

WHAT SIX DEEP-POCKET OWNER REPS TAUGHT ME

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Recently, my Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS) chapter sponsored a client round-table meeting. Six deep-pocket owner representatives from the public and private sectors spent the better part of two hours talking about being a serious buyer of professional services.

What they said was intoxicating. Pull up a stool and find out what I learned.

The six people represented the following:

- A public utility serving well over a million people.
- An international insurance corporation.
- A multi-state gas, electric, and alternative power utility with considerable interests in real estate and other non-regulated businesses.
- The facility manager of a multi-campus medical center.
- The director of properties for a trucking company with over 150 facilities nationally.
- The vice president of construction and development of a family-owned real estate development firm.

Here is some of what they said—the *abridged version*. Sorry you weren't there.

How should architects, engineers, and interior design firms approach you?

- Do your homework first. Know what our organization does and does not do.
- Don't come calling because you heard a story on the six o'clock news about one of our projects. By that time all of our design professionals are under contract and hard at work.
- Send a brief cover letter and some background information on your firm. "I spread my projects to many firms. It is in our best interest to get to know many firms and new talent." Follow up by making an appointment... "It might be a few weeks or two months before I can see you. But I will find the time."
- Don't waste my time. Be on time, be short, and be direct. Make our time together efficient. I may be able to give you 15 or 20 minutes. Condense your message. No fluff.
- Forget about a gift. Unless it is a Rolls, I don't want it or need it. More often than not, our organization does not allow me to take it. Gifts are passé. The stakes in my position are high; we have the highest possible moral standards. Invite me to lunch, but I will probably pick up the check.
- Explain why you can make my job better, easier, or save me money.

What are the biggest mistakes sellers of professional services make?

- Failing to know our organization before they meet with us. We are an open book. Go to the Internet and research us. Talk to your colleagues.
- Failing to ask us good questions and then failing to listen to the answers.
- Being overly aggressive—be professional in your approach to us.
- Don't be a pest. "One designer wanted to be sure he was on our bidders list. He called me six times about one project that we had not yet released. One the sixth call, I took him off the list."
- Double or triple dipping is a big no-no. That is when two or three different sellers from the same design or construction firm call on us...not knowing someone else from their firm was there just a week earlier. If you don't have your selling act together, you won't have your service act together.
- You have to understand about our business. In today's economy, the final decision on a project will come at the 11½ hour. If it is a go, everything will happen very, very fast. Turn-around for everyone will be compressed—design and construction is no longer fast-tracked, it is at warp speed.

Here are some random comments that have weight

- Respect our chain of command. You go to my boss, forget about coming to me—*ever!*
- A single mailing with no follow-up does little good. You have to be in front of someone (touches/contacts/mailings, etc.) seven times before they really get to know you.
- Design/build is attractive. It saves time and money, but mostly time.
- With small, simple projects (\$2 million to \$3 million), we will always use designers and construction firms local to the project location.
- Once you get a project from us—*NO SURPRISES*. You can have problems...we are used to problems...but we don't like surprises at the last minute.
- The last five percent of a project tells me a lot about the firm. If they move through the last five percent like the first five percent, we have a winner.
- I am looking for honesty and integrity all the time. My job is on the line if you mess up.

It was a superlative SMPS meeting. There is nothing more powerful than learning from clients!

Used with permission from Dennis Schrag who can be reached at Iowa City, 319-351-6510.