

Notes from the Spec Coach®

The Formats Advantage

Over the last little while, there has been a lot of talk in the industry about standard formats. We've been hearing a lot about MasterFormat™. It changed dramatically, there are now changes coming to SectionFormat™ and PageFormat™, and probably within a year you'll see changes to UniFormat™. Some of you may never even have heard of some of these standard formats and may be asking yourselves "If I don't even know what it is, why should I care?" It's a good question. I'd like to show you why you should not only care, but why caring will help your business.

It's really all about the laziness inherent in all of us as human beings. Maybe laziness is the wrong term, let's just say if there's an easy way to do something then it's more likely that it will get done.

When the numbers in MasterFormat changed, everybody thought that the change was for the better in the long term, but nobody wanted to change in the short term. The reason for this was because it's easier to do nothing than to do something, but industry is changing to the new numbers because it makes sense.

When the changes are announced about SectionFormat, PageFormat and eventually UniFormat, we honestly believe that the reaction will be the same. These documents are all going to be important in the future for manufacturers because they all make it easier for specification writers to specify products.

In any construction project, given that all characteristics and criteria of competing products is the same, the specification writer is going to use the product that's easier to specify. If your technical literature is in a format that the specification writer can identify with and is familiar with, then it's easier for the specification writer to compare the product characteristics to the project requirements. If the manufacturers have a construction specification sections for their products in the same format that specification writers use, it makes it easier for the specification writer to download the product section and put either the whole section or relevant articles and paragraphs right into the Project Manual for bidding purposes.

Right now throughout North America, just like every other trade or professional in the construction industry, there is a shortage of specification writers. This means that those of us who are in the spec writing business are overworked and under pressure. Most of us are turning work away. So, if the specification writers have the choice of downloading a complete and accurate specification in a usable format from a manufacturers web site, or researching the materials and developing a construction specification from scratch, which choice do you think they will make?

I'll give you a clue. Downloading the spec and fitting it into you project takes at most half a day. (Remember that like you spec writers have to have coffee breaks and check the hockey scores

and weather on the internet.) Developing a construction specification from scratch could be anywhere from two to five days (bearing in mind the aforementioned coffee breaks).

There are going to be some real advantages when the changes come out for PageFormat. One of the things that you are going to see among the changes is that article and paragraph numbering in Canada is finally going to be the same as has been used in the US for years. Canada will be switching from an all number paragraph numbering system to an alphanumeric system. This is going to save manufacturers a lot of money in that they won't have to have a spec section for their US clients and a separate section for their Canadian clients.

The drawback to this for Canadian manufacturers is that as far as standard construction specification sections are concerned, it is going to be even more important for them to have documents available in electronic format for specification writers to download. The advantage of course is that with construction specification sections written in a format that is the same on both sides of the border, the whole US marketplace opens a little wider to Canadian manufacturers if they are willing to provide the specification writers with what they need. Let's face it, the specification writers in the US look for as many easy ways of doing things as we do here in God's Country.

In conclusion, and to answer the question "If I don't even know what it is, why should I care?", the answer is the same as the answer to many questions asked in a business: "because it affects your bottom line"

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