

*Graber Post's e-Modeler program is an amazing marketing tool that turns everyone into a designer.*

# Success Automated, By Design

Utilizing software to design and bid post-frame jobs

■ By Alli Gordon

**S**elling building supplies to post-frame contractors is a complex process. Since bids take hours to complete, builders often ask distributors for help. Even on jobs where the contractor does the final takeoff, suppliers still waste tons of time entering data and translating it into internal part numbers. And because manual data entry has an inherently high error rate, incorrect shipments and expensive hotshot deliveries are almost always sure to follow. But for

builders working with Graber Post Buildings Inc., success is automated, by design.

Contractor customers using Graber Post's proprietary version of SmartBuild Systems swap time doing bids with live-design client sessions and automated, push-button ordering. Using the pole barn industry's only complete design system for post-frame structures generates more business and higher sales for them both.

Started by Glen Graber in Montgomery, Indiana, in 1973, Graber Post is the post-frame industry's acknowledged leader in

manufacturing and material supply. Graber Post prides itself on seamlessly selling materials to a growing legion of loyal contractors who credit the company with freeing up their time to close more business.

"We have dreamed of this kind of automation forever and now it is a reality," said Graber Post General Manager Chad Wilson. "We worked with the SmartBuild people to make sure SmartBuild does what we know our contractors need. SmartBuild dramatically changes the way our contractors do business and how we do business with our contractors."

## Post-Frame Providers

Graber Post is known for its extensive product line, pole barn kits, hardware store, and delivery and installation services. The company has its own custom truss plant and specializes in the design and manufacture of pre-engineered wood truss systems. When requested, they draw truss designs from customer blueprints and build to spec. More recently, Graber Post began manufacturing laminated columns that won't split, warp, or twist, allowing for easier framing and finishing.

Harkening back to their beginnings as a three-man Amish building crew just trying to support their families, Graber Post still prioritizes manufacturing and distributing all the components neces-

sary for post-frame projects—a large and complicated undertaking when working with both the retail and wholesale markets. In fact, before SmartBuild, Graber Post was so dissatisfied with the software programs available for post-frame design and the direct distribution of materials to contractors, they considered writing their own software.

## Courting Contractors

The standard operating procedure for post-frame contractors is laborious and inefficient. They get a lead and interview the client over the phone, trying to gather all the specs using a checklist created in Excel. After the interview, they spend two hours doing a material takeoff, manually adding quantities and pricing to the

spreadsheet to generate a bid. They hope to get the bid to the client within 48 hours, but it's always closer to a week. Builders know the best practice is to drop off the bid to the client in person but, making up for lost time, often send it via email. This process wins contractors roughly 1 out of every 7 bids—a mere 15% close rate.

When they do close a deal, contractors typically review the bid, ensuring they submit the exact materials (but often lean on the supplier to build the final material takeoff). Looking to help contractors increase their close rates—while alleviating its own frustration with the tedious back-and-forth of assisting with bids—Graber Post tried numerous post-frame design systems throughout the years. All of the programs left them disappointed, as none facilitated live design, integrated with the Paradigm accounting program, and automated the takeoff and bid processes.

## Design and Distribute

When SmartBuild Systems' CEO, Keith Dietzen, approached Wilson, it was evident that both companies had a lot to gain. SmartBuild needed an established, knowledgeable supplier to test the system and provide meaningful input. Graber Post was searching for a materials supplier sales tool that automated the core functions of post frame and made them more attractive to contractor customers. An industry-changing association was born.

According to Dietzen, "Graber Post enjoys an unparalleled reputation that is well deserved. We have been working with them and have gained an appreciation for the depth of their knowledge and the care they exercise on behalf of their customers. Graber Post has helped mold SmartBuild into the system that gives the industry what it has always needed."

SmartBuild Systems is web-based software that's simple enough for anyone to use. Guided by a menu-driven set of prompts, SmartBuild automatically:

- Designs a 3D model and framing
- Updates changes in real-time
- Compiles a bid and order using a custom database
- Builds a cut list for all sheathing

## Are You Ready for SmartBuild Systems? Check These 5 Signs:

**1** You have a serious case of whiplash from the tedious back-and-forth process of helping contractors with bids. Without SmartBuild, contractors are taking specs from buyers over the phone, then spending hours manually adding quantities and pricing to spreadsheets. They try submitting the exact materials but lean on you to build the final material takeoff.

**2** Your fingers and your finances are taking a hit from the man-hours needed to fulfill the order. Even on jobs where the contractors do the final takeoff, you or your staff are spending 200 hours per year manually entering data into your system and translating it into internal part numbers.

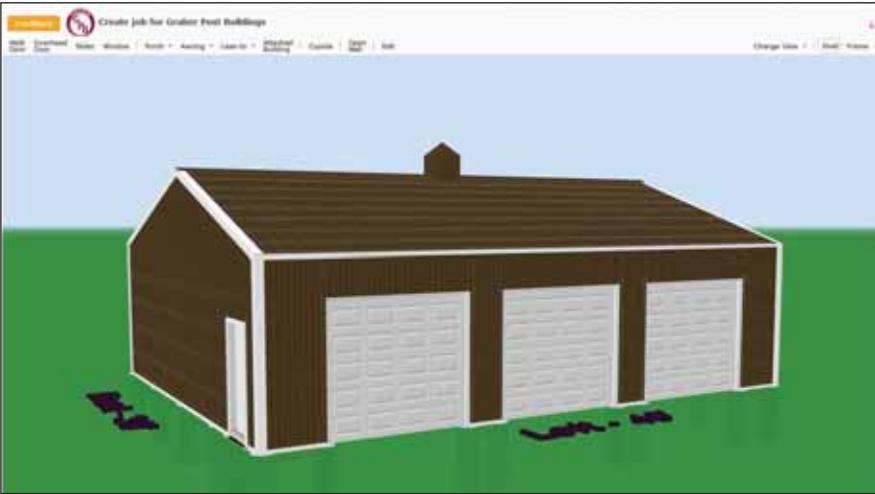
**3** You're constantly getting high fives from hotshot delivery drivers because your error rate is so huge. Because contractors manually enter data into spreadsheets, they have a high error rate. As such, these errors often result in the delivery of wrong window sizes or incorrect color schemes. So, as a precaution—you routinely throw an additional \$400-\$500 worth of product on the quote, as it's cheaper than sending missing items via hotshot delivery.



**4** You'd like to add more contractors, but they spend most of their time chasing deals they never close. Without SmartBuild, it can take contractors up to a week to get bids to prospective clients. Plus, in an effort to make up for lost time, they often email the bid rather than the preferred practice of delivering it in person. This inefficient and impersonal way of doing business costs contractors 85% of the jobs they bid.

**5** You wish you could increase your annual sales with the push of a button. Now you can!

If you're experiencing these common distributor disturbances—then all signs point to it being time for SmartBuild—the complete design system for post-frame structures!



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and trim

- Generates construction drawings
- Calculates price, including materials, labor, and sales tax
- Creates a thorough description of the building
- Populates the sales contract
- Emails and prints a copy for the buyer on the spot

After partnering with SmartBuild, work began on Graber Post's proprietary setup. The team at SmartBuild helped Wilson and his crew download the entire in-house inventory database, price quotes, and color schemes into the Graber Post version of the program. SmartBuild also created an entire part-number system, as well as standard sales contracts and bid form templates. Once complete, Graber Post set up contractors on its custom platform, showing them how easy it is to use the data established in the master account. It took little effort for the contractors to get up and running.

According to Royden Wagler, Graber Post's Technical Lead, "With Smart-

Build, we can get new contractors set up in less than a week and all of their comments are positive." Continuing, he said, "We've added 29 new builder accounts just because they heard we have the SmartBuild system that cuts the bid time to 16 minutes."

Impressed with the functionality of SmartBuild and the positive feedback from current customers, Graber Post recently demonstrated the SmartBuild program at a trade show. When they effortlessly offered the software to contractors in return for buyer commitments, it was clear that relicensing the software is also a powerful sales tool.

Wagler, explaining why contractors love SmartBuild, said, "It makes designing and bidding easier because they can draw up every door and window in a live session. And they can get more quotes and takeoffs done, so they save time and satisfy more customers."

### **"E" Stands for "Everyone"**

Though originally developed to au-

tomate the core functions of post frame between the builder and supplier, Graber Post envisioned more. Together with SmartBuild, Graber embedded the same design technology on its customer-facing website. Dubbed the e-Modeler, the program is an amazing marketing tool that turns everyone into a designer, including the DIY crowd, building buyers, and farmers. Almost immediately—through word of mouth alone—daily leads began pouring into the Graber Post website. As new users were added, many large companies turned into customers.

But what about the smaller builders who can't afford a software seat? In today's uncertain financial climate, access to SmartBuild Systems could literally be what keeps them in business. Fortunately, the Graber Post/SmartBuild partnership continues growing for the good of the industry. The new "Pay as You Go" license structure allows builders to use the SmartBuild system—with the proprietary Graber Post database—and only pay by the job. Now, even the smallest contractor can increase their sales, expand their customer base, and operate as a 21st century tech-led company.

Summing up the effect of complete design software on everyone in the post-frame industry, Chad Wilson said, "This is great for them and great for us. SmartBuild is truly a game changer." **FN**

*For more information about Graber Post, visit [www.graberpost.com](http://www.graberpost.com).*