

The Really Useful Guide to Construction Sales

A guide for smaller building firms

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Introduction

“A campaign of
pro-active sales
can transform a
business, taking it
up a level, breaking
into new markets,
delivering growth



Welcome to the Really Useful Guide to Construction Sales. This has been my world for the last four decades, and I want to share some of what I've learned over those years of experience.

What can you expect from this guide? We'll start with an overview of sales and how it works differently in the construction sector – it really isn't like sales in any other field, for reasons that will become clear! We'll take a look at how to create a sales strategy, and use market intelligence to give yourself an edge. And then we'll get as practical as we can, with down-to-earth sections on how to place a phone call that gets results, how to follow up, and how to win the work you want.

That, ultimately, is what it's all about: winning the contracts you want most. Not whatever work is going. Not more of the same unrewarding, low margin projects. Sales is not about letting work come to you. It's pro-active. It's about locating the jobs you want, and going and getting them.

It's what I do for a living, hunting down work for my clients, and I've seen how powerful it can be for a company. A campaign of pro-active sales can genuinely transform a business, taking it up a level, breaking into new markets and delivering growth.

I've already shared some of the basics in The Really Useful Guide to Construction Marketing. If you haven't downloaded that resource, I'd encourage you to do so. It will make sure that the foundations are in place for a more targeted sales approach. But if you're ready, let's see what sales can do for you.

About the author

David Crick is the Managing Director of Contractors Marketing Services. A Chartered Marketer, David has over 40 years' experience and has worked on contracts worth up to £20 million.

His work with UK market intelligence firms, such as Barbour ABI, has seen David advise a diverse range of clients on strategic development and training.



David Crick

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Chapter 1

An Introduction To Sales



Marketing vs. sales: what's the difference?

As I write and talk about my job, I often end up referring to both sales and marketing, sometimes interchangeably. Which might leave you wondering – what exactly is the difference between them? Where does one end and the other begin?

In simple terms, marketing is the major discipline covering all aspects of product, pricing, people and profit maximisation. Sales is the pro-active 'get out there and sell' element of the wider marketing discipline.

Almost every business engages in marketing, even if it's at the very basic level. But not every company does sales, and I have found that it can make all the difference in growing a company and building a successful business. So let's look a little deeper into the differences.

Marketing is the broad discipline of telling people about your company. From the website to promotional materials, to the brand and how it is applied, it's all about communicating who you are and what you stand for. It tells your story and broadcasts your identity. Usually, it does so indiscriminately – you can't control who sees your van with the logo and strapline on the side, for example. Everyone in the street sees it, whether or not they're in the market for your services.

Sales is a more focused field of work. Where marketing talks to everyone, sales zeroes in on key clients. Where marketing communicates information, sales aims to build relationships.



“Sales is a more focused field of work. Where marketing talks to everyone, sales zeroes in on key clients.”

It's one to one, targeted to specific clients or potential clients, and it's personalised. It builds on the background information of marketing, and applies it to particular contexts: here's what our business could mean for you, how we can work together, the solutions we can offer to your specific needs.

Because it is strategic, sales is very effective at generating the right kinds of enquiries – the kind of clients you want, the kind of work you're good at and enjoy doing. You can't sit back and wait for those sorts of jobs to come to you. You have to get on the phone and chase them down.

Sales in construction: what makes it so special?

Sales is a particular skill in any business sector, and every sector has its nuances. Construction sales, however, is particularly specialist.

As almost everyone in construction will know, the industry in the UK is unique in having an extraordinarily good forward view on billions of pounds worth of upcoming construction jobs.

This potential new business is all logged in the planning applications and approvals system, and then through the tenders and contract awards data services that follow on from planning.

Virtually every new building project of any real value is documented, from small home extensions under £50k to major new schemes up to £1bn or more. They're all tracked, researched and known about well before most buying decisions are made.

This means that every construction and property company, from small local builders and specialist sub-contractors to major national contractors, have one of the most powerful sales and marketing tools in the country at their disposal. Seriously – marketers in other sectors can only dream of the kind of market intelligence that the planning process provides.

Construction sales leads are the key to pro-active sales, and to hunting down the kinds of jobs you want most. You can use them to find the kind of projects you're best at, at the right value, time and place – and go after them. All the information you need to do this is publicly available through the planning process.

We'll get into how to navigate the vast ocean of data from the planning system, and how to find what you need. First, we just need to check the rigging, so to speak.



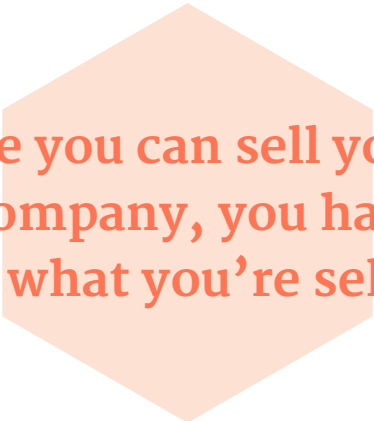
“Construction sales leads are the key to pro-active sales, and to hunting down the kinds of jobs you want most.

Marketing as the platform for sales

Before you can sell yourself as a company, you have to know what you're selling. Even if you have a very clear idea of who you are and what you're doing, it's worth pausing to think about your brand distinctives. What makes you different? What can you offer that others can't? Can you name your strengths? Why are you a better choice from everyone else in the running?

Sales needs a solid marketing foundation, and that begins with brand identity. When you're on the phone to a potential client, and you've got 30 seconds to tell them why they should give you the contract, you've got to have your answer ready.

Then you've got to be able to back it up. Does your website, your brochures, or your van livery communicate the same message that you do? You don't need anything highly sophisticated or expensive, but make sure that a poorly-designed or out-of-date website isn't undermining your good work elsewhere.



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The telephone is going to be your main tool for sales, but when you've spoken to someone for the first time, they're going to look you up. You might send them a letter or an information pack. As well as marketing assets, this is about people too. If a prospective client phones the office, are they going to hear a similar message from your colleagues as they do from you?

A sales strategy needs some foundations. Before you get started, make sure that you can check off everything on this list:

- A clear and effective corporate identity, shared across everyone on your team. What do you stand for? What makes you distinctive?
- An attractive and memorable brand that expresses this corporate identity, consistently applied, and that communicates trust and professionalism.
- Marketing resources for introducing the company and following up contacts – website, brochure, letter-heads, etc.
- Evidence to back up your marketing claims, such as case studies or testimonials. Give new clients confidence by showing off your best work.

How does your firm perform? If there's anything that could be improved, take the time to do that first. The stronger your marketing platform, the more effective your sales staff can be when they hit the phones.

Chapter 2

Building A Sales Strategy



Focusing your sales

So, you've got the foundations in place. You and your team are committed to the long-term growth of the business. You're ready to tap into the mine of information in the planning system and start hunting down work. There's just one problem: there are over 340 local planning authorities around the country. It's time for a system. And it's time to focus.

First of all, every construction sales professional needs a source of sales leads to work from. There are four main providers, the best known being Glenigan and Barbour ABI. We'll come to them and their competitors shortly, to help you decide which service is best for you.

Whichever provider you choose, you'll be able to specify what you want to see using a broad range of filters. They will allow you to narrow down the vast tide of information coming out of the planning system into a manageable stream of top quality opportunities. They could include:

- **Location** – work that is closer to you and your team, or in a region you want to expand into.
- **Price** – jobs in the right price bracket for your firm, where the margins are good and where you have demonstrable experience.
- **Expertise** – projects that are in your wheelhouse or where you have particular skills.
- **Sector** – residential or commercial, education, healthcare, retail – whatever your preferred sub-section of construction, you can find leads to suit your needs.

- **Specialty** – perhaps you have a niche interest, such as the luxury market, heritage refurbishments, or sustainable construction. Look for jobs that fit these interests.
- **Satisfaction** – don't forget your own personal preferences. Which jobs are the most rewarding? Look for work that you know you'll enjoy.

Use search criteria like these to exclude the jobs that aren't going to be of interest. Once you've got a source of incoming tender enquiries, it's time to start turning them into tenders and then into contracts.

Finding future contracts

If you've set up your criteria correctly, you'll now be getting a stream of potential projects from your sales lead provider. For example, a smaller builder might focus on architect-led projects in the £100k-£400k range, within an hour's drive. It's a good strategy: architect-led projects offer four to six-month build periods, and reliable cash-flow based on architects' valuations. For them, that's where growth lies, and a thriving business with a healthy work-life balance.

Those are what I call the A* jobs. What are yours?

A* projects will be those that meet all your needs. Every week, ruthlessly eliminate any projects that aren't right for you. Then select the most promising project leads to follow up each week by telephone. If you were to follow up 8-10 quality new leads a week, I'd expect to net perhaps 2 - 4 targeted tenders every month.

Be wary of taking on too much. Only go for A* projects, and concentrate on a manageable number each week. Focus on the very best opportunities; it will pay you dividends.


Remember what I said at the outset, that marketing is about communicating information, and sales is about building relationships. That means that you're using sales leads to find clients, not just jobs. Perhaps an architect doesn't have the right project for you at this moment, but you'd like to work with them in future. Use the sales lead to get in touch and get on their radar for next time. When a project comes up that's a good fit for you, they'll already know your name.

A good sales person brings in tendering opportunities, but they're also building a network, compiling a contacts book, getting to know a wide range of work providers and raising your profile among the right people.

Those looking for a quick win might want to contact past clients first. Perhaps there's someone you used to work with in the past. Even if a few years have gone by, there's a good chance they'll remember you if you get in touch. It's easier to renew an old business relationship than create one from scratch, so see if you can resurrect some old contacts.

I also look out for what I call 'aliens': architects or developers working outside of their usual patch. If they don't work in your area often, they won't have as many contacts and you have a better chance of winning the work if you introduce yourself.

If you've got an eye on growing your business, then be ambitious in what you pitch for. You know what you realistically have a chance of winning, but use sales leads to get your name in the hat for slightly bigger contracts than you're used to. It can be more work to chase down these jobs, so you want to go after three or four bread-and-butter projects for every bigger one. I call them flagships, because they're the jobs you'll want to put front



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and centre on the website, and feature as case studies. Don't chase all big jobs. Bigger tenders will come quite naturally as you prove yourself. But see if you can take on one flagship project at a time, balanced with two or three medium jobs and some smaller ones. It'll get the best out of your workforce and help to maintain cash flow.

Using sales leads in this way can get a business out of a rut of similar jobs, and onto the kinds of projects you've always wanted to do.

Choosing a sales lead provider

With only a handful of services to choose from, selecting a sales leads provider is relatively straightforward. To summarise, there are two major services in Barbour ABI and Glenigan, and two smaller services that serve opposite ends of the process – Planning Pipe covering the planning stages and Builders Conference tracking tenders and contracts.

Which one works best for you will depend on what you need.



Larger builders and developers will benefit from access to well-researched projects as early as possible, and so will want to consider one of the big two. Small to medium builders and main contractors will be getting involved as projects reach planning, and so Planning Pipe will ideally suit their needs.

Planning Pipe offers full UK service of the 250,000+ planning applications every year together with approved details.

You can be highly specific about the type of project you want, the area coverage (towns, counties and postcodes) and more. It's also exceptional value for money with subscriptions starting at £49 per month, and a growing number of our clients would count themselves as satisfied customers of Planning Pipe's services.

Subcontractors are going to be more interested in the tenders and contract stage of the process, and so Builders Conference might be a better fit.

That might narrow it down for you, but ask around. See what the various services will cost you, and you can get more detail about each of the four providers on our website if you need a bit more guidance. Get those sales leads coming in, and then it's time to pick up the phone and start winning work.



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Chapter 3

Winning The Work



Before you call

It's time to get practical. You've done the groundwork. You've filtered your data and sourced your first sales leads. They're sorted and graded, and you have a shortlist of A* leads. Let's get down to brass tacks – what are you going to do with them?

This is where the old-fashioned telephone becomes your most powerful tool.

For some people this is difficult and intimidating. Others find it easy. However you feel about the prospect, the first thing you want to do is take two or three minutes to prepare. If you're nervous about calling, this will give you confidence. If you're already confident, it'll make sure you don't rush things and miss something important. And most of all, it will make your call more efficient.

Look up the architect's website. Study the type of work they do. Scroll through project photos on the gallery page. Architects are often pleased that you have taken the trouble to look at some of their jobs, and that you have something to say about their work.

Check to see if their team details are on the website (and if so, check their names and titles). The call will go more easily when you have an idea of who you're speaking to. Your preparation will show, and that demonstrates professionalism and makes you easier to trust.

Don't forget to visit the online planning portal. Look at the details of the project you're chasing. Planning Pipe leads always have the planning reference number and name of the relevant council. It's helpful to look at the submitted planning drawings – the elevations, floorplans, the design and access statement. Double check this is a job you really are suited to. You don't want to find out late in the day that there are extra challenges that you're not prepared for.

When you speak with the architect, weave your research into the conversation. Show you're a serious builder who has taken the trouble to be informed.

One last tip: don't put off your calls, but don't rush them either. When a new project lead appears in the late planning stage, there's always a wave of interest. A lot of builders will get in touch at once. Hold off a week or two to make your call stand out!

Your first call

If you're a natural sales person you'll probably have no qualms about this, but one of the reasons that people don't like calling about a job is that it feels like cold calling. And we all know the clichés about cold calling and how annoying it is.

But think of it this way: architects need builders just as much as builders need architects. If there's a project to talk about, you know they need a good builder! Think of it as matchmaking, or brokering. You're providing an answer to the question that you know they have – the question of who is going to do the work. Think of yourself as the solution to their problem, and you'll realise that your call is far from a nuisance.

Now that you're picking up and dialing, consider how you want to come across. Your tone of voice has a big part to play here. Think of it like acting: no matter how you feel, project your voice in a friendly, warm and professional way.

Smile when you're on the phone. I know that sounds corny, but any radio broadcaster will tell you the same. Your listener will sense the warmth of a smile. It brings a brightness and positivity to your tone. You only have one tool to work with when you're on the phone and that's your voice – so make the most of it!



“When you speak with the architect, weave your research into the conversation.”

If you can, inject a little humour into the conversation, too. They will certainly remember you, for all the best reasons.

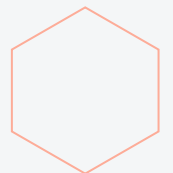
Occasionally, an architect has all the builders they need and will turn you away. But that's not how it usually goes. Most architects are always open to good builders.

Of course it's disappointing to be turned down, but how we deal with it is important. Reject the pushy stereotypes and respect a "no" answer when it's given. Never argue. If the job is gone or they already have someone lined up, don't try to force your way in. That will only damage the prospects of future work. A gracious response to a negative answer will win you respect, and that's helping to build the relationship for the future.

If they say it's already gone to tender? Smile, and wish them well with the job. Afterwards, you can ask about future job opportunities. A call is rarely wasted, and if you've come across well, you will have got on the architect's radar.

Sales is a long term discipline. It's also a learned skill, and that means that practice makes perfect. Don't be disappointed if you feel out of your depth at first. The more you call, the better you'll get. One way to improve your skills is to listen to someone who knows how to do it. It can be very helpful to spend an hour listening to an expert, observing how they prepare and how they introduce themselves.

We can help you with this directly - you can hire a CMS professional for some coaching. They call and you listen. Then you call, and they listen. This can be a insightful way to spend half a day, and it can quickly boost your confidence.



Leaving effective voicemail

Sometimes you're going to call and get a voicemail message. Naturally it's tempting to hang up. Perhaps you'll even breathe a sigh of relief, if you're new to sales calls. But let your competitors do that! You're going to demonstrate your genuine interest by leaving a message, and that will improve your odds.

Besides, if you don't leave a message, it's a wasted contact. Get the full value out of every call you place by leaving them the important information.

On that point, leaving a message can feel like being put on the spot. It's worth writing out a quick script for a good voicemail, so that you don't wing it and miss out something crucial on the spur of the moment. After a few times it will be second nature and you won't need to consult it.

Experience suggests around one in five architects will respond to a warm and interesting voicemail that emphasizes the expertise you bring to the job and call you back. If an architect does call it's always a warm opening for a conversation.



The Five Stages of a Successful Call

1. The Personal Intro Your architect contact answers. Keep it short, friendly and cheerful.

“Good morning, James! I wonder if you could help me for a moment? I’m _____ of XXX Builders, close to you in _____. Like yourselves, we specialise in good quality residential work. I was very interested to look at your website just now.”

2. The reason I’m calling – the job in mind.

“I wondered if I could ask your advice about the proposed new-build house on Western Road in Keston?” It’s the type of work we specialise in, and I’d really appreciate your help on this one in terms of progress.”

3. The benefits we have to offer – which we’ve hinted at in the first two stages. But as the conversation continues we can perhaps add more detail here. Again – not a long spiel – just a few seconds, but make it count. Ask the question, then answer it: What value can we add here?

“Keston is within very easy reach – just half an hour from the office and we have a number of trades who live close to this site. Or – I was very interested to look at the Design & Access Statement on the planning portal – it’s very similar to several other houses we built recently – may be worth my forwarding the case studies over to you?”


4. Listen – Make sure you listen and write down what you hear. You need to put some of this in the email you’re going to be sending to the architect after your call.

Get the other person to talk about their project and what interests them. You'll be surprised how much some people will tell you. Get the other person talking, and listen. My old boss used to say – You have two ears and one mouth – use them in that proportion!

5. Ask good questions – As a sales person, you're looking to get your company in the hat for the project that's caught your eye. But your call is also information gathering. What you find out will inform your follow up calls and when to make them. You're looking for the names of any other decision makers you might need to contact. And with a view to the future, you might get advance notice of upcoming projects and get in early.

Here are some important questions to drop into the conversation.

- a. What's the current stage at planning?
- b. Is it likely to go to tender?
- c. Who might assemble the tender list?
- d. What's the budget value?
- e. Is there a QS appointment? If so – who?
- f. We're interested - when should I call you back on this one?
- g. By the way – any other projects that may tender soon?
- h. Check their email address and spelling of their name



“Get the other person to talk about their project and what interests them.”

Following up well

Any sales person can make a call. It's the ones that follow-up properly that deliver the goods time after time. It's not difficult, but it pays to be systematic and persistent. There's a general rule in sales that it takes around seven contacts to land a tender. Nobody is going to hand it to you after a cold call. It'll take an initial phone conversation, an email, a follow-up call, a letter with case studies, a possible meeting, and so on.

Remember, sales is about relationship building.

You need the architect or the client to trust you enough with a significant budget, and they might never have heard of you before. So build trust with little steps. In that first call, tell them that you will follow up by email. When you do, you've demonstrated that you're a person that keeps their promises.

Also in that first call, ask when they want you to call back. It's rare for anyone to tell you not to. Instead, they'll give you their most convenient time. Make a note and call back then. It's better for them, and you'll catch them when they have time to talk. It's better for you too, because it saves you a wasted call or another answerphone message. And here's the secret power of a planned phone call: it shows that you're a person who keeps to time. It's such a little thing, but it's significant. Not showing up on time and not getting things done when you said you would are such common gripes about builders! Just by timing your call back, you've set yourself apart.


Each small step you can take like this will be a step ahead of your competitors.

If you're going to do this with every contact, it should be obvious that you'll need a system. You can soon end up with hundreds of contacts to keep track of, and this isn't going to run on post-it notes and a whiteboard. Invest in a sales admin system and an online contact management database. This will help you to track all your conversations. When you phone someone, you can bring up notes on previous calls and have all the specifics of the project to hand.

Once your system is up and running, you'll be able to review the last conversation before you call, and update the notes afterwards for next time. Keep notes brief and to the point, so that you spend more time on the phone and less on data entry.

As well as the details of the job, you might want to make occasional entries about the person you're talking to – little personal things about them. They might mention they like sailing for example, or that they're just in from walking the dog. If it sounds important to them, make a note and you can ask about it when you call again. Always keep calls professional and don't force it, but a quick question about something meaningful for them will build rapport. (It certainly beats the bland introductory comment about the weather that opens so many conversations!)

This isn't about gathering data on a person in order to win them over. It's respecting them as individuals with their own lives and interests.



“Remember, sales is about relationship building.

Ten keys to maximise the tender stage

When you get the opportunity to tender, you'll be passing on the project to the estimating team and it might feel like your job is done. It's not! The best construction sales professionals stick with it through the tender period and help to bring the contract over the line.

Think of your tender as a major sales document in its own right.

Even if there are other tender prices submitted, some tenderers may fail to follow-up. Genuine interest and a courteous follow-up will boost your chances of a win. To give a specific example, I remember one of my builder clients winning a £750,000 tender for a new-build high-end house in Surrey. This builder was third of three on the list and £50k above the lowest bid. What made the difference and won them the job? An excellent tender presentation - fully detailed with cost breakdowns, an evident interest in the job and a willingness to negotiate.

To increase your chances at the tender stage, here are ten key actions you need to take when your price goes in.

1. Find the decision makers – Who makes the definitive yes or no? Very often the client is strongly influenced by the architect. Or it could be a family member who is a QS. It's frustrating to make your case only for someone to say "I'll pass that on". Asking about the decision maker early in the process will ensure you are talking to the right person!



“The best stick with it through the tender period and help to bring the contract over the line.”

2. Is your tender detailed and impressive?– Another of the builders I work with has developed the best tender format I've seen. It's a 16-page document, sent in pdf and hard copy to both client and architect. This is always remarked on by the architect and/or client. A good tender goes a long way to securing future work opportunities. He includes:

- quality covers
- a thank you letter that affirms the builder's keen interest and commitment to the job
- the tender offer, followed by two elemental cost breakdowns
- an appendix with potential cost savings, which really adds value for the client
- relevant case studies of recent, similar jobs that prove they can deliver

3. Look for potential cost savings – These cannot be part of the actual tender – but they can be in an appendix. If the job comes in over budget, or if you're a close number two on the list, your consideration of savings may be crucial.

4. Submit on time or a day early! – You'd be surprised how many builders submit late without informing the architect. There's no better way to damage a reputation. If you have no option – in case of illness, for example – then alert the architect without delay, and give a date when you can get the price in. You'll always get respect for being open.

5. Be open if you can't do it after all – If you learn halfway through the process that you can't tender for the project this time, for whatever reason, tell the architect as soon as possible. You will earn brownie points for honesty. If you wait to inform the architect, you could put them in a difficult situation with their client. Tell them early, and they may have time to secure another builder to tender. Then they will appreciate your openness, and that will boost your chances next time.

6. Check receipt and say thank you – When you've submitted your price, call right away to check that your tender has been received, and say thank you for the opportunity. Gratitude goes a long way in construction and will predispose the architect towards you. It's also a perfect opportunity to ask if it would be okay to ring back in a week to check in.

7. Call again a week later – as suggested above, call back. Most architects are comfortable with a follow-up call. Ask if all the prices are back and politely inquire about where you stand. You aren't going to hear much detail, but they may indicate if your price is of interest. Confirm your willingness to look at cost reductions or negotiate – that may be enough to move you up the ladder if there's no clear favourite.

8. Stay involved – If you're committed at the start of the job, there's a good likelihood you'll be committed all the way through. Architects, clients and Quantity Surveyors appreciate builders who show genuine interest. If the client's budget needs £15k off to make it work, how can you find that £15k for them? Or if they want to add something late in the day – can you re-price to allow for that?

9. Lose graciously – I'll be honest: you're going to lose more than you win. That's absolutely normal, and if you win one in four you're doing fine. So make sure you use the bad news as an opportunity. When you hear that you weren't successful, be gracious in defeat. Your time will come. Wish them well with the job, find out who did win it and then ask about the next job coming out to tender.

10. Picture the long game – See beyond the job in front of you. Concentrate on building a solid working relationship with the architect. You're not just chasing jobs, you're building a relationship with a work provider. Over the next few years, that could pay you returns worth millions of pounds.

In conclusion

If you've read this far, hopefully you now have a good understanding of construction sales, what makes it distinctive, and how powerful it could be for your business. Over the course of my career, I've seen countless firms benefit from the sales process I've outlined here. Some have gone from small to large companies. Some have saved themselves from the brink of bankruptcy. Others have used sales to shift into a new line of work, or break a dependency on one big work provider.

What are you going to do in sales?

To learn more, you can read our Really Useful Guide to Construction Marketing available for download from our website, if you want to read up on how sales forms part of your full marketing suite.

And don't forget, we're here for you if you need back-up. CMS can help with coaching, software, and marketing support, as well as sales. Our sales professionals work out of your office, from as little as a day or two a month. We're on your side.

Let's win the work you want most.

Need a little more help or advice?

Get in touch with us. We know the industry inside out, and provide dedicated marketing staff committed to winning you the jobs you want to grow your business.

Call us on
01256 475 880

Or visit
contructionsales.co.uk

