Built on Trust: How Liberty Sheet Metal and Zahner Reduce Risk Together

The more ambitious the project, the more important it becomes to know who you're working with. For Liberty Sheet Metal and Zahner, mutual trust comes from knowing each team will anticipate problems, solve them early, and execute at the highest level. Here's how the two firms reduce risk from design and fabrication through installation.



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Owner & President
Liberty Sheet Metal

Complex architectural metal projects come with risk, and the demands are numerous.



Cincinnati Open Lindner Family Tennis Center

Geometries require precision, materials need protection, and schedules and budgets must be met. Not to mention the countless details that must translate successfully from a digital model and fabrication to real-world jobsite conditions.

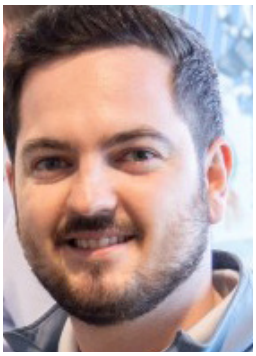
For Liberty Sheet Metal and Zahner, managing those risks starts with something surprisingly simple and entirely separate from a project's design and construction drawings: trust.

Based in Ray, Michigan, about 40 miles north of Detroit, Liberty specializes in fabricating and installing architectural metal systems, including complex exterior facades and roofing. Its relationship with Zahner has grown significantly in recent years as the two companies have collaborated on increasingly ambitious projects.

Liberty owner and president Jim Borgiel has built the company from the ground up. He started in the field and remains closely involved in projects, emphasizing a deep understanding of the work, anticipating problems, and delivering on promises.

"Our customers are trusting us to get it right," Borgiel said. "That means surrounding ourselves with people who take the same kind of ownership of the work. With Zahner, we know there's a team on the other side that cares about the details and is going to work with us to solve problems before they become bigger ones."

Justin Becker is Liberty's Director of Estimating and Project Management, and agrees that his counterparts at Zahner share similar approaches to project management.



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"We emphasize teamwork," said Justin, "and we want to make sure that things get done right the first time. Zahner works the same way, and that's why we work well together."

That shared mindset has created a partnership in which Zahner often brings its expertise in material, engineering, and fabrication, while Liberty brings deep knowledge of installation and what actually works in the field.

Reducing Risk Before It Reaches the Field

As both an estimator and project manager, Becker thinks constantly about risk.

Becker said schedule is probably the number one concern when evaluating a project. So are constructability, material quality, field labor, and the ability to adjust when plans inevitably change. On highly customized architectural projects, seemingly small problems can quickly become expensive ones.

That's one reason Liberty frequently brings Zahner into projects where conventional fabrication solutions may not be enough.

On a recent project involving custom metalwork around windows and fins in multiple colors, Becker considered using a local fabricator. Instead, he brought the challenge to Zahner.

"I know for a fact it's going to be done right, and the quality is going to be there," Becker said. "It's worth spending a little bit extra money up front to make sure that everything meets and exceeds the general contractor and owner's expectations."

Becker says the case for working with Zahner often goes far beyond material and fabrication cost. Better engineering and coordination with Zahner can mean less rework, less field labor, and fewer problems to solve during installation.

"The amount of engineering, design time and coordination up front mitigates risk," Becker said. "And that's an important benefit in having Zahner involved early and throughout a project."

That ability to solve problems early has even become a selling point for Liberty. When a project includes complicated metalwork that hasn't been fully resolved, Becker can bring Zahner to the table during preconstruction to help determine what is feasible, refine the design, and find a solution that works within the budget.

"We don't get that level of service with any other fabricator out there," said Becker. "Zahner is unique in that respect."

Trust Earned Through Execution

That observation was put to the test at the Cincinnati Open's Lindner Family Tennis Center, where Liberty and Zahner collaborated on a major facade transformation under an aggressive schedule.

Liberty brought Zahner into the project because the fabrication requirements and timing demanded capabilities beyond what Liberty would typically handle internally. Zahner engineered and fabricated the system, and Liberty installed it.

Becker said the project pace was extremely demanding, with existing conditions requiring continual adjustments. Liberty and Zahner teams communicated almost daily through calls, emails, and FaceTime conversations from the field. When conditions changed, they worked through solutions together and kept material moving to the site. From the first shipment in January to completion of installation at the end of June, the project took roughly six months.

"I don't think anybody else could have done that," Becker said. "We would not have been able to do the Cincinnati Open project without them."

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The partnership works in both directions. When Zahner needed a highly capable installation partner for the Assembly Studios pavilion near Atlanta, Liberty mobilized a Detroit-based crew to install the complex stainless steel system. Extensive 3D modeling, prefabrication, and upfront coordination resolved many difficult details before Liberty's installers encountered them in the field.

"The speed of it was better than I expected," Becker said. "Because the Zahner team had a lot of it figured out already."

Better Together

Repeated execution has created a level of confidence that changes how Liberty and Zahner work together.

Zahner trusts Liberty's field expertise. Liberty trusts Zahner's engineering and fabrication. Both teams communicate openly, respect each other's expertise, and know when to listen.

Becker points to a recent project that Liberty and Zahner teamed up on during the proposal process. During an interview for a potential project, representatives from Liberty and Zahner presented together. Afterward, the general contractor told Becker the two companies looked and sounded as though they had been working together for 20 years.

That may be the partnership's best attribute.

"You're never going to eliminate all the risk on a complex project," said Becker. "But when you trust the people you're working with, you can identify issues early, engineer around them, and solve problems before they become bigger problems. That's what we have with Zahner."