



“If I only knew then...” Hindsight with Clark Branum of Brickform Rafco

Are making mistakes sometimes beneficial? Yes. We can always learn from our mistakes... and others' mistakes. Pick up a few tips from Clark Branum, and industry leader in the decorative concrete field, as he shares some of the wisdom he's gained over the years. [*Continue >*](#)



In this second installment of our Hindsight series, we're talking to Clark Branum, Director of Technical Services for Brickform Rafco. While most salesmen focus on their company's products, Branum focuses on processes or more specifically, what the underlying issues are leading to a particular product's use.

Branum's more than 24 years' experience, starting with entry-level curb and sidewalk finishing in Seattle and Alaska, coupled with an artistic background (he's a musician), has enabled him to grow the decorative concrete industry through education, one contractor at a time. Branum takes care of clients in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Alaska and parts of Canada, as well as one client he's close with in Oklahoma City, The Stamp Store. Also on the Board of Directors for the American Society of Concrete Contractor's Decorative Concrete Council, Branum helps with the World of Concrete's mega-demos.

Here are Branum's Hindsight tips:

1. Education

"I was a concrete finisher for 15 years before I knew anything about concrete," says Branum, adding that he had to learn a lot through trial and error. "If you learn about concrete itself, the rest will come naturally."





Branum says that often contractors get caught up in coloring, texturing, etc., but if they don't understand concrete itself there are still struggles. He says common issues include cracking, shrinkage, improper joining and water/cement ratios, as well as climate issues.

He recommends learning about concrete through industry resources such as the American Society of Concrete Contractors (ASCC), American Concrete Institute (ACI), and The Concrete Network, as well as the Bob Harris' line of books and seminars at the World of Concrete.

"I still learn and attend seminars every chance I get," he adds. "Education is an ongoing process."

2. Choosing products

"Don't let someone else make a decision that will affect your company's work," Branum cautions. "Most manufacturers don't have time to find out what every contractor is doing with every gallon of product."

He recommends gathering technical data sheets from two or three comparable products and making an educated decision based on what you need.

"Learn about the products and choose the appropriate product for the conditions of your concrete," he adds. "Know your concrete and you'll know what product to use...it's critical to have that kind of knowledge."





3. Estimating

Branum says that every contractor approaches estimating differently, but what he's found that works is simple. "I try to build profit into man hours," he says.

He also keeps an eye on material costs and availability by requesting regular quotes from his suppliers, at least every six months but every quarter is better.

"Otherwise, you can end up delaying a job or having to use more expensive products," he notes. Branum says this is also a great way to lock in prices for a given period of time.

4. Exclusions and line items

Branum says he uses exclusions and line items to paint an accurate picture of what everyone can expect during a job. Exclusions often include demolition, rebar, sub-base, and surface preparation, all of which Branum says he will do, but it will cost more.

"If I'm using a concrete artisan to do demolition, it's going to cost what a concrete artisan would be making," he explains, adding that he encourages his clients, through exclusions, to get the best price for the job.





Similarly, Branum says he uses line items to ensure that both he and his clients know exactly what each part of the job will cost, such as square foot prices for basic applications, and linear square foot prices for saw cuts and step risers.

“Having exclusions and line items controls the job and makes estimating easy,” he adds.

5. Presentation

Beyond showing up for bids looking presentable (versus coming straight from a job site with dirty clothes on), Branum says he has invested in technology that has more than paid for itself.

With a laptop and printer he can plug into his vehicle’s cigarette lighter, Branum says he can present a polished, professional bid, all while sitting in a prospective client’s driveway.

“If you carry yourself more professionally, there’s no need for flexibility on pricing,” explains Branum. “I never lower my price when times are slow. I don’t budge on price and I’m upfront with clients...they decide if they can afford me or not.”

Branum adds he also doesn’t undercut his competition, noting, “I get jobs because I’m the best person for the job, not because I’m the cheapest.”





Selling on reputation versus price has proven successful for Branum; he says he would average one out of three bids, and sometimes he would even get five or six in a row.

6. Contracts

Investing in CAD software has also paid off for Branum.

“Typically, a homeowner would change their mind [frequently] because they couldn’t visualize something the first time,” he explains. “But I was able to create dimensional drawings showing colors and textures, all of which helped visualization. And the drawings gave me square footages.”

Branum says the drawings also helped define the scope of work. He would attach the bid to the drawing, complete with pricing, line items and square foot prices. Then, if the parameters of the job changed, everyone involved would know how much the price would increase (or decrease).

“Rather than give a lump bid, this would eliminate a point of argument,” he concludes.

That’s the kind of thing that helps each day end smoothly. At the end of the day, Branum’s tips are sure to make decorative concrete jobs easier for everyone involved, which in turn helps the decorative concrete industry as a whole.

Read other articles in the [Hindsight Series](#).





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NAVIGATION & USER TIPS

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	PC	MAC
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Zoom out	[Ctrl] [-]	[⌘] [-]
Full screen/normal screen view	[Ctrl] [L]	[⌘] [L]

ABOUT THE CONCRETE SHERPA

The Concrete Sherpa is a team of people that represent the experience, teaching and learning of our team members and other industry leaders *on a mission to make life better for the concrete contractor*. We are an idea center striving to deliver thought provoking ideas based on “Concrete Advice for Business and Life” to stimulate you to reach new heights. As a user, you should remember to consider all information you receive, here at the Concrete Sherpa or elsewhere, not as a *cast in concrete* recommendation, but rather as an idea for you to consider and ponder.



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THE JOURNEY LEADING TO THE CONCRETE SHERPA PROJECT

The Concrete Sherpa Project (A [Sherpa](#) is a “guide”) was born at The Concrete Network in mid 2004. Here is how it happened:

The biggest surprise, or gift, since starting The Concrete Network in 1999 has been the concrete contractor friends from around the country we’ve made and witnessing the passion they have for what they do. These people include Dave Pettigrew, up in the San Francisco Bay Area, or the Verlennich brothers in Minnesota, or Bob Harris in Georgia, the list goes on and on. It’s quite inspiring.

We were once asked, “How are you so excited every day about concrete?” Well the answer is simple, it is impossible to not be excited about concrete when you have the job we do—interacting with hundreds of concrete contractors from every state in the country.

The thing we’ve learned about concrete contractors is that most are passionate *craftsmen*—they are often less passionate and experienced in the “office stuff”. Human nature channels us to do what we are most comfortable with; learning how to use a new saw-cutting tool is comfortable; learning and implementing a new estimating strategy, or job management tool, is not so comfortable.



Sherpa info

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES...

So Sherpa was born to provide FREE and easy to use information on topics many contractors are not too comfortable with.

- Concrete Sherpa is here to provide help to contractors who are often 'Lone Rangers' and don't have anyone to get solid business advice from.
- Concrete Sherpa is here to provide help for contractors who have to work too hard and too many hours in their business, and one day realize they need to work *on their business, not in their business*.
- Have fun with Concrete Sherpa and go faster towards reaching success than you might have on your own.
- To skeptics who think something free can't be valuable, or there must be a trick- visit Concrete Sherpa and decide for yourself.

We hope you make great use of the Concrete Sherpa and it helps you to become an awesome success for yourself, your family, your church, and your community.

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