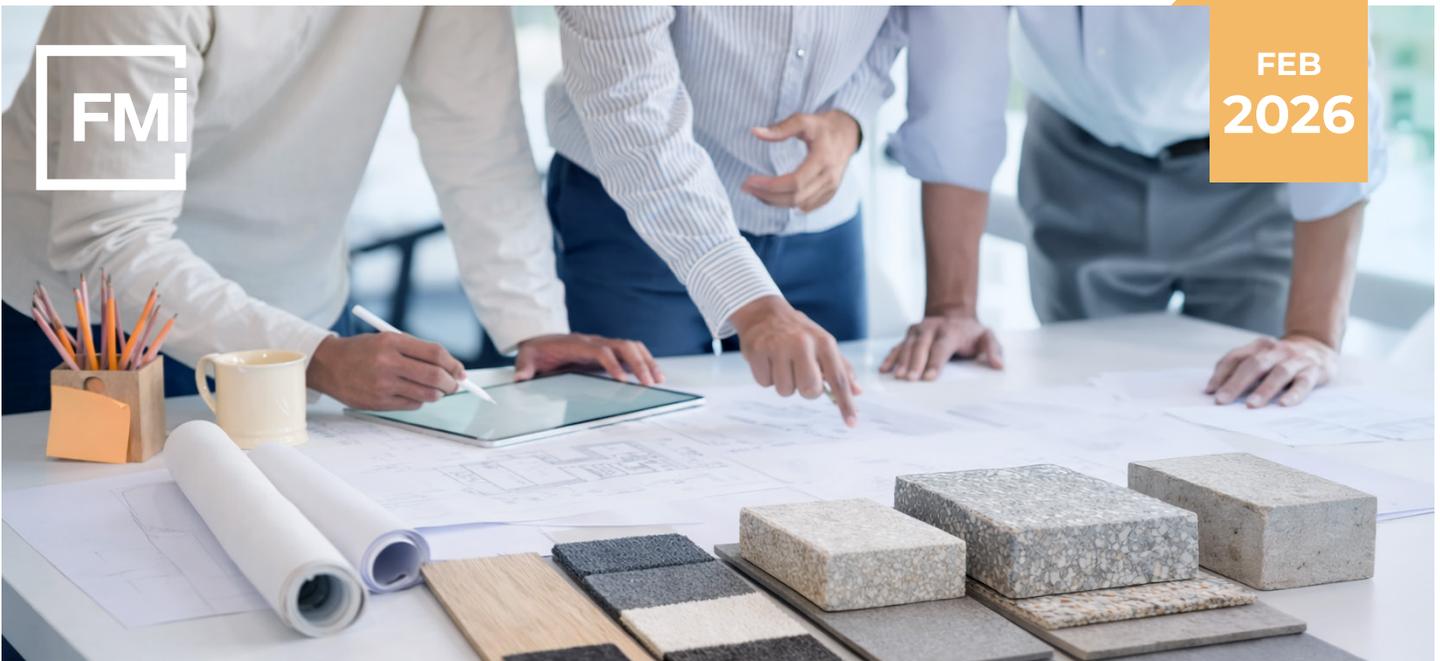




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ARCHITECTURAL SALES REPRESENTATIVES: A STRATEGIC LEVER FOR BUILDING PRODUCT MANUFACTURERS

BY PAUL TROMBITAS, JULIAN GOTTLIEB, AND BRIE OWENS

The building product landscape is characterized by an abundance of choices from floors to walls to roofing. Architects are frequently in a position to assess this vast array of products to determine which should form the standard that ultimately drives purchase decisions for each project. This leaves manufacturers with a challenge — finding the person responsible for coordinating these decisions and differentiating your products from direct competitors' and alternative products and materials aiming to gain entry and take market share.

Enter the architectural sales representative (AR).

ARs are responsible for securing the manufacturer's position with architecture and design professionals, ensuring products are top-of-mind when it comes time to design a project. These are not traditional, commission-based sales teams that rely on high volumes of customer calls to generate revenue. ARs are strategic influencers who build relationships with design professionals. By filling the role of technical advisor and educator, they establish themselves as long-term, dependable partners within the design community.

Despite their value, however, manufacturers often struggle when it comes to structuring these teams for success.

HOW TO LEVERAGE THE POWER OF ARS

The challenge generally arises because traditional sales models and incentives, which rely on short-term metrics and high commission potential, are misapplied to these roles designed for long-term strategic influence. The classic method can ultimately prevent ARs from demonstrating value because:

- The patient, collaborative approach required to cultivate rapport in the design community is difficult to incentivize, so often is not.
- They lack role clarity and resources, becoming misaligned and frustrated.
- Trust erodes because other sales roles view the ARs as competition for resources instead of team members.

To avoid these obstacles, architectural sales teams require their own unique structure including separate reporting relationships, tailored incentive programs with distinctive metrics, and a playbook that defines territorial boundaries, target accounts and collaboration norms with sales teams.

Successful AR Models Include Three Factors:

1. Defined geographic focus and reporting lines
2. Clearly articulated roles and responsibilities
3. Established incentive structure and performance metrics

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

Defined Focus and Reporting Lines

Strategic AR programs are built on deliberate internal alignment and reporting accountability. This structure can take several forms, but the ideal set-up has the AR and sales teams collaborating closely and complementing one another’s strengths to win work and achieve shared goals and metrics. For example, geographic designation enables ARs to work cohesively with their counterparts on the sales team while maintaining a separate reporting line, creating more coordination.

Clear and distinct separation of management reporting structures for ARs and sales teams is critical. This separation maintains focus, prevents conflict of interest and preserves the AR’s long-term strategic orientation. Once roles and reporting lines are established, teams can begin to build intentional pursuit strategies to get products written into standard specifications.

Regional ARs focus on local design firms and project opportunities, while national account ARs engage with large multi-office firms or corporate owners who have their own standard set of specifications. As the key drivers of basis-of-design influence, they can manage

both levels. However, a clear and differentiated structure that supports standardization, consistency and shared accountability across the organization is essential so they can master the distinct approach each requires. The result is an integrated structure where teams collaborate to drive specification inclusion and product adoption without stepping on each other’s toes.

Mini Case Study

A national manufacturer of pre-engineered building systems uses an intentionally coordinated approach that aligns ARs with a select network of trained builder partners and dedicated territory reps. Design teams, builders and reps engage early through education and design-assist to ensure material selections align with performance, code and constructability before projects go out to bid. By limiting who can sell and install its systems and clearly defining roles across the channel, the manufacturer achieves strong conversion from design to build.

Clearly Articulated Roles and Responsibilities

The most effective ARs are technical advisors, relationship-builders and, most importantly, trusted partners. ARs focus on high-potential accounts within their focus areas, starting with senior decision-makers before engaging project architects, interior designers and specification writers. They should be deeply active in the market, continuously engaging with architectural firms to secure products as the basis of design and positioning the company advantageously once projects move to bid. As connectors between design influence and downstream sales, ARs feed live opportunities to sales teams by sharing GC and owner contacts early in the process – helping sales engage before competitors even enter the conversation. Day-to-day work involves consistent outreach, lunch-and-learns and meet-and-greets centered around being top-of-mind when a new project begins.

But without clearly articulated guidelines and boundaries, they can drift into ambiguity, reducing effectiveness and creating friction with sales teams. To avoid overlap with traditional sales teams, clearly define and communicate the AR’s scope of work. Set them up for success by defining clients, segments and responsibilities so that their work is both intentional and measurable.

Ultimately, ARs become force multipliers, enhancing the organization's ability to win work.

In partnership with traditional sales teams, establish predetermined criteria – such as target client types, contract potential and project value thresholds. This clarity ensures everyone understands when and how AR involvement adds value, preventing confusion and competition for credit. In this way, the two teams can jointly address every point of the buying triangle (architects, GCs and owners) as well as distributors.

Mini Case Study

A leading roofing materials manufacturer fostered a collaborative, team-based approach by restructuring its ARs as partners to both design professionals and the sales team. In the new model, the AR is tied to a geography and works alongside a sales manager, ensuring buy-in on regional sales goals and using additional metrics measured individually through CRM. These activity-based metrics include KPIs like specifications written, lunch-and-learns delivered and projects tracked. Measures serve as leading indicators of future demand and reduce internal disputes over credit. Ultimately, the model reinforces a “win together” regional mindset without tying compensation to individual architectural wins.

Established Incentive Structure and Performance Metrics

Successful ARs are often industry veterans with deep technical understanding of products and systems. They ensure specifications are written accurately, code-compliant and tailored to architects' and owners' needs – and ultimately assist in helping sales managers close more business downstream.

The more success is defined collectively rather than individually, the better the team alignment and performance. While a strong team culture can drive the right mindset, a unified approach doesn't automatically make sense for compensation. The difficulty lies in balancing collective success with individual recognition and rewards.

ARs must have a system for tracking their unique metrics so there is a documented record of how they're connecting with clients, customers and influencers. This

way, when a sale is made, there is a clear understanding of the AR's involvement and influence on the project. Measures like these enable you to track involvement rather than compensation:

Number of ...

- new strategic relationships added to CRM
- new specifications written
- specification updates
- early-stage projects added to CRM
- opportunities created with internal partners
- lunch-and-learns hosted
- follow-up meetings scheduled from targeted conferences
- spec jobs won
- opportunities to jobs won

Companies can make the mistake of structuring AR commissions akin to that of traditional sales roles. With sales cycles that can be in excess of 18 months, commissions can be few and far between. Thoughtful consideration on the ratio of base salary to commission is required to foster an effective AR sales program.

FMI has observed that a higher base salary structure helps maintain AR motivation and consistent field activity, especially given the long and unpredictable conversion cycle between specification influence and realized revenue. As part of this, effective AR bonus structures tie compensation to annual revenue targets. Aligning project contract value with predefined revenue expectations creates a single, clear performance test: did the AR generate the sales required to meet their goal?

There is no mechanism to pay AR bonuses without affecting the economics of the sales organization. Successfully managing and bonusing ARs requires full alignment with sales leadership. If they are compensated based on projects they influence, that compensation must be funded from those wins. Specifically, when ARs materially influence specifications and drive pull-through revenue, they should benefit from the financial outcome of the projects they help win.

Because of this, sales leadership must be aligned on how revenue and compensation are allocated. Without their buy-in, the model will create internal friction and ultimately fail. Properly structured, the model rewards shared success – as opposed to creating internal competition.

To gain buy-in and support, leadership needs to communicate that ARs ease selling. By influencing specifications and educating designers, they enable greater opportunities for early involvement in new projects, which in many cases can turn what would otherwise have been a cold call into a warm call or conversion opportunity. This shortens the sales cycle and better positions sales managers to drive increased revenue with greater consistency — a net benefit for both teams.

Mini Case Study

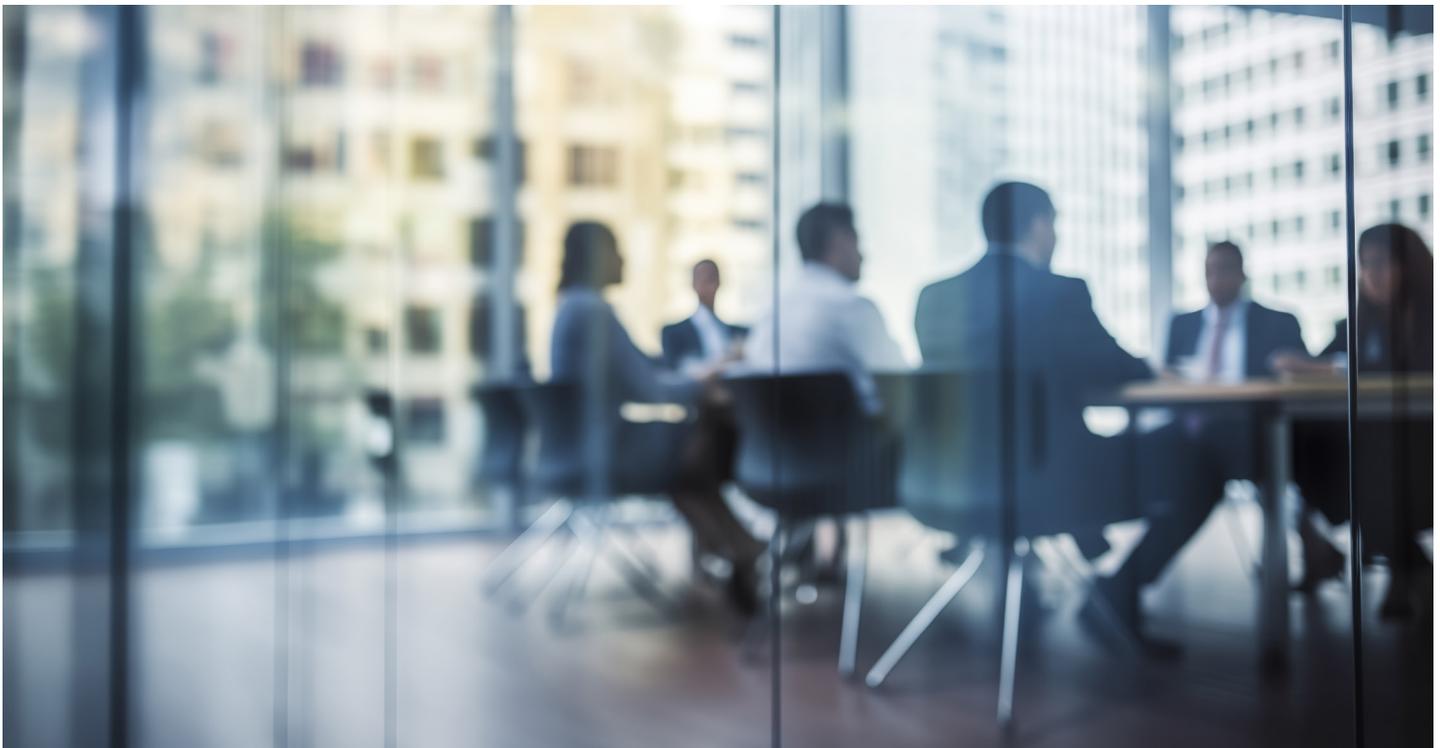
ARs and traditional sales representatives at a large North American building products manufacturer operated under the same structure, causing misalignment and frustration for both teams. Leadership redefined success and redesigned incentives to reflect the distinct nature of each role. ARs were evaluated not just on closed sales but on the quality and conversion rate of their specifications tracked through CRM data linking specs to eventual projects. This created a healthy accountability loop: ARs were motivated to generate actionable, high-quality specs and sales reps were inspired to convert those specs into wins. The company also leveraged technology to identify upstream design opportunities.

LEADERSHIP EMPHASIS

Capturing the competitive advantage of integrating ARs into a company’s overall business development strategy requires full sponsorship from top leadership and structural support throughout the organization.

Senior leaders are responsible for establishing and upholding a clear internal playbook and actively championing a cross-functional partnership model. Additionally, leadership must commit to and protect the long-term mandate of the AR function. Because AR teams are designed to create strategic, specification-driven value over time and not to fill short-term revenue gaps, the distinction must be explicitly communicated, consistently reinforced and insulated from short-term pressures.

Sustainable cultural change requires active leadership engagement. Executives must eliminate structural barriers, provide adequate resources, and deliberately empower ARs — without compromising accountability. When leadership demonstrates visible commitment and dedicated support, it creates the environment where traditional and architectural sales teams succeed together.



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Paul combines deep industry relationships with rigorous market analysis to help clients translate complex construction dynamics into actionable strategy. He leads multidisciplinary teams delivering market intelligence, customer insights, and opportunity sizing that enable data-driven decisions and long-term value creation.

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