

Feldman Lumber

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Building *for the future*

Commercial carpentry contractor *Component Assembly Systems* invests in information technology to further communications and best practices. *Linda Seid Frembes* finds out more

Since its founding in 1964 by H. Lewis Rapaport, Component Assembly Systems (CAS) has grown to become a premier carpentry, drywall, and acoustical specialty contractor on the East Coast. The privately held company has worked with construction heavyweights on marquee projects such as the FleetCenter (now TD Banknorth Garden) in Boston, the United Center in Chicago, and Madison Square Garden in New York City.

Working on big construction projects is not a new task for CAS, considering that its first contract was at the World's Fair in New York in 1964. Since then it has built over 50,000 hotel rooms, 4,000 hospital rooms, and 30,000 apartment units all over the country. CAS maintains offices in metropolitan New York, Boston, Central New Jersey, the Washington DC area, and opened its newest office in Las Vegas.

"Even though we have a wall and ceiling specialty, our role can be fairly broad, depending on the project," explained John Rapaport, director of operations and general counsel for the company. CAS operations include IT systems, project management, accounting, and estimating. "We have databases of historical project information; it's all about working faster and smarter."

These days CAS is often asked to bid on projects but also gets leads via CDN and the Dodge Report.

For multimillion-dollar projects, companies like CAS must go through a pre-qualification process. Rapaport added, "We have a bonding line of \$250 million, which gives us access to many larger projects. In fact, we just got the new Foxwoods project in Connecticut with Perini Construction."

CAS has built a reputation for quality work delivered on budget. To achieve this, the company has invested in information technology and new practices that are challenging the old methods of the construction industry. "The old way is to print out plans on paper and send big specification books and scope-of-work binders. Then the estimators use colored pencils to estimate on printed drawings," said Rapaport. "Our preferred method is to download files using the FTP site of the general contractor or blueprinter."

The project plans are downloaded as TIFF images, with the company's 25 estimators using virtual colored pencils to do the same job in their Onscreen Takeoff software by On Center software. The images also load in On Center's QuickBid software for budgeting. If no FTP site or data disc is available, then CAS will send the plans out to be scanned into digital images. Finally, Hewlett-Packard plotters are used to print out the final plans for one last quality check. "Our method seems to be very new to most people in the industry," said Rapaport. "Certain companies have

Above left
1505 Fifth Ave.
in New York City,
a completed project

Above middle
Specialty ceiling on a
project in Connecticut
(Diageo North American
headquarters)

Above right
Specialty ceiling
finished work

concerns over security and don't want to use FTP for fear of network intrusion."

The industry is slowly changing and, thanks to companies like CAS, is taking evolutionary steps toward using technology more effectively. By investing in technology, CAS has seen gains in accuracy and productivity. Rapaport and his team took two years to develop the Component Assembly Systems information management (CASim) system. CASim provides custom screens and workflow models that help the company track budget goals and benchmarks. Rapaport explained, "It's a new way to look at costs on a job. CASim tracks payroll codes and adjusted budgets. We can click down into detailed information either in the office or in the field. We can adjust manpower on an hourly or daily basis based on the progress of the job."

CASim helps close the loop from estimating to project management to accounting and back to estimating. The system also rates the risk on everything from labor to pending items, in part to

ensure that the appropriately skilled person is in the best position to succeed. "You don't want your best drywaller to be assigned to unloading trucks," said Rapaport. CASim is seen as such an innovative system that it just won a Gold Vision Award from Constructech magazine.

Suppliers, though, haven't changed their methods. Today, besides some markets using e-mail, a company like CAS still must phone or fax in orders. "There's nothing online," he noted. "There are areas of opportunity with XML or other technologies, but you'd need to get the larger suppliers on board."

In the near future, CAS's focus is on major casino projects through its Las Vegas office, as well as upgrading CASim with new developments. Rapaport concluded, "Our initiatives refreshed everybody. They showed that you can let go of information and be even better off than if you didn't share it at all. We're all more powerful and successful because of it." ■

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