 1 or 2 in this area, compared to 29 percent in 2003) and contractor quality of inspections (18 percent received a 1 or a 2, an improvement of six percent versus 2003 statistics).

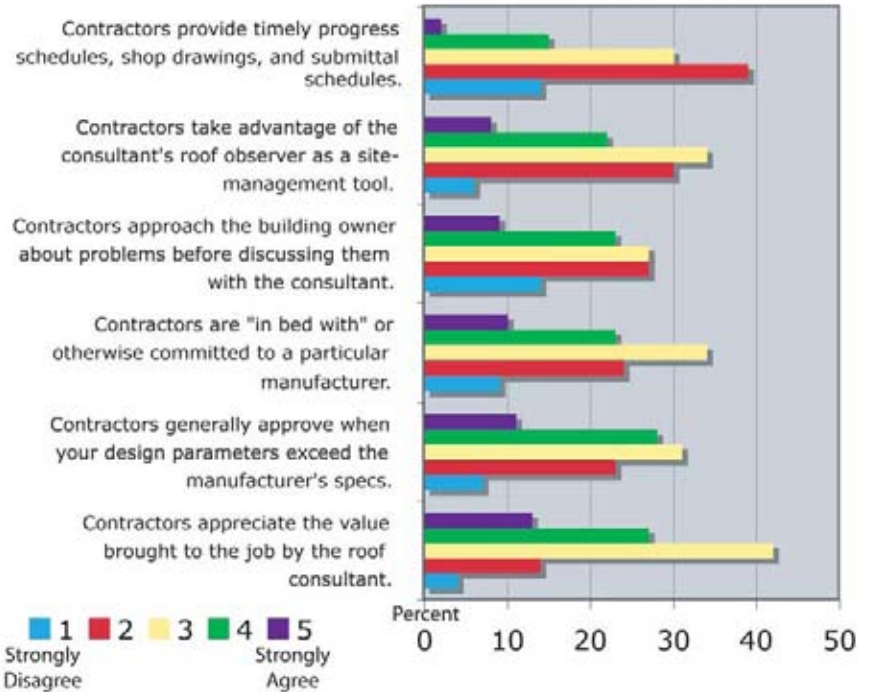
When contractors were asked to rate the last consultant they worked with, consultants received the best ratings in communication with contractors and with specification and details, with 65 percent and 64 percent receiving a 4 or a 5 in those areas, respectively (see *Table 4*). Contractors appear to have very little frustration with specifications and details and with inspections, as consultants earning an unsatisfactory rating in those two categories totaled five and nine percent, respectively.

Consultants have areas that could use some improvement, according to their contractor counterparts. In the responding contractors' last experience with a consultant, timeliness was considered unsatisfactory by 11 percent, but this was a substantial improvement compared to the unsatisfactory rating of 24 percent in the 2003 study. While overall scores regarding communication were high — 65 percent gave consultants a 4 or a 5 in that area — 16 percent of contractors rated communication as unsatisfactory or poor. Follow-up is an area of frustration for 16 percent of contractors. The data demonstrates improvement by consultants with regard to change orders, but this still remains the highest area of frustration for contractors (19 percent rated consultant performance on change orders unsatisfactory, but this was down nine points from the 2003 study).

### Respect – But What About Trust?

While there is a reasonable degree of respect by both contractors and consultants for the other group, the core of a relationship is trust, and based on the results of survey questions designed to explore how much the two groups trust each other, there seems to be ample room for improvement.

Both groups were given a list of statements about the other and asked to rate their answers on a scale of 1 through 5, with 5 equating to “strongly agree,” 3 to “somewhat agree,” and 1 to “strongly disagree.” When asked whether they agreed that “contractors approach the building owner about problems before discussing them with the consultant,” 32 percent of consultants agreed and answered with a 4 or 5. (See *Table 5*.) Consultants are also concerned about contractors' indepen-



*Table 5 – Consultants were asked to rate how they agreed with statements about contractors.*

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## DO CONTRACTORS TRUST CONSULTANTS?

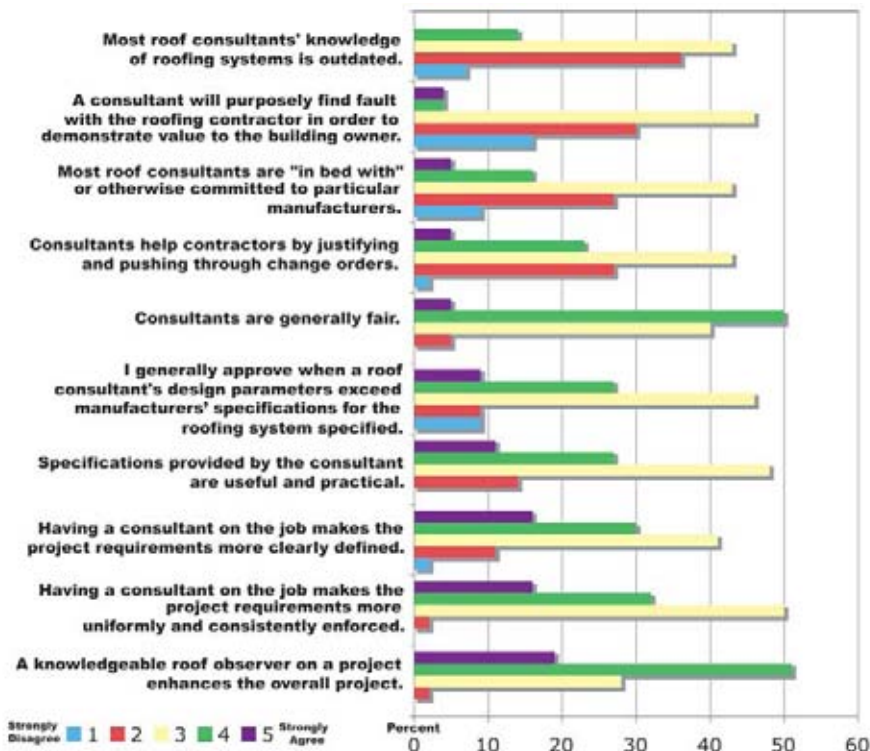


Table 6 – Contractors were asked to rate how they agreed with statements about consultants.

dence. When asked whether they believed that “contractors are ‘in bed with’ or otherwise committed to a particular manufacturer,” 33 percent of consultants were in solid agreement, scoring the item with a 4 or a 5; another 34 percent agreed somewhat. Finally, 18 percent of consultants do not believe that “contractors appreciate the value brought to the job by the roof consultant,” which certainly can negatively affect the relationship.

Contractors also have trust issues with con-

sultants, but several areas showed marked improvement over the 2003 study. (See Table 6.) When asked if they agreed that “consultants purposefully find fault with the roofing contractor to demonstrate their value to the building owner,” only eight percent of the 2005 respondents agreed strongly with a 4 or 5 rating, compared to 37 percent in 2003. When asked if most consultants’ knowledge of roof systems is outdated, 14 percent of contractors surveyed agreed with a ranking of 4 or 5, compared to 24 percent in 2003. Finally, when contractors were asked if they agreed with the statement “most roof consultants are ‘in bed with’ or otherwise committed to a particular manufacturer,” 21 percent of contractors were in solid agreement, compared to 37 percent in the 2003 study.



### What About Cooperation?

We improve our businesses by understanding where and how others who depend on us are frustrated with what they perceive is the quality of our cooperation — and then demonstrate our ability and commitment to being cooperative and getting the job done right.

Consultants have significant issues in two aspects regarding cooperation with contractors. First, 53 percent of consultants do not believe that contractors provide timely schedules, drawings and submittals. (See Table 5.) Also, 30 percent of consultants surveyed do not perceive that contractors support the consultant’s efforts when design parameters exceed the manufacturer’s specifications (this was the same percentage of respondents as in the 2003 survey).

On the other hand, 29 percent of contractors would appreciate more help from consultants with justifying and pushing through change orders (see Table 6). However, when asked if “specifications provided by the consultant are useful and practical,” 38 percent of contractors were in strong agreement, and another 48 percent agreed somewhat, while only 14 percent disagreed.

### Contractor Services — Perception of Voids

Sometimes, perception is reality; it doesn’t matter if it’s true or not. Many consultants (35 percent) believe that contractors do not provide 24-hour repair service (see Table 7). Worse, the majority of consultants (52 percent) are dissatisfied with contractors’ “after-project service” — and this figure is similar to the response in the 2003 study (53 percent).

These are serious issues that contractors should focus on. Why? We know from a previous industry study with property owners that over half of their roof replacements go to the contractor that does the majority of their repair and maintenance. The contractor who can demonstrate to a consultant that they provide a responsive repair service and that they take after-project service seriously will likely get invited to participate in more bidding opportunities.

### The Value of Consultants?

The contractors surveyed believe that consultants bring value to the industry — and this perception has improved somewhat since the 2003 study. When asked if “having a consultant on the job makes the quality increase,” 37 percent of contractors

## CONSULTANTS' PERCEPTION OF CONTRACTORS

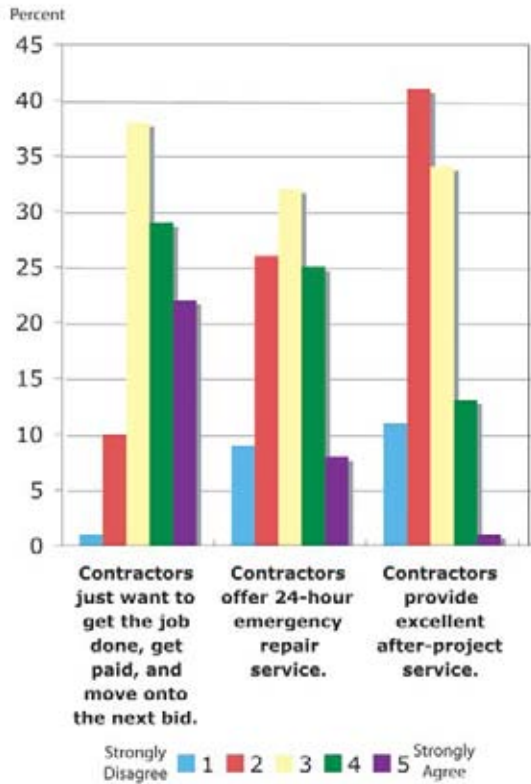


Table 7 – Consultants were asked to rate how much they agreed with statements about contractors.

responded affirmatively with a 4 or 5 rating, while only 21 percent disagreed (see Table 8). When asked whether “consultants add value to the project for the building owner,” only nine percent disagreed. Interestingly, when asked if they thought “design specifications from consultants are better than design specifications from architects,” 46 percent agreed with a rating of 4 or 5, and only 22 percent of respondents disagreed.

### Implications for Progressive Professional Consultants

Overall, this study presents good news for consultants. Contractors increasingly view the role of consultants as very good for the property owner. That suggests that they are hearing this from property owners, and observing it in their interactions with project planning through implementation.

At the end of the day, the most successful companies first view their business through their customers' eyes. Identifying their needs (which means, in most cases, understanding their pain) and then demonstrating a solution is essentially the only way for companies and individuals to pro-

vide value. The role of the consultant exists within the industry to help provide property owners with their best and safest choice. Consultants do this by assuring that designs and specifications take into consideration the options for the specific property, analyzing the particular use, and considering the investment objectives of the owner. Further, their role is to assure the selection of a roofing contractor who is capable of providing great value that is hassle free.

So, how can our survey be useful? First, this research can be used to demonstrate to property owners that a qualified roof consultant is likely a safer choice than a general architect. This is proven by professional roofing contractors who work with both professions, and rate the value of the roof consultant much high-

er. Further, the contractor results help demonstrate to the property owner the value of a qualified roof consultant to provide a better performing roof and superior value.

A core to a roof consultant's practice relies on his identifying and including the best-value contractors to participate in his bids on behalf of his clients. This research provides some helpful insight for this purpose, too. Specifically, a consultant who can demonstrate why and how he attracts the best contractors to participate can create more value for his or her clients. And the data suggest that a consultant who can demonstrate



## CONTRACTORS' PERCEPTION OF CONSULTANTS

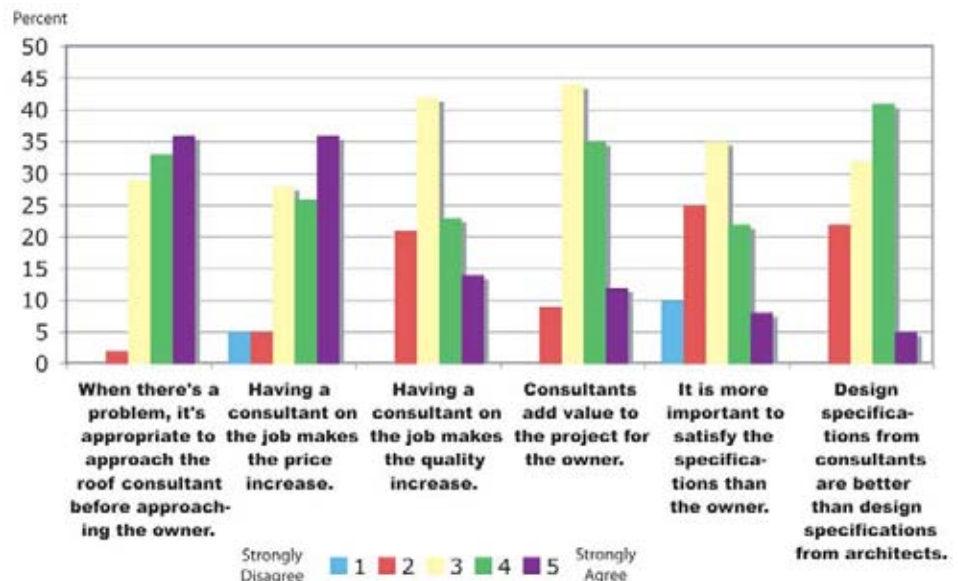



Table 8 – Contractors were asked to rate how much they agreed with statements about consultants.

that he or she has a process that is sensitive to contractor issues can separate himself from other competing consultants.

For example, consider building processes and approaches that demonstrate how your company develops relationships with the better contractors by assuring that they are an advocate for quality services rather than simply "policing" to find fault. Share how you educate contractors on how and why certain manufacturer specifications were exceeded, so that there is greater compliance from the contractor. Establish processes to share roofing education with the better contractors, resulting in both organizations improving their capabilities and insights into differing roofing system technologies and most common mistakes in applications and specifications. Once you've

gotten the processes and approaches implemented, reflect them in your client proposals, too, and differentiate yourself as providing superior services and value.

Business can seem very complicated, but it can also be pretty simple. The companies and individuals that excel at building trust and educating their customers generally earn more than their fair share. World-class processes will help demonstrate trust. World-class proposals will help educate the clients, demonstrating to them why using your company will result in superior value, with less risk. And, when you're at a world-class level with your processes and proposals, your entire team will be prouder, more effective, and more efficient. Most importantly, they will generate world-class results. 

#### Dave Harrison

Dave Harrison is widely known in the roofing industry as a result of the educational events he's conducted with thousands of contractors, consultants, and property owners throughout North America, as well as through articles published in *Roofing Contractor* and *Interface* over the past several years. He is the founder of CARE, the Center for the Advancement of Roofing Excellence, and serves as senior vice president of GAF Materials Corporation with responsibilities for marketing, technical services, and business development. He can be reached at [dharrison@gaf.com](mailto:dharrison@gaf.com).



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