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A/E Rainmaker

The Guide to Attracting and Keeping Great Clients

In This Issue

You Must Become A ‘Trusted Advisor’

They had been a generalist architectural firm for the first 25 years, with roots in master planning. Several years ago many of their competitors were very busy with K-12 school work. Although they were tempted, especially with local projects, they decided to focus on the higher education market. Other firms had bulked up to handle the K-12 work, but when it started to dry up, those architects started competing by promoting themselves as “education architects.” Tenée Rehm Casaccio, AIA, Senior VP of JMZ Architects and Planners, P.C. in Glens Falls, NY, pointed out, “By then, we had been focusing strictly on higher education projects, and had built a ‘fortress’ around that market. Since we kept winning projects, the strategy worked.” Tenée added, “the fact that we had a sub-niche specialty in community colleges rang true with our clients; they really saw value in that. We can now easily say, ‘we know why you’re different, and why you have to be quick and nimble, and so are we.’ We understand what their issues are, and it’s really paying off.”

Their Charlotte Manifesto

One year the American Institute of Architects held their convention in Charlotte, NC, and the principals and senior associates of JMZ used it as a mini-retreat. The result was a manifesto named after the conference. It declared that the firm would strive to achieve 90% of its work in the higher education market. It became their strategic plan. They would reserve 10% of their time and resources for community-based projects; ones close to home, where they had a good opportunity for design, a reputable client, and a reasonable budget. They would accept - but wouldn’t actively pursue - that work. As it turns out they have achieved about 98% of their work in the higher education market. They still look closely at community-based projects but do not rely on them. They now have over 20 years of experience in higher education and are seen by their clients as a trusted advisor.

The manifesto also stipulated that they would expand their community college focus out of New York State. “We had amassed quite a résumé of community college master planning and community college building design projects, and if we wanted to grow the firm, the community college market was the horse to ride,” Tenée said. “We also talked about diversifying within that market by growing geographically. Adding out-of-state work would mean that we wouldn’t be devastated by a state budget squeeze, or when projects were put on hold for political reasons.”

When the firm interviews out-of-state, they know they have to get over the distance hurdle, so Tenée points out, “Community college planning and design isn’t *something* we do; it’s *everything* we do. Everyone in our office is completely focused on higher education.” She said their clients seem to be increasingly interested in hiring a specialist even if it means getting an out-of-state firm.

(cont. next page)

You Must Become A 'Trusted Advisor' (cont. from Pg. 1)

Sub-niche Market Focus

In order to service a sub-niche market, you must have intimate knowledge of the clients' challenges and issues. For example, of the 1,200 community colleges in the country, the SUNY system is highly respected. "We know how the system works and how they differ from their four-year counterparts," Tenée added. "There is also a very tight-knit group of leaders in the northeast. Even when we're pursuing work at community colleges out-of-state, we realize that they all communicate with one another. This has worked to our advantage, as word of our firm's reputation has spread very quickly," she noted. The opposite can also happen, so JMZ works hard to stay on the top of their game.

Know Your Audience

Half of JMZ's staff is female, and that's also important to their market. They once received feedback from two college VPs who came to see their office and plan out the schedule and strategy after awarding them an important project. They said, "It's obvious that you know community colleges, and there are lots of technically good reasons why we hired you, but in the end, the next team we interviewed consisted of five men, and not one woman. We talked about it afterwards, and felt that, JMZ looks like us." Other than their president, the top leaders in that college are all women.

Supporting Clients' Organizations Is Paying Off

Tenée pointed out how JMZ is lending support to their college clients. She said they attend their conferences, provide funding, and sponsor their trustees' meetings. They sponsor related organizations, such as the Association of Presidents of Public Community Colleges (APPCC), the Faculty Council of Community Colleges, (FCCC), and the Institute for Community College Development, (ICCD). "We attend their meetings so we understand what's important to them. We learn about their challenges so we are better informed to advise them on planning and facilities-related issues," Tenée added.

What Isn't Working...So Far

Travel is taking a toll on JMZ's human resources and presenting some time management issues. A master plan usually takes two years to get approved and funded, so they are just now getting the results of some initial out-of-state master planning work. "The latest RFP for one of our client's projects looks pretty much like it was tailored to us. Preparing their master plan gave us a leg up," Tenée noted.

What's Next?

JMZ is committed to continuing to build their reputation as the higher education 'Trusted Advisor,' by attending their clients' conferences, learning their issues, and staying in touch with them. "We build a strong relationship throughout the planning process, so when the client needs help convincing an important person to contribute to the funding of one of their projects, we usually get a friendly call for help. We pull information together that the college president can use in a meeting with a potential donor to convince them of its worth. Even when the information isn't site-specific, it's a great incentive and can really get a donor excited," Tenée added.

Robert J. Joy, AIA, JMZ's President and founder, has also served on the Adirondack Community College Foundation. He's able to help attract potential donors because he knows the foundation side of it. He is able to speak to a potential donor as a Director of a Community College Foundation and impart to the donor what is important to the college. "So we're not only talking as architects, but also as advisors. That's very helpful," Tenée said.

Clients As Marketers

How do their clients view the firm's commitment to their chosen specialization? The following testimonial says a lot.

"For the development of facilities master plans, I don't think you can beat JMZ. Their experience with community colleges and their great effectiveness in meaningfully engaging all the stakeholders (including trustees and county legislators) in the process are two key strengths that made a huge difference in my ability to get full support for the various projects."

Dr. Debbie Sydow, President
Onondaga Community College

Tenée added, "Everyone always says, 'It's all about the relationship' – and it really is! People hire people. When you're likable, friendly, and up-to-date on what your clients' challenges are, you're going to get hired. They expect you to be technically competent, but they hire you because they want to work with people they like. We work really hard to build those relationships. That's what keeps it fun!" ■

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Reason #156 Why Conducting Debriefs is Critical

By Rich Friedman

Imagine your architecture firm just poured its heart and soul into going after a large ($40 million) county justice facility. You believe that you formed the right team, submitted a winning proposal, and blew them away in the presentation. Then, you get the news you dread: second place! "You did a great job but…." What do you do? How do you react? Some firms may attribute the obviously incorrect decision on the part of the client to politics or some other form of "sour grapes." Yes, you'll contact the prospective client and try to elicit feedback that will be useful in the pursuit of future opportunities. Often, the process of trying to conduct a "debrief" after your firm has lost a project requires several phone/meeting attempts, and you're lucky if you even get a call back. Equally frustrating, we've all experienced the standard, pat responses: "It was an extremely difficult decision," "we wouldn't have gone wrong with any of the firms," etc. Sometimes it's easier just to throw in the towel and move on with life.

Meet Treanor Architects (Lawrence, KS), a 65-person architecture firm with niches in justice facilities and higher education student housing. Marketing Director Deb Renick and Principal/Justice Sector Leader Dan Rowe, AIA wanted to debrief a potential client to learn more about their second-place showing, and would not take "no" for an answer. After their first attempt, they were told by the client that they could not conduct a debrief until the contract was signed with the winning team. Patiently, Treanor Architects followed up regularly over the course of the next four months in pursuit of a debrief. Along the way, they were able to sustain, if not strengthen, their relationship with this client. Finally, Treanor got the news they had been waiting for: "we're ready to provide feedback." The feedback they received during an in-person meeting was not exactly what they had anticipated. The client explained that the contract negotiation process with the winning team was unsuccessful, and asked the Treanor team to enter into negotiations, which had to be completed within ten days. Ten days later, the contract was signed and work is well underway. The morals of this story are several:

- Debriefing after a loss (or a win) is more than just a reflexive, go-through-the-motions activity! It is a continuation of the business development process! How your firm treats this process, including the questions you ask and how you ask them, what you do with the data, and how you stay in contact (or don't) with the prospective client even though you lost speaks volumes about your firm's attitude.
- Perseverance in the business development process is almost always rewarded (at some point). The perseverance comes from believing that the client is making a MISTAKE by not hiring your firm! The process of getting them to realize this is one reason why the business development process often has a long gestation period. Successful firms chase relationships, not projects, and even the presence of a successful incumbent is insufficient reason to throw in the towel.
- And as Yogi Berra is famous for saying, "It ain't over till it's over!"

In an increasingly crowded playing field, the business development process (not just a firm's technical product) is increasingly becoming a differentiator. A critical component of this process, which can't help but be conveyed to prospective clients if it exists, is the kind of winning attitude that the Treanor Team displayed. ■

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Lipstick on the Bull Dog

By Dennis Schrag

Take Jeffrey Gitomer's (author of ***The Sales Bible***) quiz:

1. True or False
Cold calls are a necessary evil of selling.

2. True or False
Cold calls are acts of professionals.

3. True or False
In sales, it's not who you know it's who knows you.

4. True or False
People want to do business with strangers rather than friends.

How did you do? If you answered YES to any of the questions, it's time to go back to Professional Services Sales 101. Gitomer has a three-word definition of a cold call: WASTE OF TIME. Many prospects will view it as a negative since cold callers are infringing on their time.

Cold calling is like putting lipstick on a bull dog. It takes a lot of time. It makes little sense. The dog never looks better. It typically creates frustration for all concerned. One-shot efforts, like a cold calls will result in very little. Selling and marketing is a PROCESS not an event.

As professional service firms feel the pinch of increased competition, there is the tendency to inspire the sellers: GET OUT THERE AND SELL!

Warm up your calls by:

♦ Sustaining your present clients first.
♦ Branding your firm with target prospects. Use newsletters, targeted advertising, and community sponsorships of charity efforts to become known and visible.
♦ Creating demand for your services. Distinguish your firm from the pack.
♦ Building wholesome business relationships.

So what can you and your staff do instead of cold calling? Here are a few suggestions. Each takes time, planning and systematic efforts. And each is likely to be considerably more effective (and less expensive than) cold calling.

♦ Google the firm you are perusing. Research them carefully and fully. Know their values and their plans.
♦ Ask others who are in the know about the target—it could lead to an introduction.
♦ Network at business functions that your target will attend. Professional associations are key. Become known. Listen to what is important to the target.
♦ Hold a free or low-cost seminar for clients and prospects. Establish your firm as an expert. Make the seminar "meaty" and well worth the attendee's time.
♦ Present a paper at a trade association meeting or convention that your prospects attend. Better yet, co-present with one of your clients.

Once you are able to connect with your target:

♦ Explain the purpose of your call—best if the purpose will benefit the target. ("I have some information that could save you money on the forthcoming expansion.")
♦ Ask for an appointment
♦ Accept their direction. ("What is the best way that we could get together?")
♦ Don't ask for business
♦ Don't tell them what they need
♦ Don't sell yourself or your firm over the phone

There is an old chestnut: "Out of sight is out of mind." In the world of busy decision makers, the number of messages sent to them daily is BIG. Yours will be one of many. Keep your messages flowing frequently and via multiple media.

Persistence is so very important:
♦ 43% of sellers make one call and quit.
♦ 5% of sellers make two calls and quit.
♦ 12% of sellers make three calls and quit.
♦ 80% of all sales are made after the fifth call.

Forget about COLD CALLING. It's too cold! Warm up your calls and continue to be a professional friend. That is what wins work. ■

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Add Extreme Value To Your Website With A Resource Library

The front line of promotional materials is the firm's web site. It sits out there 7/24/365 for anyone to view whether by accident or on purpose. When prospective clients first find your site, what do they see? Most often it's images of your projects, or your firm's people. Rarely is it something that speaks to them, invites them in, and directs them to useful information through a resource library within the site.

Many commercial and services websites currently offer a resource library for visitors and prospective buyers - an area filled with articles covering relevant topics to the industry with which the site is connected. They usually do not sell the products directly, they feature articles on how to use them. These informational pages achieve very impressive monthly rankings in Google, rankings that surpass the same company's sales pages. The reason is simple; the most sought after item on the web, by far, is information.

Benefits of a Resource Library

The obvious benefit is that the client does not feel any sales pressure or hype and that the information may be helpful to them. A library full of useful articles and information can spread good will among a firm's prospect base. But it does not end there. The site is seen as offering free information about important issues and that makes it a more attractive site to return to when a service may be needed.

Additionally, with a resource library included, the site may attract other links, which will boost traffic and rankings in the search engines. The traffic might enter the site at the articles, but may entice the visitor to the other information in the site itself.

Objections to a Library

One common objection is that firms want to sell their services not educate their clients. This is shortsighted. It is important to reach potential clients at this front-end of the marketing spectrum with a message that relates more to them than simply selling the firm. The prospect will develop a desire to know more about the firm, and will remember the positive educational value of the site when they return.

Browse This Resource Library

One site with an impressive resource library can be found at www.hdrinc.com. Under "Resources" one will find an array of valuable information, including an online 'library' containing articles, books, papers, presentations and other written materials. It states: "*In one year HDR employees authored more than 700 articles, white papers and presentations, and published in more than 50 trade journals and industry publications; and were selected to present at more than 100 industry events.*"

If this does not impress a prospective client, nothing else will. ■

The Benefits of Using Articles to Promote Your Firm's Website

Writing and submitting articles is one of the most powerful marketing techniques and one that can be used to drive traffic to your firm's website. The benefits of this approach are many; e.g., you become an instant authority, you garner appreciation from readers for the information, which can develop into trust, and possibly lead to future work for the firm.

When readers click on the link in your article to visit your website you have already established a certain amount of credibility with them. This first step is invaluable in the business development process.

Once you get your article published on someone else's website, that article and the link may remain there for a very long time, and it is 100% free advertising.

It's best to write your articles between 300 - 500 words and make sure that they relate to the content of your website. Furthermore, your site must contain additional information that the viewer can benefit from once they visit it.

You can also get your articles distributed to hundreds of different websites instantly by submitting them to article directories. There is a software program that assists in getting articles submitted using this method.

Check it out at:
http://articlesubmitterpro.info/ ■

Why Write Articles?

By Karen Susman

According to Harvey J. Coleman in *Empowering Yourself,* success is made up of three components: Performance, Image and Exposure (PIE). He states that performance is only 10% of your success. Image is 30% and exposure is 60%. This doesn't mean that performance isn't important. But, if you do a great job and no one knows about it, you've lost career control.

One of the most efficient ways to, pardon the expression, expose yourself is to write articles that are read by your target market. You don't have to be a Hemingway to write and publish valuable pieces that will establish you as a leader in your field.

Not convinced writing is worth your time and effort?

For example, let's assume you have a service the mortgage industry could use. One industry trade magazine, the *Scotsman Guide*, lands in 44,000 mortgage leaders' mailboxes every month. Each edition is probably read by at least two people. That means approximately 88,000 people read *Scotsman Guide* monthly. Thus, a practical article written by you with your byline and contact information will get in front of 88,000 prospects.

Let's say *Scotsman Guide* readers are worth reaching for you, but you think writing an article would take too much time and time is money. Consider sending out a one-time mailing to *Scotsman Guide* readers. If you could obtain the names and addresses of subscribers, you would have to pay for the list, pay for the creation and design of the mailing, pay for labels and pay postage. Unless you have six kids you can bribe with pizza, you'll be paying staff or temps to fold, staple and stamp your mailing. The postage alone would cost $32,560 for that one shot. Marketing gurus know it takes seven hits to make a dent with your marketing, so you probably would want to send out a second, third or fourth mailing to the same list.

You can buy advertising. Advertising is important for the publication, the advertiser and the reader. An advertisement asks for business. An article educates your reader and builds your credibility.

Benefits of writing articles:

1. Get your picture in front of potential customers. Readers will feel they know you.

2. Share valuable information with your readers that will help them be more successful.

3. Offer additional information that will drive people to you and your web site.

4. Qualify potential leads.

5. Sell without pushing.

6. Get speaking gigs.

7. Turn your articles into a book.

8. Learn more about your industry when you do research for your articles.

9. Learn what your potential client values.

10. Use published articles as marketing pieces.

11. Use your articles as instruments of excellent client service.

12. Get paid for your articles.

For whom to write?

Focus on your market. Do you want to get in front of others in your industry, suppliers, or end users? Do you want a global or local audience?

Contact the publications you read. Ask for their contributors' guidelines. If possible, talk to the editor. Consider the associations you belong to. If they have newsletters, bulletins, magazines or e-zines, you have an "in" because you are a member. Write for the associations your clients belong to.

If you are speaking for a group that has a publication, offer to write a brief article on your topic that will appear either before you speak to promote your talk or after you speak as reinforcement.

Resources:

Surf over to www.ASAEnet.org. You'll find 23,000 associations listed. Most have newsletters that need your expertise. Another source of publications that need copy is *The 2005 Writer's Market*. Locate this

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Why Write Articles?

book in the reference area of your library. *Writer's Market* lists hundreds of publications from *Crochet World* to *Gumbo Magazine* to *Fortune.* Each state and large city has a magazine, too. Look locally at your daily paper, business journal and neighborhood weekly. Even if the Wilshire East Neighborhood Association only covers two square miles of 200 readers, it's worth getting your article published in its publication.

Don't overlook opportunities to be published on the internet. Is there an e-newsletter or e-zine you subscribe to? Offer an article idea. Believe me, we e-newsletter editors are always looking for material. Research which publications would be a good fit for you, find out their writer's guidelines, and start a file of ideas. Look to your clients for ideas. What do they ask you about? What keeps them up at night? Keep a file folder of ideas. The idea is to get published and recognized as an expert. Now, get out your Number 2 pencils. Sharpen them. Scare up a legal pad, a few file folders and prepare to write your socks off. ■

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The First Rule of Surviving Slower Markets: Provide What the Client Perceives as Superior Service

Though some markets are showing staying power, many are slowing and becoming buyers' markets. As markets cool, the competition will focus on the fewer active clients – your clients! You must make sure that your clients do not stray to another consultant.

Firms often think that they are providing superior service and then are surprised when a client goes elsewhere. These tips will make sure that does not happen to your firm:

♦ **Determine and then exceed client expectations.** Before starting a project, sit down with as many client representatives as possible. Ask them what is most important to each of them about the project and his or her expectations for your performance. Then, **don't just meet their goals and expectations. Exceed them!** Even try to delight them! If you miss the mark in any area, communicate immediately with the individual and explain why.

♦ **Do pre-set check-ins during the course of the project.** Write it into your contract that your firm will do a brief check-in to see how well you are exceeding client expectations at set times during the course of the project, such as the completion of schematic design, design development, etc. It is best to have someone who is not on the project team do the check-ins since clients are more likely to be candid with someone they are not working with. **The catch is that if a check-in uncovers a problem, you must try to correct it ASAP.**

♦ **Communicate the value of your services.** As a service company, your firm probably 'goes the extra mile' all the time. But, do you tell your clients how or why your actions benefited them? Consider adding a section to your regular invoices that highlights how you saved the client time and/or money or call it out in monthly project reports.

♦ **Conduct a client feedback survey.** Ask your clients to evaluate your performance – they will appreciate the fact that you are asking. Getting your clients' honest feedback and acting on it will set your firm apart from most competitors. ■

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Crumb Topic:
Brand Lifestyle

Summer is a great time to make a renewed commitment to your brand.

The seven ways listed below can help make it a lifestyle at work. Practice them often and it'll become a natural way of doing business. The more you live your brand, the more others will become aware of it, both internally and externally.

Now is the time to gets started:

1. Eat, sleep, and breathe your brand.
It's who you are, and no one else can be it.

2. Keep it alive and fresh.
Find new ways to express your brand.

3. Be professional, but show personality.
Break free from "generic" words and templates.

4. Be brave.
"The same old thing" is a bore.

5. Brand to lead.
Make your brand magnetic.

6. Stay in touch with your clients' brand.
Make sure you still understand them.

7. Periodically re-evaluate your brand.
Check for accuracy and effectiveness. ■

From Crumb Topics: Bligh Graphics. Contact: carolyn@blighgraphics.com, or go to: www.blighgraphics.com.

Partnering with Clients to Create Your Next Winning Case Study

By Amy Gesenhues

Case studies make an impact on prospects and offer specific evidence that your firm can deliver. A success story about how your firm improved someone else's business is a powerful communications tool. But how do you convince clients to participate in a case study?

It's never too early in the project cycle to start thinking about a case study. When you begin a project with a new client, ask about their policy for allowing their name to be used in the service provider's marketing materials.

Choosing Your Case Study Candidates. What if it's a big client and you are anticipating great results? Consider giving the client a small discount for the work you perform if they agree to do a case study. The ROI you receive with the case study from a major client will more than cover the expense of knocking a few dollars off their final invoice.

Don't get hung up on the big clients. It may be inviting to focus on clients with recognizable names, but your case study doesn't have to be about big client names. Strong case studies include projects that deliver the biggest results—even if the client is lesser known. In addition, you may have a better chance of getting the go ahead from a smaller client than a large corporation that rarely lends its name.

It's important that your sales and marketing teams keep an open line of communication when it comes to identifying case study candidates. While your marketing team is responsible for writing the case study, it's up to your sales team to know which clients are experiencing the best results.

Contacting The Client. Once marketing knows which clients would make for a great case study, a simple email from your marketing person to the client can get the ball rolling. Here's sample email requesting a case study:

> *To: The Client*
> *Subject: We'd Like To Use Your Story*
> *Client Name,*
>
> *Thanks for choosing our firm. I just heard from sales that you are experiencing great results and wanted to ask you about doing a case study.*
>
> *As our company's Marketing Director, I am constantly searching for relevant, informative content to include in our monthly newsletter. It would be great if we could feature your company as a "Success Story" in a case study. The case study would be used in our newsletter, published on our site, and used to generate positive media coverage for both of our organizations should you agree to let use us it for PR purposes.*
>
> *The process would take very little of your time and could be accomplished entirely over email or phone — whichever you prefer. I would*

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Partnering with Clients to Create Your Next Winning Case Study (cont.)

send you a quick list of questions covering topics such as: What were your project objectives? How did you measure your results? What results did you experience? (I would be sure to keep it short so that it would only take 20 or 30 minutes of your time.) Once I received your answers, you and your PR team would be given ample time to review the finished case study and have final edit privileges.

My goal is to provide our prospects and clients with interesting, insightful information that demonstrates our firm's capabilities. Your story would make for a good read and possibly lead to further PR opportunities for both of us down the road should you wish to take that route. In any case, we would be grateful for the chance to include your story as one of our most successful case studies.

Please let me know if you have any questions. I look forward to hearing from you.

Many Thanks,
Amy Gesenhues, Director of Marketing

Working With Your Case Study. Should you get the go-ahead, move the process along quickly and do not waste your client's time. Most often people would rather be interviewed over the phone than forced to answer a series of questions via email. Make sure you record the interview so that you can pull quotes from the client to use in the case study.

Do not feel the need to keep the interview strictly focused on the questions you outlined beforehand. There's a chance that the client experienced unexpected results from the project in an area you were not even considering. If the results make for a strong story, let the interviewee direct the storyline.

Try not to take more than a week to write the final version of the case study for your client to review. The longer you take to deliver the final draft for review, the less of a priority it becomes. Once you have published the case study, post it on your site and add it to your library of marketing materials.

Send your client a link to the case study so that they have it for their records. It's always a good idea to send your client a handwritten thank you note to let them know how much you appreciate the time and effort they gave to do the case study.

Nothing Succeeds Like Success. Never underestimate the power of a success story. A great case study will serve as an integral part of your marketing communication tools and can be leveraged across the board. If the story is strong enough, you may even extend it into your PR initiatives. The more great stories your business has, the more successful you will be. ■

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Developing a Focused Business Vision

Fundamental to achieving success in your business is having a clear, compelling and focused vision.

Having focus means establishing a clear goal for the business and then implementing a simple, clear strategy for achieving that goal. It's a simple principle yet not always easy to achieve.

How focused is your vision for the future? Ask yourself these simple questions.

- Will our creativity distract us from our long-term path to success?
- Will we work only on ideas that make us feel most comfortable, even if they are not the most effective for success?
- Are we trying to be all things to all people?
- Are we strong starters and slow finishers?
- Are we decisive in our decisions?

Benefits of getting focused.

- Decisions become less stressful.
- Resources are used more effectively.
- Instills self confidence.
- You become more proactive and productive.

Building Your Network

By Scott E. Mickle

There are three simple things you can begin working on today that will bring life to your network and make networking a valuable tool for you and your business.

1. Build it before you need it
2. Avoid being 'that guy'
3. Follow up or fail

1. Build it before you need it
How many times have you gotten this voicemail or email? "Hi Bob, this is John Doe. You and I met at an AIA luncheon last year. I am looking for a new job and I wanted to touch base with you to see if you knew of any leads. Please call me back." After you hit delete on this message you think, who is John Doe? I do not remember meeting him.

Most people do not think about networking until they are in need. As we discussed in the last article, real networking is about bringing value to others and not worrying about how quickly the value gets returned. If you are serious about developing a network you need to start today. Be proactive, get out from behind your desk and begin making contacts.

The easiest way to begin is to make a list of all the people you know. Then, make a separate list of the people you want to meet. Look at the two lists and see who you already know that may be able to introduce you to the person or people you would like to meet. By doing this, you get to re-establish or strengthen your existing relationship while expanding your network before you too are in need.

2. Avoid being 'that guy'
We all know a person who is exactly like I am referring to within this section. The name dropper, the gossiper, the person we see a mile away at a function blasting through people, shoving his business card into the hands of everyone within a three feet radius. You see 'that guy' and will do anything to avoid making eye contact, or providing him a reason to speak with you.

If you are still thinking of networking as a numbers game, then you are missing the point. Networking is not about handing out or getting the most cards. It is about building trust between two or more people. You cannot build trust if you are only spending 15 seconds with someone and forcing your business card into their hands. When you go to any function, no matter the type or size, focus on your first step, and begin to strengthen your network.

If you are attending a function for the first time or 100th time, seek out 4-5 people you would like to meet and try to spend 3-5 minutes with them. If you can research those 4-5 individuals before you attend the function, even better. During your research, try and uncover any similar interests you may share as those can easily serve as conversation starters, setting you up for success! Your goal is be someone people want to come over and say hi to, not someone they want to avoid at all costs like 'that guy.' If you are successful, soon you will attend a function and have people looking to speak to you, share information with you, or introduce you to their friends.

3. Follow up or fail
This is probably the most important tip I can give you. You can go to all the meetings and have lunch with all the right people, but if you do not follow up with anyone unless you need something then you will not be a successful networker.

This means that you will need to be constantly following up with your network through email, hand-written notes, phone calls or which ever your preferred communication method may be. This is what I like to call "pinging" your network. You can ping someone on their birthday, when you read about them in the paper or you can just drop a "hello how are you" email from your Blackberry.

Personally, I try to ping everyone in my network at least 4 times a year. I use a variety of methods from email to cards to seeing them in person. I do not always have something important to say, I just want them to know that they are important to me and that I was thinking about them. Once

(cont. on the next page)

Building Your Network

you begin 'pinging' your network, you will be surprised at the results and how important this will make people in your network feel. Once people realize that they are important to you, they will be more than willing to help you and become an active member of your network. Ah, success!

Networks are all about information. Your network will thrive or die based on the amount of information you pass through it. If you want to be a successful networker, you must seek out the people you want to meet, begin to build a honest and sincere relationship based on trust and finally, you must keep the communication channels open at all times. Good luck and happy networking. ■

Scott E. Mickle is President of AEC Marketing Solutions. The firm specializes in working with A/E/C firms to maximize the effectiveness of their marketing and business development activities, allowing them to differentiate themselves from their competition and win more work. You can learn more about AEC Marketing Solutions on the web at www.aecmarketingsolutions.com or reach Scott directly: 704.560.7079 or smickle@aecmkt.com

A Client-centric Business Model

Today, with increased competition and client defection, it's important to keep every hard-earned client. Firms can overcome low-price strategies with client-service strategies, resulting in a stable of dedicated clients. A shift in the focus from traditional marketing efforts to client service efforts will pay large dividends into the future. The issues to examine are:

A Business Development focus examines: market potentials, demographics, the economy, and develops strategies and tactics to pursue identified projects. It looks at regulatory influences, financing, funding, and determines a firm's strengths and weaknesses in relation to it's competitors.

Promotional material focuses on: qualifications of the firm, Press Releases on news of the firm, and new project awards.

A Business Retention focus examines: what clients value most in the delivery of services, seeking client's comments on how to improve service, interest in how the firm compares to the competition, soliciting client input along the way, ensuring that all points of client contact are properly managed, and training for all staff on matters of client service.

Promotional material focuses on: service to clients behind each project, Press Releases on progress of the client's projects, and emphasis on repeat business as evidenced by satisfied clients' testimonials.

The business development person is the most appropriate to initiate this client focus, but the entire firm must participate. The project team is expected to deliver good client service on a constant basis throughout the project. Debriefing is a critical factor in making sure that the firm is actually performing to the client's expectations. This should be the task of the business development team, not the project team, who may be part of the client's satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

Frequent interviews are the best policy with reports made to the project team, and follow-up to make sure that any complaints were corrected to the satisfaction of the client. This will keep the lines of communication open and guarantee the future success of the firm – with a happy client base.

Excerpted from *Marketing To Win: PSMJ's Guide to Developing and Improving Marketing Materials for AEC Firms.* For more information or to order go to:www.psmj.com/publications/?id=117, or call Bruce Lynch at 800-537-7765 ■

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