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# A/E Rainmaker

The Guide to Attracting and Keeping Great Clients

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## In This Issue



## Effective After-Sales Service

*by Wally Hise*

After-sales service is not a commonly used phrase in our business. More often, you will hear "project execution" as the project manager and technical team take over while the business development staff moves on to the next pursuit. After-sales service is a mindset that great companies cultivate to improve customer satisfaction and retention. Here are some reminders to help you.

• **The client is not always right.** There's a fine balance between accepting all blame for problems and challenging your client in destructive ways. Dig deep to discover the source of their incorrect perceptions, beliefs or attitudes. Then engage in a meaningful dialog, or perhaps a partnering session, to get back on the same page.

• **The client is never completely wrong.** There's usually some element of their perception that is a true reflection of reality as they see it. Clients can share valuable information on your company if you keep an open mind and are receptive to what's being said. They may help you pinpoint an internal process that needs improvement.

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## Essential Strategic Behaviors for Rainmakers in the New Economy

*by Greg M. Goodwin, FSMPS*

Are you ready for the "second half" of this thing we've called the "Great Recession"? You know, the part where economies start to pick up and show some vital signs beyond a lot of the false positives we've seen. You're not alone, and I say "Let the second half begin!! We get the ball!"

Already in the short year, new decade, and at the precipice of this era soon to be known as the "teens," we are experiencing some real, sustained economic activity in spite of all the "help" we were supposed to get from this administration's first stimulus initiative (now officially called the ARRA Era).

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## Effective After-Sales Service (cont. from page 1)

• **Don't be too busy for your clients.** Think about the times when you have been on the buying end and got the feeling that you were an interruption or imposition on a salesperson's day. Like the scenario when it takes too long to get a simple question answered, and you walk away shaking your head, vowing never to do business there again. Try not to treat your clients this way.

• **Say what you will do, then do what you say.** Follow through, keep your promises, and honor your commitments. Keep your clients apprised of progress on their projects, the good and the bad. People tend to be more patient and understanding if you communicate with them in a timely manner.

• **Don't pass the buck.** Consider making the following a rule: "whoever hears about a problem owns the problem." Teach your staff to avoid being defensive or upset when a client brings them a concern or complaint. Rather, accept the fact that a problem exists, and set a course of action to resolve it. Don't let people bring problems back to the office and dump them off for others to deal with.

• **Be interested.** Let your client know that you are glad to be working for them. People like it when you appreciate their business. Clients are prone to give more work to firms who are genuinely thoughtful and thankful. You can show your interest by bringing new ideas and approaches during the project, by quickly accommodating change requests, and by looking for other ways to help their business.

• **Think ahead.** Try to stay one step ahead of your client by anticipating their needs and concerns. You are already behind if you wait for them to bring problems to the surface; reacting to problems distracts your team from executing the work. And if you wait for them to communicate their future needs, you may not be the only firm hearing the message. Try to stay out in front with a problem-solving and future-service attitude.

• **Give the client your best effort.** Regardless of the time of day or day of the week, always put your best foot forward. The fact that your team worked late last night preparing a deliverable shouldn't have any negative impact on your duties today. Issues like these are not your client's problem, and may cause him to switch to a competitor for the next project if you are not careful.

• **Review these items with your team at a kickoff meeting and periodically throughout the life of a project.** An effective after-sales service program requires discipline, dedication, and intense communication— telephone calls, meetings, e-mails, executive visits, or any combination of these. Make it easy for clients to do business with you, and keep them coming back for more.

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## Essential Strategic Behaviors for Rainmakers in the New Economy (cont. from page 1)

I believe there are some essential strategic behaviors and traits we must live in order to be successful in the most challenging marketplace I have experienced over the past 30 years. This brief article highlights some things we should continue to do to be successful this decade.

You have to bring ***passion*** to the marketplace. Passion exhibits itself in many ways. You have passion for your profession and everything it has done for you. You have passion for serving clients and solving their challenges with forward out-of-the-box thinking. Our passion drives us and actually provides the energy in our lives to work diligently, provide for others and be creative in our service offering to our clients. Whichever form it takes, passion makes you get up bright and energetic in the morning and serves as your "natural stimulus" throughout your day and your life. If you don't have any passion as we begin the "second half" of the recovery, you better get some quick.

***Intellectual curiosity*** is needed now more than ever to find new opportunities and to learn all of the emerging technologies that are necessary for thriving in this new age. You have to have a large dose of intellectual curiosity to learn everything you can about all of your firm's services and to understand your client's current plight and challenge platforms.

***Empathy*** is also a basic ingredient to your success strategy. Like its sibling passion, empathy also travels on many levels. First we have to have empathy for our clients and their challenges. While meeting face-to-face with them, we need to show undivided care and attention and make sure that they feel like they are the most important thing in the world…because they are. They are facing unprecedented challenges that are constant and include working with less revenue, but with a rising tide of expectations from their bosses and often the ultimate client, the public. We also have to have empathy now for our consulting brothers and sisters. Not everyone will come out of this "second half" in the same shape. Lending a helping hand and/or offering a teaming discussion may go a long way for some folks, and people never forget a helping hand when times have been tough.

***Competitiveness*** is another basic building block for strategic success. There may not be the level of RPMs in the marketplace now that everyone wants, but trust me— there are considerable opportunities right now and you had better be up for strong competition to be victorious. Competition is one of the hallmarks of this great nation, survival of the fittest, and it is no different at our level in the consulting business. Competition is good for everyone: us, our clients and, ultimately, the public. It's good for us because it keeps us sharp and at the ready to impart our creativity to the marketplace. When we play against the best, our performance is usually at its highest point. Competition is good for our clients because it constantly brings the best available ideas and practices to the playing field. This is especially true when firms are not operating at the dizzying levels of chargeability that we experienced no less than two years ago. And competiveness is good for the public, bringing the "best value," especially during these days of transparency and open competition for even the smallest as-needed contracts.

You truly have to ***like people*** and want to ***build relationships*** with people that you respect and trust. Selling professional services is unlike our related cousin, product sales. Typically, you can see products and they are tangible objects bought and sold in the product market place, frequently with little human interaction. Our professions, more than others, involve working with and through people. We often provide services not seen by the "product" human eye, but still built on trust and responsiveness. To be successful in our business, you have to know how to start and build relationships and cultivate good people that represent the jewels of our consulting practices. Long-term relationships that lead to earning the role of trusted advisor are the hallmark of jobs well done!

You also need to be ***fearless*** in your strategy and actions. Not being disrespectful or overly aggressive, but unfazed by trying new things that will help you implement your strategies for winning. Our attitudes and how we feel inside can truly be a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we are timid and afraid, our results most likely will be something short of where we would really like to be. If we hold onto our beliefs and plans with strong resolve and commitment, we have a much greater chance to personally influence the outcome of our pursuits and initiatives. Marketing and developing new business are some of the greatest challenges in our business. They may be the hardest activities we undertake, but they are also the most rewarding when our "plan comes together" and we reach the victorious mountaintop together.

Great rainmakers, like great football coaches, understand that winning in "crunch time" is as much about attitude and emotional readiness as it is about executing the strategic Xs and Os in the playbook. Often, even more so.

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# Hired…For Just a Plugged Nickel

*by Karen Compton, CPSM*

Well, what's a plugged nickel? According to the dictionary, it's a five-cent piece that's worthless. But, in the case of one entrepreneurial architect, John Morefield of architecture5cent.com, that nickel has resulted in countless questions being asked at his farmers market booth, 1,546 nickels donated to the Ballard food bank, 304 questions asked online through the web site, 228 architects from around the world asking how he could help them or how they could help him, and 15 new clients with great projects. According to him, "100 percent of his work within the last year" has come from offering consulting advice to would-be clients at the outlandish fee of five cents. No…not five cents a minute, just five cents.

Morefield's marketing concept reflects the four Ps that we often forget about in the AEC industry— product (or service), price, promotion, and place (distribution). So, let's consider architecture5cent.com and, more importantly, let's consider the lessons we should learn.

**Product (or service).** Built on the philosophy that "no project is too small for big ideas," Morefield has redefined marketing in the most traditional sense and, along with it, has allowed himself and his firm to transcend selling the traditional service of architecture or engineering and instead sell ideas. He offers ideas that then become architecture, for the most mundane projects (i.e., bathrooms) to the unique (i.e., tree houses). In taking this approach, John is remaining true to his company philosophy and identifying new leads for his firm. This approach might be difficult for those of us who have spent most of this economic cycle focused on building types, market sectors and client relationships. But for those who have acknowledged the new and ever-changing economy in which we now find ourselves, this redefinition of product (or service) resonates with clients. They understand the value proposition— the concept that good ideas don't have to be expensive. That brings us to price.

**Price.** Well, who can go wrong for a nickel? It is clearly impossible to sustain an architecture or engineering practice on five-cent advice. But as a lead generation or qualifications tool, who could say no? Even the most financially hard-pressed public-sector client would love to ask their favorite (or not so favorite) consultant for advice or direction at a cost of five cents. Consider how this approach could be used within the context of a trade show or conference booth. Instead of offering free drawings for an iPad® or iPhone®, or a bottle of wine that someone has to figure out how to transport back to their home town, consider the impact to your firm in generating new or qualified leads by offering to solve a problem or question for the mere donation of a nickel to some charitable cause.

**Promotion.** There are several different types of promotions: word of mouth, sale promotions such as coupons and demonstrations, direct sales (i.e., person-to-person, B2B, telemarketing, e-blasting) and advertising. In the A/E/C industry, we invest a significant amount of money in the most expensive of these forms— direct sales. Business development professionals, firm principals and partners call clients, call on clients, meet and greet, all in an effort to identify a lead. Architecture5cent.com takes a twist on the direct sales concept by actively demonstrating his value proposition. For his time investment (a half day at the farmers market), Morefield's cost is $600 (assuming a $150/hour billing rate). For that investment, would-be clients ask him questions about what? Potential leads. And in a brief exchange they not only get a sense of his ideas, and design innovation, they get an opportunity to connect with him over a common interest—their project. Oh! And did I mention his promotion is spread by word of mouth? So let's do the math. Coffee or lunch with 20-30 potential client? Six hundred dollars. Providing charitable advice to would be clients at a booth or trade show? Six hundred dollars. Connecting with a would-be client over ideas? Priceless!

**Place.** In marketing parlance, place refers to distribution channels. Architecture and engineering are not widgets so they are not distributed. Nonetheless, the concept is the same. How will you get your ideas to the marketplace? Morefield is a residential architect, so he took his promotion to the street— a farmers market. Where is the street for your clients? We've talked about trade shows and conferences, but the street could also be the blogosphere, social and professional networking sites. What tool you select will depend greatly on where your clients are and the return on investment you are seeking for identifying and/or developing a qualified lead. So choose wisely.

In this constrained and very challenging economy, architecture5cent.com offers several clear lessons. First, we need to reexamine what we sell. Selling architecture or engineering services may not be a sufficient value proposition when the field of competitors is so crowded, both in number of firms and number of unemployed. Second, a client is only going to pay what he or she feels a service is worth— not what we say it is worth. This is one reason we find ourselves in a fee battle with our competition. In the end, it's often a losing battle of low profits and dissatisfied clients. Finally, whatever marketing strategy we adopt must not only generate qualified leads, but also offer us that rare and unique opportunity to connect with our would-be clients over something they value and treasure— their work. It is only then that we are able to convert leads to real opportunities.

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## Smart Ways to Delegate Content Development

*by Anne Scarlett*

Quality content. It's the darling of our marketing programs these days. Even the most stubborn of AEC firms cannot ignore the numbers indicating that new business opportunities— or at least strong enhancements of professional credibility— come from social media marketing channels. Solid, rich content ensures that our electronic marketing efforts draw attention, fans, and most of all— new projects.

But wait. *Your* job is business development. You spend the majority of your working hours calling on prospects and clients, networking, providing direction on presentation and proposal strategy, studying research and making wise moves with leadership towards securing business. In the past, you most certainly edited web site content, wrote relevant, clever cover letters, and prepared the first draft for project understandings.

But now, on top of that, prospects and clients are demanding more than your firm's electronic visibility. They want extra information. And typically, they want it for free. They want to see blog posts regularly in their RSS feeds, tweets that are useful to the AEC industry, opportunities for online 'conversation' and data-rich white papers.

This is particularly a problem in mid-sized firms or smaller branch offices without the assistance of a big marketing team, public relations experts, or outsourced writing professionals. There's only so much time in our days, especially if we insist upon life balance to keep us sane. So what is a quality business development professional to do? Adjust our focus away from making calls and visits to prospects? Skip more networking functions in order to write worthy content for these newer marketing channels? Ideally, the answer to both would be an emphatic no. Instead, we need to delegate the content development while remaining highly involved in its direction and final edits.

Since you are an important 'company face,' interacting with the outside world, you most certainly cannot disengage completely from content development. That would be crazy, considering you know what people are talking about; you've heard their challenges. But direction/topic-setting aside, here's what you can do to get help rounding out your firm's marketing efforts.

### Source the writer(s)

1. Overcome the notion that all technical professionals are crappy writers. This is a generalization, not a reality.

2. Open your eyes to other potentially talented writers in your firm, such as those in the administrative and support staff.

3. Recruit an intern from local university journalism and/or marketing communications departments. Also, don't overlook the idea of recruiting for a writing intern at the design or engineering schools in your area.

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## Smart ways to delegate content development (cont. from page 5)

4. Outsource the work to a writing professional who knows and respects our industry. Sure, this will cost money. Weigh the cost against the opportunities lost for all the time you are writing rather than calling on prospects and networking.

You've found warm bodies that are willing to help. (By the way, in this economy, internal staff would far rather start writing and researching as opposed to sitting idle and potentially losing their job). Now what?

### Train the writer(s)

1. First, review their writing samples. If they do not have any, ask them to create a project description from one of their recent projects. Encourage them to write in a storytelling format. Some elements of storytelling— conversational, flowing, descriptive, sequential— will guide them to tell the stories of the clients' goals and challenges, and will motivate them to share hiccups (and resolutions) encountered along the way. Be prepared to help them unearth the kernels of most interest.

2. If their own writing voice is acceptable to you, compliment them and encourage their continued exploration of independent style. Alternatively…

3. Pick your favorite writing 'voices' (in or out of our industry) to show examples of what you're looking for. If you are truly a great writer, then obviously your own work serves as an example. Be mindful, though, if it's an internal writer rather than an intern or outsourced professional, you may opt to let them use their own style regardless of whether it matches your preferences, unless it is so far off-the-mark that it would cause harm rather than good. It's often hard for writers at any level to change their style, though it certainly can be done with additional attention.

### Give guidance and continuous inspiration

1. Don't make these people 'figure it out for themselves.' They are not mind readers. They may need more direction than simply a general request: "Write about how our clients are incorporating sustainability into their capital building projects." This is not focused enough.

2. In the beginning, create outlines for your writer(s) to fill out the content. This may require some research on their part. Remind them that it's ok to start with the end in mind.

3. Equip them with Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style* or similar resources. Make sure they have robust thesaurus and dictionary programs.

Offloading some content development responsibility may be the wisest move you make in 2010. Do it!

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## Client Satisfaction Surveys

*by Bernie Siben*

*"Please take a few moments of YOUR valuable time to answer some questions we didn't want to waste OUR valuable time asking."*

This is how you might as well phrase the request if you ask your client to take a survey in writing or online.

If you are devising a hard-copy survey for clients to check boxes and/or fill in blanks, a .pdf form delivered via e-mail to be completed on-screen, or an online survey, consider:

• How important will the client think it is if you're not willing to invest senior-level time in the survey aspect of your relationship?

• How honest will the client be when you can't see his or her body language or hear how tone-of-voice contrasts with words?

• How can you tell when the client really has more to say and just needs some prompting, if you can't see or hear him?

Your cover letter may say the survey is important and that you'll use it to improve service. But if the client is truly important to you, you should be willing to invest in a visit, or at least an extended phone conversation. Either way, make an appointment in advance so your client has sufficient time available when you visit or call.

In today's competitive marketplace, many firms can match your technical quality, your schedule and/or your fees. Therefore, the personal quality of the work experience is at least as important, sometimes even more important, than the technical quality of the work product.

Client perceptions of technical product and service quality cannot be judged by counting check boxes on a form or tallying online survey results. Conversation is the only way to get complete, accurate and reliable information about client perceptions.

### Who should ask

Surveys should be conducted by high-ranking firm officers— president, vice president, chairman, principal, marketing director, discipline director— who have no personal stake in the project or the survey results.

You want someone mature enough to ask a question and then listen until the client is done talking; someone perceived by the client as high enough in the firm to institute change if change is needed; someone sufficiently removed from the project so as not to get defensive when the client makes a negative comment.

Don't send the project manager to do the survey— in many cases, he or she is actually the problem!

### When to ask

Many firms do satisfaction surveys when the project is complete and both they and the client can look back over a (hopefully) successful collaboration. This allows the client to say that everything was wonderful and provide good marketing quotes. But it doesn't tell the truth.

What if the project isn't going well? Do you really want to wait until it's over before you find that out? Wouldn't you really rather find out while there's still time to fix whatever is going (or has gone) wrong?

About 25 percent into a project, the technical discipline director should call the client to ask how things are going, if the client feels they and the project team truly share the project vision and goals, if they feel they are being listened to, and if they are getting the frequency and type of communications they prefer.

If the comments are negative, the discipline director can help the project manager devise and implement changes to address the comments. The discipline director should tell the client what they are changing and how it will help.

Around the project mid-point, someone should make a formal visit to the client. Ask open-ended questions— get the client to volunteer information about the project experience. Ask the client what other firms he or she has used and how your firm compares. Ask if there is anything you can do better, or if there's anything you're not doing that he or she would like you to do. As before, devise and implement appropriate changes, and advise the client.

When the project is over, go through another formal visit with similar questions. This time, also ask specifically if the improvement measures implemented actually helped. If your changes didn't improve things, you will need to devise other changes and try again.

If your senior folks are really too busy to make these visits, consider outsourcing these client survey interviews to a firm with expertise and experience in conducting such activities. In the long run, this will serve you much better than sending the wrong people (junior staff) to do the interviews.

No matter how valuable you believe your time is, your client's time is much more valuable— to him! And what is valuable to your client should be your number one priority.

**Bernie Siben is principal with The Siben Consult, LLC. His firm provides strategic/marketing consultation and SOQ/proposal development for AEC firms. He can be reached at *Bernie@sibenconsult.com*. His latest book, "A Horse of a Different Color: Marketing to the Public Sector" is available at *www.psmj.com*.**

# No News is Not Good News: Over-Communicating in Hard Times

*by Rich Friedman*

On the surface, it seems like such a no-brainer. We need to err on the side of over-communication when uncertainty and stress levels for many firms are sky high. So why is it that my consulting colleagues and I hear so many stories about a lack of communication from the top down— often in the firms that are struggling the most?

Is this attributable to the weak communication skills of some industry leaders? A belief that staff people are so deep in the trenches that they don't have time or don't value frequent updates from the "front"? An unfounded, "bury-your-head-in-the-sand" feeling that everyone is doing just fine? Whatever the reason, information-sharing within firms has not been, and never will be, optional in an industry that sells knowledge and expertise to clients and seeks to retain this expertise as long as possible.

In the A/E/C industry, useful information can take many forms, including:

• A candid, pragmatic assessment of how competitive many markets have become, along with go/no-go and pre-positioning advice for today's harsh climate. (For example, I'm hearing stories of 400 firms submitting for a fairly small higher education renovation project.)

• An update on implementation of the firm's strategic or marketing/business development (BD) plan

• Announcement of new project wins

• Useful tools and tips for PMs to improve efficiency

• Market or competitive intelligence that can aid the BD process

• Anecdotes of employees going the extra mile for the firm or a client

• A candid, conservative estimate for the firm's near-term financial outlook

• Robust rationale for why an employee benefit has been watered down or eliminated

Two firms that have recognized the vital role that internal communication plays in boosting morale and embodying the firm's mission and vision are **LandDesign** (Charlotte, NC) and **S E A Consultants** (Cambridge, MA).

LandDesign, a 120-person landscape architecture, land planning, and civil engineering firm, has been hit hard by the bust in private sector land development. Having weathered layoffs and salary reductions, the firm's leadership launched two initiatives to enhance internal communication and boost employee morale. The first is "fireside" chats with staff to field questions, address concerns, and share information. The second initiative is the "Good News Now Newsletter" comprised of content from partners, principals, and staff on all the "good things" going on in the firm.

LandDesign President Dale Stewart says that, as the recession deepened, whenever firm leadership held a meeting, the staff expected a layoff announcement. "The idea was to create more opportunities for staff to gain information about the firm's status that's not directly associated with layoffs," adds Stewart.

Regarding the "Good News Newsletters," Stewart says the response has been very favorable. "Several years ago, we made a run at a monthly company newsletter, but with dismal results. The staff person in charge eventually became frustrated with the task as a result of lack of participation."

This time, LandDesign's approach is much different, and the timing is directly related to the volume of good news, not an arbitrary end-of-month deadline. In addition to highlighting new projects under contract, the newsletter includes a summary of genuine prospective work being pursued and personal tidbits such as family additions, new LEED-certified staff members, industry awards, and other good news.

Of course, the need for robust internal (and external) communication is not limited to struggling firms that have experienced staff and/or benefits reductions. Many firms with strong, proactive, articulate leaders are the choir to whom I'm preaching. One such firm is SEA Consultants, a 200-person engineering/architectural and environmental sciences firm.

"Our philosophy is to constantly look for multiple ways to reinforce the firm's philosophy of 'one company' and that we're all owners in the firm. With that mindset, no one should feel that they're in the dark concerning our financial well being," says Tony Zuena, president and CEO. "We publish a monthly internal newsletter that includes my message of how we're doing against our annual financial goals and strategic plan implementation; announcements of new business; new hires and employee anniversaries with the company; and an individual employee profile. We also hold a quarterly all-company video conference where we present news on the state of the company sprinkled with 'S E A Trivia and Fun Facts,' with prizes for the winners," says Zuena.

What creative tools is your firm employing to reduce uncertainty, boost morale, or convey vital business information? I'd like to hear them, so please call 508-276-1101 or e-mail me *rich@friedmanpartners.com*.

**Rich Friedman is principal of Friedman & Partners, a marketing and management consulting firm serving US and Canadian AEC and environmental consulting firms. He is also a member of A/E Advisors, a network of industry-leading consultants providing complementary business skills and services to architecture, engineering, environmental, and construction firms.**

## SMPS Announces Events

The Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS) (Alexandria, VA) has announced several of its upcoming education programs for marketing and business development professionals in the design and building industry. These learning opportunities include one- and two-day seminars, online webinars, and an annual national conference.

March 2:
"The Basics of Business Development
in the A/E/C Marketplace,"
Chicago, IL

March 9:
"The Basics of Business Development
in the A/E/C Marketplace,"
Columbus, OH

March 16:
Webinar: "Developing a Sales Strategy,"
Online, 2 pm ET

April 27:
"The Basics of Business Development
in the A/E/C Marketplace,"
Phoenix, AZ

May 4:
"The Basics of Business Development
in the A/E/C Marketplace,"
Seattle, WA

July 14:
"The Basics of Business Development
in the A/E/C Marketplace,"
Boston, MA

July 14-16:
Build Business: "Reinvent. Retool. Rebound,"
the 2010 SMPS National Conference,
Boston, MA

All programs are open to SMPS members and nonmembers and offer continuing education credits for Certified Professional Services Marketers (CPSM). Presenters are experts in the industry and cover a wide range of hot topics, best practices, and special interests.

Register at *www.smps.org* under "Education & Events." Programs and dates are subject to change.

### Be Sure You Have Participated!

We are now collecting data for our PSMJ 2010 *A/E Business Development Benchmark Report*.

Your input is vital to the success, and we will return to you your data, ready to use in comparing your firm to your choice of market sectors.

Our surveys are not only critical to assisting you in measuring the success of your firm, they are used by clients to help them negotiate your fees.

The questionnaire is available at *www.psmj.com/documents/surveys/2010/2010Fees.xls*. We have made it easy for you to use, and it can be completed and submitted electronically.

There is only a limited time left to participate, so we urge you to participate today!

# Leading the Tribe by Creating a Forum for Idea Sharing

*by Chris Parsons*

The Dow Jones Industrial Average was at 6,500 the day I founded Knowledge Architecture. It was March of 2009 and I had been meeting with prospective clients and strategic partners to test-market our services. I told them that we were going to build a knowledge management and information systems consulting practice for the AEC industry and that I was interested in getting their feedback.

I received reactions that ranged from supportive to doubtful. One trusted advisor told me that people would not invest in knowledge management consulting because "knowledge management is squishy." He was convinced that despite familiarity with the term "knowledge management," few people could define it or enumerate the benefits.

My trusted advisor was right, at least on one count. As I talked to more and more firms, I discovered the following:

• Firms agreed that their people were their company's greatest asset.

• Most firms did not have a systematic approach for creating, capturing and sharing knowledge.

• People were interested in what we had to say.

We had to educate them one by one. I realized that we had two challenges as a new company: not only did we have to build brand awareness around Knowledge Architecture, we had to build a market for knowledge management services. In short, before people could hire us, they had to understand what they were hiring us to do.

## A knowledge management tribe for the AEC industry

In the summer of 2009, I came across Seth Godin's talk called, "Tribes are what matter now." In 18 minutes, Seth Godin articulated the benefits of creating a community for disconnected individuals with common interests. He called these undiscovered communities "tribes." Tribes have a yearning to share what they know, learn from each other, and connect with their peers. They are just waiting for someone to lead.

I was inspired. I knew from my history in the AEC industry and my recent experience with Knowledge Architecture that there was a latent demand for a knowledge management tribe in our industry. However, I also knew that I didn't have all of the answers and that Knowledge Architecture could not make knowledge management a standard business practice in the AEC industry alone. I realized that the fastest way to build the case (and market) for knowledge management was by inviting a bunch of smart folks to share their ideas and stories. Like TED— a 1984 conference that brought together experts from technology, entertainment and design and spawned the non-profit educational site TED.com— we would record all of the talks and release them for free over the web as embeddable videos to encourage sharing. KA Connect was born.

As a result of launching KA Connect, our firm has:

• Connected thought leaders from AEC firms, academia, consulting, and software development

• Developed new strategic partnerships and deepened existing alliances

• Registered dozens of prospective clients and included a complimentary admission to the conference for our subscription clients

• Built a platform for creating, capturing, and sharing new knowledge with our clients, partners, and staff

• Positioned ourselves as a "tribal leader" in knowledge management in the AEC industry

## What tribe are you going to lead?

Let's go back to the two marketing challenges I laid out at the beginning of the article— building brand awareness around Knowledge Architecture and building a market for knowledge management services. I work with enough AEC firms to know that you are also facing differentiation and positioning challenges.

Every firm has a niche of some kind or offers something unique, even in areas that have become commoditized. The key is to position your firm out in front of the issue, as a hub around which information flows.

Here are five steps to take to position your firm as a thought leader, deepen your relationships with strategic partners, and provide a learning experience for your clients and staff:

• Find an emerging issue that connects your clients, strategic partners, and firm in which you want to plant your thought leader flag. *(For example, the impact of integrated project delivery on K-12 school districts.)*

• Book a venue.

• Invite the smartest people you know to share their ideas and stories. *(Yes, this will probably include your competition. The benefits of collaboration with your competition, or "co-opetition," on strategic industry issues are for another article.)*

• Invite prospective and existing clients and strategic partners.

• Capture and share lessons learned. *(This is a great way to assuage that guilt you've been feeling about falling behind with social media. Sharing knowledge on issues your clients, partners, and staff care about via video, your blog, Twitter, LinkedIn, and other social platforms sure beat press releases.)*

Good luck! Your tribe is waiting.

**Christopher Parsons is the founder of Knowledge Architecture, a knowledge management and information systems consultancy to architects and engineers. You can reach him at *cparsons@knowledge-architecture.com*. The web site for KA Connect is *www.ka-connect.com*.**

## Nine Creative Approaches to Grabbing Clients' Attention

1. Submit to awards programs for your clients, and then frame the awards and give it to them.

2. Conduct lunch-box seminars and workshops on topics relating to your client's industry.

3. Offer copies of your firm's promotional material highlighting their project. There are firms who have developed books for their clients on projects that they have done together.

4. Research the publications that your client is active in, and try to get articles published on their project.

5. Use themed proposals. This nontraditional approach to proposals helped one firm go from doing $50 million a year to $3 billion dollars in revenue a year.

6. Show your client in the best light possible in promotions (example: clients love being known as someone concerned about the environment, the arts, etc.).

7. Produce segmented newsletters to different clients' types. It makes clients feel that the newsletter is developed just for them and their staff. This indirectly educates the entire client staff on your expertise.

8. Direct marketing dollars toward brochures that highlight one project or project type. Clients love getting things that highlight their project.

9. Produce different websites for different client groups.

# A/E Rainmaker

The Guide to Attracting and Keeping Great Clients

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