



THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE  
OF ARCHITECTS  
Practice Management Knowledge Committee

# PRACTICE MANAGEMENT DIGEST



***Advancing the Practice of Architecture***

**Fall 2012 Issue**

*As the Practice Management Knowledge Community, our mission is to advance the practice of architecture through discovering, generating, organizing, and sharing insights, resources, and tools that enable architects to practice more effectively.*

## **Letter from the Editor**

*By Ray Kogan, AIA*

Getting work and clients is the lifeblood of every architecture firm, and this issue of the Practice Management Digest—which goes out quarterly to all 10,000+ members of the AIA Practice Management Knowledge Community—contains a treasure trove of information about marketing and business development. Each of our seven articles, all contributed by industry experts, provides valuable intelligence and insights into how clients think, what you can do to reach them more effectively using social media, brochures and other communications vehicles, how to write high-impact proposals, and finally, making sure your firm gets the credit it deserves.

- This Digest begins with a thought provoking article entitled “*Three Big Reasons Why Clients Leave You...and How You Can Win Them Back*” by Howard Wolff of Full-Height Advice, Inc. [Read...](#)
- Following up on that topic is “*The Client Whisperer: Every Client Has a Story to Tell; All You Have to do is Listen*” by Cara Bobchek of Kogan & Company (full disclosure: Cara is my business colleague). [Read...](#)
- We then discuss how to reach out to clients using the latest in social media in “*The Top Five New Marketing Technologies for Architects*” by Ann Harris, Knowledge Outreach Specialist with the AIA in Washington, DC. [Read...](#)
- Delving further into social media –blogs, specifically—Michael McManus and Maggie Scott of HDR Architecture offer the instructional article “*Corporate Blogs Exposed.*” ***Read...***

- Of course marketing materials are always essential, whether on paper or online, and Molly Wagner, Director of Communications for Dewberry, addresses that in *“Back to Basics: Ten Best Practices for Developing a Brochure.”* [Read...](#)
- Then David Stone of Stone and Company offers some hard-hitting advice on proposal writing in *“Avoiding the Trite Trap.”* [Read...](#)
- We conclude this issue with *“Credit Where Credit is Due”* by Cindy Taylor of Capstone Communications, for once the work has been won—and done. [Read...](#)

In our last Digest we introduced a new feature for your convenience: simply click here to download this entire issue, including all articles, as a single PDF for your ease of printing and reading later.

### **Upcoming Issue**

Our next issue of the Practice Management Digest, to be published in December, will cover business trends and practices. If you would like to provide an article for consideration, or know someone who would, please contact me at [rkogan@kogancompany.com](mailto:rkogan@kogancompany.com).

## *Features*

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# Three Big Reasons Why Clients Leave You ... And How You Can Win Them Back

*By Howard J. Wolff*

Where have all your clients gone?

Do you know why a client is no longer working with you? Chances are you might only be guessing. My advice is to pick up the phone and ask.

You'll find that clients leave you for three primary reasons:

1. They feel you screwed up; and you never dealt with it satisfactorily.
2. They feel neglected; and you haven't stayed in touch.
3. They no longer need the services you offer; and you haven't checked in to inquire about their current situation.

Let's address each of these in order.

### **What's the danger of ignoring unhappy clients and just "moving on"?**

According to a study by the Research Institute of America, the average business will not hear a peep from 96% of their unhappy clients. You would think that's good news, but it's not. For one, these folks aren't communicating with you, so you have no clue what the issue is or how to address it. The worse news is that you not only have lost their business but you also have tarnished your reputation in the industry.

Dissatisfied clients don't just go away quietly into the night. They tell at least nine other people about their unhappy experience. And 13% of disgruntled clients tell more than 20 people, according to a study conducted for the White House Office of Consumer Affairs. And, with the recent explosion of social media, the potential damage from negative word-of-mouth is even more staggering.

### **Why is it better to know if there is a problem?**

If you have an unhappy client (one of the 4%) who does bother to complain, consider it a gift. Seventy percent of those who complain will do business with you again, if you address the issue. Even more impressive: 95% will do business with you again, if they feel that the problem was resolved promptly.

So, ironically, having a problem and addressing it immediately can be even better for building trust and respect — and repeat business — than never having a problem at all.

Often, it's not a single performance issue that causes clients to go elsewhere. It's an overriding feeling about the quality of care. A survey by Harris Interactive suggests that 86% of clients leave because of the perception of poor service. RightNow Technologies, in a related study, found that dissatisfied clients most often cite rude, indifferent and/or incompetent staff as their reason for going elsewhere.

While inattentiveness to a client in the course of an engagement is inexcusable and costly, it's even more common for clients to feel ignored by you after your work on their project is completed.

### **What's the impact of not communicating between projects?**

Whether you simply got busy with other clients or didn't think to stay in touch, your old clients interpret your lack of contact as a lack of interest in them. By contrast, your eager competitors are contacting them, asking about their interests and needs, and sending them information of value. Who is going to be top-of-mind when those clients are ready to select a firm for their next project?

Every firm brags about having a high percentage of repeat business. And, why not? It's a measure of client satisfaction. But satisfied clients do not automatically become repeat clients, especially if they sense that your interest in them ends when your paid work does.

How can you maintain a link with your valued clients and get them to come back?

Number one, express interest in them. Demonstrate that you care. Stay in touch without a hint of selling.

And number two, learn about their industry, their business, and their issues, so that you can speak their language and offer them something of value.

Ask clients what they are reading. Inquire about the challenges they are facing. Clients don't care about you or your business. They care about themselves and their business. You become relevant only when you can find a way to help them, to solve a problem of theirs, to suggest an innovative way of addressing an issue they face, to make them money, to save them money, to help them look good.

A Rockefeller Corporation study revealed that 68% of your clients leave because they think that you don't care about them. The most-cited complaint clients share with me about architects: "I only hear from them when I have a project coming up." Give 'em some love.

### **What's the downside of crossing some clients off your list?**

Unless the individual has died, there are compelling business reasons to stay in touch with valued, past clients who have changed jobs, moved, or retired.

The simple reason is that, though they may no longer be prospective clients, they are friends whom you can call on for their insights, their knowledge, and their referrals.

How can you express your interest in having these folks serve as a reference or a lead source? Simply ask. And then thank them in a personal and meaningful way. To ensure that they don't feel used, make sure you stay in touch periodically, especially when you don't have a favor to ask of them, and express a

genuine interest in what's happening in their lives. If the relationship is real, it can yield benefits to both parties, well beyond their status as an active client.

### **What part does price play?**

It's easy to believe that someone would be lured away by a competitor offering a lower price. But most clients will tell you that it's not just about money. They know the dangers inherent in getting burned by a firm that's low-balling a fee to buy their business. A savvy client will not leave you for price alone. If he/she is jumping ship, take a hard look at your relationship as well as your fee. Consider how you can enhance your value, improve the quality of the experience of working with you, and/or adjust your scope while still providing great service.

A loyal client will stick with you and, while trying to negotiate the best deal, will acknowledge your right to make a profit, so you can stay in business and continue to be a viable provider of professional services.

In fact, according to a study by the [PIMS Strategic Planning Institute](#), firms that are rated high in client service, on average, charge a 7% price premium over their competitors and are 12 times more profitable!

There is a compelling business case not only for providing great service but also for keeping the clients you have. If you can cut your client attrition rate in half, it has the same effect as increasing your sales by the same percentage. And re-activating a lost client relationship is much more cost effective than cultivating a new one.

### **So, what can you do to win back lost clients?**

Here are four action steps you can take right now:

1. **Ask for feedback.** Reach out to inactive clients and talk to them. Even if you can't win everyone back, you can learn a lot about what past clients liked and disliked as well as ways in which you can improve your service.
2. **Stay in touch.** Send past clients information of interest and value to them. Give them a call and ask how they're doing. Get together for a drink or invite them to lunch.
3. **Solicit input in the course of a project and address issues immediately.** You can't fix a problem if you're not even aware of it; but, if you are, you can prevent clients from leaving you in the first place. Check out the simple tool developed by DesignFacilitator for quickly and easily gathering client feedback on a regular basis.
4. **Share this advice with your staff.** Reinforce the importance of client service and consistent communication. Reward the behavior that you want others to emulate.

The only acceptable reason for losing past clients is *firing them*. But that's another topic entirely.

**About the Author:** Howard J. Wolff is the founder of Full-Height Advice, Inc., a consultancy offering advanced marketing strategies to architecture and design firms. Previously, he was the worldwide director of marketing for WATG. You can reach him at [howard@howardwolff.com](mailto:howard@howardwolff.com).

## The Client Whisperer

### *Every Client Has a Story to Tell: All You Have to do is Listen*

By Cara Bobchek

Clients of design firms tell us that what they want most from architects is for them to *listen*. But how often do you listen to your clients outside of a project engagement? How often do you take a step back and think about your client's vision and mission, and how yours might align? How do clients perceive your performance? What is your reputation in the marketplace, and what might clients be telling others about you? Client research, in the form of a marketplace survey, is an effective way to find out.

Many architects struggle to find time to extend their relationships with clients when they aren't actively engaged in a commission. Perhaps they've lost touch with a past client who didn't select them for the next job; or they've invested in communicating with a prospective client, even making the shortlist now and then, but never landing the project. They may have a good working relationship with individual clients, without being confident that they have the "whole story."

All clients have a story to tell, and they're eager to tell it. In our management consulting practice, we've talked to hundreds of clients of design firms through marketplace surveys, and as a result of what they've learned from each one, the firm has rectified problem areas, built on strengths, and created future strategies for success.

#### **Structuring Client Research: The Marketplace Survey**

You can design a research survey that probes client perceptions and priorities:

- Your past performance on projects
- Your firm's reputation in the marketplace
- Other architecture firms who are leaders in your markets—in other words, your competitors
- Factors that clients consider important when retaining an architecture firm
- Forces affecting the clients' business

When analyzing the collected responses to your survey questions, note patterns in where they tend to converge and where they diverge. Remember to read between the lines. For example, a 150-person architecture firm with offices in three major cities was pleased to earn a fairly solid average rating of 4.0 (on a scale of 1-6, where six is the highest) on the effectiveness of their project managers and project-

related communications. Digging more deeply, they found that while some ratings were as high as 5.5 and 6.0, a number of ratings were much lower, in the 2.0-3.5 range.

Further investigation revealed that the lowest ratings were clustered among clients of the firm's busiest office. As a result, the firm leaders provided additional project management training to members of that office, as well as appointed a deputy office manager to support the current local leader.

### **It's Not About You**

As much as you will want a "report card" on your firm's performance so that you can address shortcomings, as well as capitalize on what you're doing well, you should also view the marketplace survey as an opportunity to listen to your clients' own stories. Your clients are as passionate about their work as you are about yours, and they love to talk about it. Be sure to ask about their world:

- The client's mission and vision for the future
- Challenges and concerns
- Trends they're tracking
- Ways in which their business—or their industry as a whole—is changing

Through a series of client-centered questions in a recent survey, a mid-sized architecture firm in the Northwest learned that facility managers, key decision makers in a targeted niche of the healthcare market, favored one particular publication to keep abreast of happenings in their industry. The architecture firm placed a series of articles regarding new approaches to sustainability—a topic that their research verified was of continued interest to clients—in this publication, raising their visibility within the target market.

### **Targeting Clients for Research**

In client research, it's just as important whom you ask as what you ask. Therefore, compile a contact list representative of the spectrum of your firm's practice:

- **Current clients**, including those with whom you're performing well as well as any with whom your relationship might be rocky.
- **Former clients**, so that you can learn why they are not "current" clients.
- **Prospective clients**, to learn how they perceive your firm—and how to enhance that perception to convert them into "current clients."
- **Partner firms**, such as mechanical/electrical engineers, because they often are in a position to influence client decisions.

As many firms do, you might learn something unexpected, even from your “best” client. For example, one upper Midwestern architecture firm with a specialty in civic buildings recently completed a project with a growing municipality in a neighboring state, garnering rave reviews from the client and stakeholders. Following on that success, the firm invested considerable resources into preparing proposals for additional projects to no avail. Through a third-party survey, they learned that although the client considered them “the best,” local politics forbade the municipality from ever again selecting an out-of-state firm. The client hadn’t had the heart to tell the firm directly that it was disqualified from future work.

Based on the survey, the firm chose to keep in touch with the client through its newsletter and occasional personal email, rather than continuing to send project-specific proposals.

### **Tips for Effective Client Research**

If you’re convinced that your firm would benefit from client research, consider the following:

- **Include the right number of participants.** Depending on the size of your firm, a survey of from 15 to 50 will be sufficient to give you the big picture.
- **Promise (and deliver) anonymity.** Although some clients surveyed in the past have assured that they would readily report the same perceptions to the subject architecture firm in person, the incidence of findings that surprise the architecture firms indicate to us that they would not.
- **Employ a third-party researcher.** As strong as your relationships with your clients may be, there are important things that they will tell a third party that they simply will not tell you—and oftentimes, these are positive things!
- **Work the phones.** With the tools available today, online is tempting. Nevertheless, your researcher and clients will have a more interesting, thorough, and satisfying conversation over the phone. You’ll find that most every client on your contact list will be eager to participate; we’ve rarely encountered one who won’t—and we’ve never encountered more than one.
- **Manage the Time.** Design your survey to limit the interview to about 15 minutes. This translates to about 10-12 questions of varying formats. We’ve found that many clients will engage in the conversation for much longer—some for as long as 45 minutes.

### **Next Steps**

Finally, be sure to thank your clients for participating in your survey, and let them know the highlights of what you learned from the research—and more importantly, what you intend to do about it. Your next steps may be small ones or giant leaps, but as long as you base them on your clients’ story, you can be confident that they are strategically aligned with what the marketplace needs from your firm.

**About the Author:** Cara Bobchek is a senior consultant with [Kogan & Company](#), a national practice specializing in strategy and management consulting services for firms in the design and construction industry. She can be reached at [cbobchek@kogancompany.com](mailto:cbobchek@kogancompany.com).

# Top 5 New Marketing Technologies for Architects

By Ann Harris

Here are five new technologies that will streamline your online marketing efforts, helping you to prioritize and structure marketing tasks to increase efficiency and time management. You can easily integrate your social networks and your email, automate social network posts, and find new ways of marketing your services with these (mostly) free online tools.

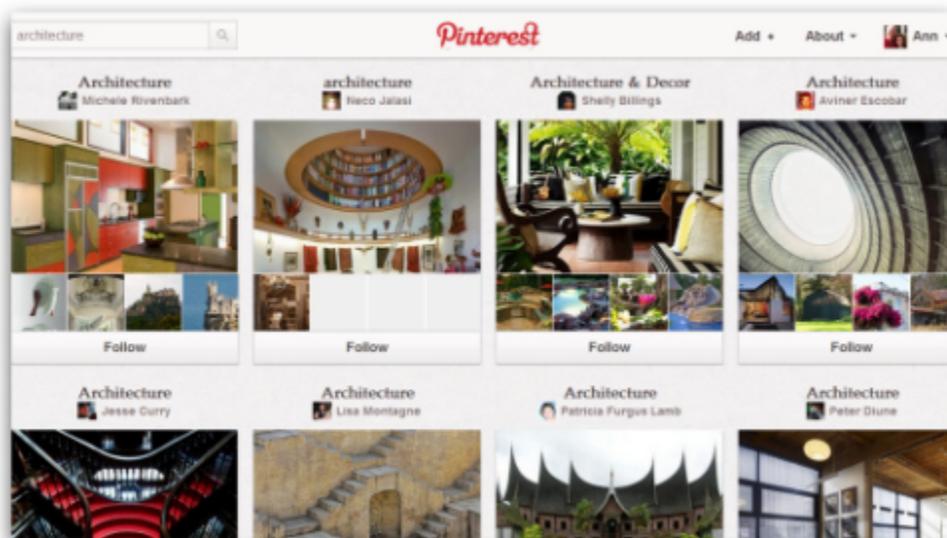
## So many tools, so little time!

The lightning speed half-life of news today and the immediacy social networks have brought to our communications have caused an "input overload" in our inboxes. Barely enough time has passed to master one tool before another comes along to make it obsolete.

Stop posting/tweeting/liking/sharing for a moment and unplug from your social networks. Setting clear goals and realistic expectations can help you avoid wasted time, wasted effort, backlash, social media fatigue (input overload), and missed opportunities. Instead of jumping on any 'ole bandwagon, decide on a small handful of tools you can realistically master.

To narrow your focus, here are the top five new online marketing tools that are user-friendly, cost-effective, and especially applicable to architectural practice.

## 1. Pinterest



[Pinterest](#) is an online virtual pinboard that "lets you organize and share all the beautiful things you find on the web" ([from their website](#)). Because the layout is tailored towards [stunning visuals](#) and rich

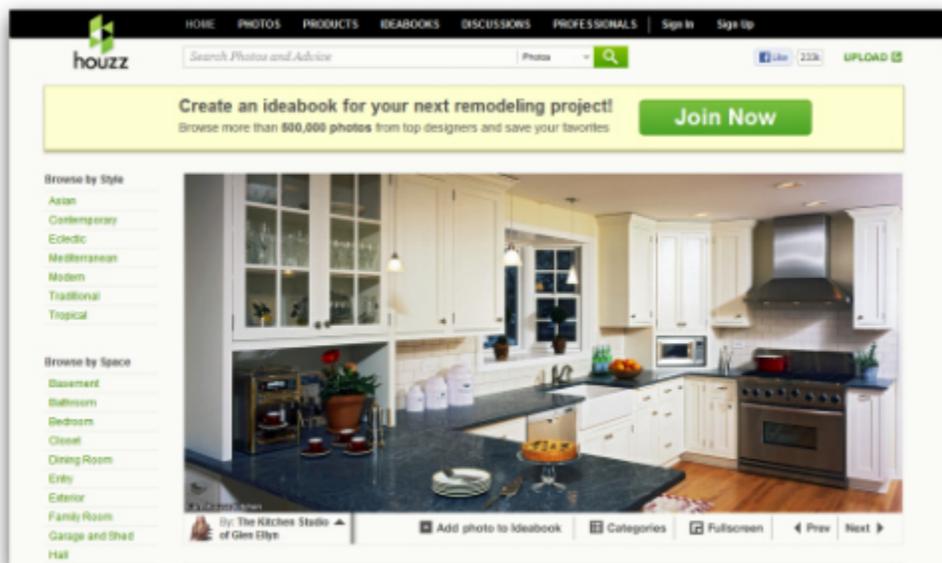
images, it's a great place to put those money shots to good use as a sort of supplement to your online project portfolio.

"We have seen a large increase in online traffic since joining Pinterest and it is now our 3rd most common referral site," says Andrew Shore, President Sea Pointe Construction, a design/build residential remodeling firm servicing Southern California.

Architects are using the tool to both engage clients and draw design ideas from collaborative pinboards.

- Find out more by reading [Pin It to Win It: Pinterest for Architects](#)
- Sign-up today at [Pinterest.com](#)

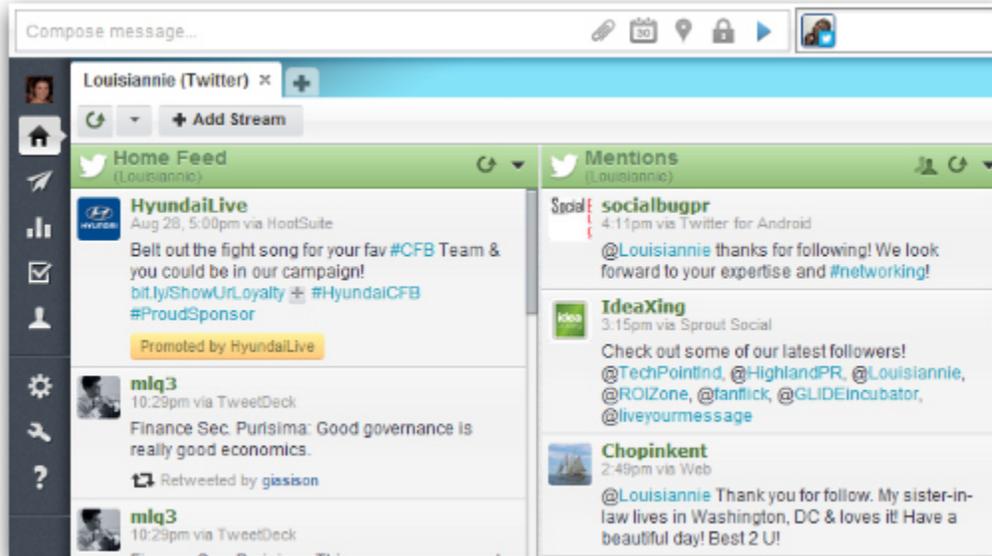
## 2. Houzz



[Houzz](#) is an online social network of user-submitted images, questions, links, and articles about architecture, interior design and decorating, landscape design and home improvement. At first blush the platform is similar to Pinterest, but it's specific to residential design projects. Houzz goes a bit further with their addition of a "[Find a Professional](#)" search, their product listings (See that [sink](#)? You can get one, too!), and a special discussion forum for real home owners to ask "[Design Dilemma](#)" questions for feedback from professionals.

- Find out more about using Houzz by registering for [Brand Building in the Era of the Empowered Client](#) on October 25, 2012. [Register now at no cost.](#)
- Sign-up today at [Houzz.com](#).

### 3. Hootsuite



[Hootsuite](#) is not the new kid on the block, but the latest round of updates surpasses most other social networking dashboards available. With a wide range of support for mobile devices, an ever-growing app directory, and a reasonable pricing structure (\$5 per month for unlimited accounts), Hootsuite is a favorite tool of small firms wanting to house all their social networking activity into one platform. Hootsuite can connect not only with Twitter and Facebook, but also LinkedIn, Foursquare, and Wordpress. Pretty analytics reporting ensures your visual learners won't be overwhelmed by important analytics and engagement metrics.

The free version is pretty robust, managing up to 5 social profiles, free quick reports, message scheduling, URL shortener, and analytics. For \$9.99/month the Premium version hosts unlimited social profiles, integration with Google Analytics and Facebook Insights for fan pages, and you can add two team members to schedule tasks and updates.

- Find out more and sign-up for an account at [Hootsuite.com](http://Hootsuite.com).

#### *Related sites:*

- [Tweetdeck](#): Twitter specific monitoring, scheduling, and posting dashboard. Allows you to connect one Facebook account so you can also add your personal profile or fan page to the dashboard.
- [Seesmic](#): What started as a Twitter tool now allows users to schedule from multiple accounts including LinkedIn, Tumblr, and Facebook. The free version holds up to 3 accounts and 10 posts in queue, but scalable premium options are also available.

- [Netvibes](#): Get your RSS feeds, e-mail, calendar, twitter updates, Facebook fan page, and daily news on a single dashboard.

#### 4. Nutshellmail



[Nutshellmail](#) compiles a report of ALL your online activity in one place: your inbox. Social media dashboards like [Hootsuite](#), [Tweetdeck](#), or [Seismic](#) are effective when you're online and in the "zone." Unplug from the constant stream of information with a daily aggregation of online activity. Nutshellmail can pull from Twitter, Facebook pages, LinkedIn, and more to help you grasp the "big picture" and quickly scan your online activity. Plus, because it's a service from ConstantContact, the email is mobile-friendly, clickable, and allows you to update accounts right from your inbox.

- Find out more and create an account at [Nutshellmail.com](http://Nutshellmail.com).

## 5. IFTTT



It's easy to force an RSS feed into every social network simultaneously, but I wouldn't recommend it. Each online network has its own character limit, image dimensions, and best practices. Instead of using a straight automation service like Ping.fm or [Dlvr.it](http://Dlvr.it), why not try [IFTTT](http://IFTTT.com)? It stands for "if this then that" and is the easiest way to automate blog posts, Facebook updates, and other social networks. By setting your online profiles with their own respective "recipes," you can ensure that your content is optimized for each site.

- Find out more by reading [HOW TO: Put Your Firm's Social Media On Auto-Pilot](#)
- Sign-up and start syncing at [IFTTT.com](http://IFTTT.com).

## Bonus: Buffer App



[Buffer](#) loads your updates into a queue, spacing out your bursts of brilliance over time. It's perfect if you're the kind of person who wants to schedule in bulk and not manually specify time signatures for every single post. Without Buffer you risk flooding your Twitter stream all at once while missing out completely on followers logged-in at other times. I recommend setting your Buffer schedule based on metrics you get from using a tool like [Tweriod](#) or [TweetWhen](#). These free online tools will determine when the best times are to update your account for maximum engagement.

- Find out more and create an account at [BufferApp.com](#).
- You may also like [Timely by Demand Force](#).

### Other Tools of Note:

- [Tweet Archivist](#): Archive and analyze old tweets.
- [Bit.ly](#): Shorten your URLs and track the clickthroughs.
- [ManageFlitter](#): Easily find inactive accounts, unfollowers, and potential spammers to manage your Twitter following.
- [Paper.li](#): Paper.li guarantees your account will be active daily by publishing a custom online newspaper that curates content automatically based your preferences.
- [Hello Bar](#): Install a sleek and discreet notification bar on your website to highlight fresh new content. Try it out with their free version and upgrade later for \$5/month.

- [TwitterFeed](#): Send an RSS feed to a Twitter account. Dead simple. Includes analytics.

**Related Links from Around the AIA:**

**[WEBINAR] Beyond Marketing: Social Media for Recruiting and Retention, Research and Development**

<http://network.aia.org/AIA/Resources/ViewDocument/?DocumentKey=9de68997-ecc7-41c2-a9f3-ba91c1d1889c>

**Social Media for Architects (Presentation by Jane Frederick, FAIA at the AIA 2011 Convention in NOLA at the SFRT forum)**

<http://network.aia.org/resources/viewdocument/?DocumentKey=7c502ea8-8d16-4798-8c7c-d261954d7893>

**Building a Solid Social Media Strategy (Presentation from 2012 Grassroots)**

<http://www.aia.org/aiaucmp/groups/aia/documents/pdf/aiab093356.pdf>

**SPP Journal 2011: Marketing with Social Media**

<http://www.aia.org/akr/Resources/Documents/AIAB089855>

**Online Marketing Tools for Residential Architects by Paul Jauregui (Presentation from the 2011 CRAN Symposium)**

<http://www.slideshare.net/myover/online-marketing-tools-for-residential-architects>

**HOW TO: Revamp Your Old, Ugly Website by Ann Harris**

<http://network.aia.org/AIA/Blogs/BlogViewer/?BlogKey=c75d3e47-059a-43cf-a3b7-4c578aadaa9f>

**10 Tips for Using Twitter to Support Your Practice by Jason Wagner**

<http://www.aia.org/practicing/groups/kc/AIAB080126>

**Social Media and Architects: An Interview with Jody Brown, AIA**

<http://www.aia.org/about/AIAB093530>

**About the Author:** Ann Harris is the Knowledge Outreach Specialist at the American Institute of Architects in Washington, DC. Before joining the AIA in 2012, she was a freelance web site designer and online marketing consultant with [Southern Social](#). She can be reached at the AIA at 202-626-7384 or via email at [annharris@aia.org](mailto:annharris@aia.org).

# Corporate Blogs Exposed

By Michael McManus and Maggie Scott

We get it: Architectural firms should be using social media. We don't need to read another article convincing us to take the dive into Twitter or watch another presentation about sashaying into the world of Facebook. For most companies, social media has become just as mainstream as the trusty press release and company Web site.

What we do need to hear about is one of the underground rules of social media (a rule that makes many a CEO cower): Show a little skin. Showing skin makes us vulnerable; it reveals our assets, our imperfections, and makes us work harder to look and be better. A more professional term for this is transparency. For many firms in our industry, the shift in transparency is being led by an in-house army of citizen journalists...with a lot on their minds.

Citizen journalists are everyday people who write and disseminate information about topics that interest them. The content they create is considered *user-generated content*, meaning it's created by regular people, not marketing and public relations professionals. The popularity of this type of content has skyrocketed in the last few years, because, not surprisingly, people trust other people more than they trust companies. A 2009 Nielsen study actually found that "opinions posted online are the most valued information sources by consumers."

So how can architectural firms embrace this new communication paradigm without opening a potential Pandora's box of PR nightmares? We recommend an employee-authored company blog.

Before we begin raving about the joys of corporate blogs, we need to give credit to the forefather of the blog movement among A/E/C firms: HOK. As part of the communications team at a competing architectural/engineering firm, we visited the firm's blog, HOK Life ([hoklife.com](http://hoklife.com)), and studied the progressive nature of everything on the blog for quite some time. It was and still is one of the best examples of a corporate blog out there. Other architectural firms have joined HOK by creating similar employee-authored blogs, including HDR Architecture ([blink.hdrinc.com](http://blink.hdrinc.com)), Gensler ([gensleron.com](http://gensleron.com)), HKS ([hkstracepaper.com](http://hkstracepaper.com)), and Cannon Design ([cannondesignblog.com](http://cannondesignblog.com)), to name a few.

The overall purpose of these blogs is to allow companies to be more human, more approachable, more personable, and of course, more transparent. Most of them (although not all) avoid *corpspeak* (PR talk) and instead create meaningful dialogue about topics that affect their business. The majority of these blogs also are written by average employees; the best include the author's bio, image, and contact information. From a business perspective, this is extremely important as clients hire our people, not necessarily our "company."

Hubspot, an internet marketing firm, recently offered some impressive statistics regarding company blogs. First, businesses that don't have a blog are now in the minority. From 2009 to 2011, the percentage of businesses with a blog grew from 48 to 65%. Businesses also value their blogs: 85% of businesses rated their blog as useful and important, and 27% rated their company blog as critical to their business. Further, Hubspot reports companies that blog get 55% more Web site visitors. This makes

sense because the more information you have on the Web, the higher you rank on search engines.

So how do you start an employee-authored blog at your firm? For starters, keep these five thoughts in mind.

1. **Read before you write.** Spend time visiting blogs you admire and get a better understanding of what your competition is doing. Creating a blog is a very referential process, meaning you'll probably take inspiration from many others.
2. **Put together a plan.** As many executives fear the idea of letting employees take control, it's crucial that you put together a plan that addresses every concern an executive may have. Some key concerns to address are talent poaching and privacy. As with most things in life, you need to weigh the risks and the benefits.
3. **Relax a little.** If people want to read about your mission statement and your industry rankings, direct them to your Web site, not your blog. Your Web site is the formal presentation of your firm, and your blog is a platform to show who you are on casual Fridays.
4. **Put the power in the people.** We strongly believe that for a company blog to be successful, the blog cannot be "controlled" by the company. It's important to put safeguards in place to ensure appropriateness of content, but a company's role should be little more than correcting typos in posts. Many company blogs prominently say, "The views expressed on this blog are the bloggers' only and do not represent the views or opinions of [the company]."
5. **Give your audience a reason to come back.** Most people do not revisit company Web sites once they find the information they are seeking. The trick with a blog is getting these people to come back regularly. To do this, write timely and relevant posts, write conversationally, and avoid constant self-promotion.

**About the Authors:** Michael McManus is a communications specialist for HDR Architecture's global markets. Based in HDR's Portland, OR, office, he can be reached at [Michael.McManus@hdrinc.com](mailto:Michael.McManus@hdrinc.com). Maggie Scott is a member of the Communications Group at HDR Architecture, responsible for social media and co-managing the blog BLiNK ([blink.hdrinc.com](http://blink.hdrinc.com)). Based in HDR's Princeton, NJ, office, she can be reached at 609.791.7389 or [Margaret.Scott@hdrinc.com](mailto:Margaret.Scott@hdrinc.com).

This article first appeared in the December 2011 edition of *Marketer*, the journal of the Society for Marketing Professional Services ([www.smps.org](http://www.smps.org)).

# Back to Basics: Ten Best Practices for Developing a Brochure

*By Molly Wagner*

In this digital age, it feels antiquated to write an article about brochure best practices. After all, haven't we evolved beyond brochures? Aren't brochures passé and inherently unsustainable? And by the time you complete the copy, gain consensus among partners and managers on imagery, and go to print isn't the brochure immediately out-of-date? Absolutely!

However, raise your hand if your firm still uses its brochure, and you think it needs to be updated. In this article, I'll share with you ten ways to re-think your brochure or brochure system, as well as best practices for traditional and contemporary methods of execution.

## **First basic best practice: Who are you talking to?**

Defining your audience and their preference is critical to narrowing the focus of your brochure or any communication tool. Here are some questions to help you get there:

- Who do you hope to reach through this brochure (e.g., clients, prospects, interns)?
- What are their characteristics, attitudes and behaviors?
- How does this audience prefer to receive information (print, electronic, social media)? Ways to find out:
  - Speak to colleagues at AIA.
  - Talk to a few clients.
  - Conduct a SurveyMonkey poll.
  - Look up the readership demographics for a publication you think this audience reads. This is normally found in the publisher's media kit. It can help you understand digital versus print preferences.

You may determine you have multiple audiences. That's okay. Developing a suite of brochures or a brochure system may be easier than trying to roll all audiences and expectations (see number two!) into one piece.

## **Number two: Define your expectations.**

Closely tied to number one, defining your expectations helps you understand what job the brochure will do. Determining expectations also helps narrow the scenarios that you envision and therefore the expected outcome. For instance, "winning more work" is too broad. "Reinforcing our sales and value proposition as a leave-behind following a client visit" starts to better articulate your expectation.

**Number three: It should look and sound like you.**

The brochure should reinforce who you are: the experience a client has working with you. How you deliver the piece—printed or electronic, on glossy or unbleached paper—also speaks to who you are. This doesn't mean that you can't alter your image. Just make sure it's supported by your culture.

**Number four: Make certain the content resonates.**

Creating brochure language that will be timely from the moment you draft it to when you've given out the last copy is really hard. There are many ways to deal with this; here are a few:

- Create a high-level overview that speaks only to your service promise and your culture. Upside and downside: You'll most likely need to supplement the overview with project descriptions. You can customize the package to the audience.
- Create a customizable brochure that's printed or shared on-demand. Upside: highly focused to the audience's needs. Downside: requires more marketing hours than you may be able to afford. If printed in-house, quality may suffer.
- Refresh your brochure annually. Upside: information is relevant to audience's interests, distributed as a newsletter or update. Downside: requires consistency. You can't miss a year.

**Number five: To print or not to print.**

As I promised in the beginning, you have myriad options for delivering your brochure message either through traditional (printing and binding) or contemporary (electronic) methods. Here are some ideas.

- Printing has gotten a lot cheaper. If you can stick with a standard size (e.g. 8.5" x 11"), you will save money. However, if your quantities are large enough (2,500 pieces or more) you may still realize some cost efficiency for more unique brochure sizes, paper stocks, and flourishes such as die cuts or finishes. Hint: if you go with an unusual size, make sure it fits in a standard envelope, such as a FedEx letter as well as into a file drawer without being folded or mutilated.
- If you decide to print your brochure, you can still save the file as a PDF and post it to your website or send it by email. Make sure the file size isn't too large. No one likes an 8MB file in their inbox. You can also customize the "open" view setting in Acrobat. If you have desktop publishing software, explore the e-publishing features.
- Most PDF files are also easily viewed on a tablet computer. Your firm may enjoy the flexibility of presenting its brochure to a client electronically. The cost of purchasing multiple tablets may also be less expensive than printing your brochure. You may still want to develop a way to "leave" something with the client. A follow-up email with a link to your online brochure may suffice.

**Numbers six through eight: Be kind to your audience.**

Deliver only the necessary information, remembering what and how much you would want to read.

Make the typeface legible.

Your photography and graphics should support the message.

Enough said.

**Number nine: Consider getting help.**

Brochure development is an easy task to outsource, thereby expediting its completion. You can draw on the expertise of a great writer and someone who can help you and your partners articulate best practices numbers one and two. However, remember to wield the culture stick (number three) so that you are proud of the results.

**Number ten: Do you need a brochure?**

You may decide that you'd rather spend your limited marketing hours elsewhere. Perhaps a PowerPoint or PDF portfolio of projects is enough. Maybe you'd rather create a quarterly letter to your clients or pour more energy into your website and start a blog or jump into other social media. If you target any of your communication tools to your well-articulated audience(s), you will still achieve the profile-raising, value proposition of a brochure.

**[Sidebar:] This one goes to eleven\***

Reference your website and social media sites in your brochure and then populate your sites with valuable content. Hint: a QR (quick response) code should lead the recipient to value-added content, such as a video of a unique project, or a way for the recipient to do something more easily. As an example, here's the QR code that my firm, Dewberry, uses for our online newsletter, *Dimensions*:



\*Apologies to Guest, McKean, Shearer, and Reiner

**About the Author:** Molly Wagner is Director of Communications for Dewberry ([www.dewberry.com](http://www.dewberry.com)) an ENR Top 50 firm headquartered in Fairfax, Virginia, with 40 locations nationwide. She encourages you to reach out to her through LinkedIn or at [mwagner@dewberry.com](mailto:mwagner@dewberry.com).

# Avoiding the Trite Trap

*By David Stone*

Having read hundreds of design firm proposals over the last 21 years, I have concluded that much of what is presented as valuable content is, in fact, trite and meaningless rubbish.

Sound harsh? To add some science to this otherwise gut-level conclusion, I've developed what I call "The Trite Test." It can be applied to any communication, written or verbal, that you send to a prospective client in hopes that he or she will hire you.

Here's how it works:

Since the bottom line of all marketing is differentiation, i.e., "what have you got that the other guy doesn't," it's reasonable that any marketing statement you make should further distinguish you from them. To apply the Trite Test, ask this question:

"Could I imagine one of my competitors, in an effort to differentiate himself from me, saying the opposite of what I've just said?"

## **Trite Statements Abound!**

Let's try an example; a tired, worn-out statement used in a proposal cover letter.

"Acme Architects is pleased to submit this proposal."

Apply the Trite Test and imagine someone writing, "We're really annoyed at having to prepare and submit this proposal." Of course not! The fact that you were pleased to submit is self-evident. If you had not been pleased you wouldn't have bothered. So it's a corny statement that adds nothing to your submission.

When you realize that every cover letter of every proposal begins with that same sentence (or a subtle variation of it), it becomes even more clichéd and meaningless. Worse, instead of setting you apart, it only reinforces the perception that your firm is just like all the others that have submitted.

Here are more hackneyed statements that appear in proposals in one form or another.

"We are uniquely qualified."

While this may be true, the statement by itself proves nothing. Instead of using this stale and ever-present assertion, get specific and cite examples of your unique qualifications: "Our unique scheduling process will ensure the smooth operation of the rest of your facility during construction." Specifics are always more persuasive than generalities.

“We will meet your schedule and budget.”

Imagine going to buy a new car and having the salesman tell you that you should buy this car because “it will start every morning!” Reliability like that became available long ago and we’ve moved on to much higher expectations. Clients today fully expect that you will meet schedule and budget – that’s merely the ante to the game. Instead, show how you’re going to go above and beyond the minimum requirement.

Trite clichés do nothing to inspire a client to prefer your firm over another. Instead, they strongly reinforce the impression that yours is just like all the others. Ask a trusted client if you can borrow some old proposals they’ve received from other firms. Review them and see for yourself just how much they sound like yours. Then purge all the tired, commonplace and unoriginal statements from your marketing and sales efforts so you can truly stand apart from the crowd.

### **Everyone’s Favorite Subject**

There is another, perhaps even more important reason to avoid these trite clichés. It has to do with the process of persuasion in which everyone’s favorite subject – ourselves – plays a pivotal role. Everyone’s perennial focus on, ‘What’s in it for me?’ should tell the smart business developer to focus on the customer, not the service being sold. Let’s look at another example of falling into the Trite Trap.

*“Our firm has been in business for XX years.”*

To this all-too-common statement the cynical or preoccupied client responds simply and rightly, ‘So what? What is it about the fact that your firm began so long ago that could possibly be of interest or benefit to me?’

The client did not set out to hire a firm of a particular age. They set out to find a firm that could complete their project on time and within budget, give them extraordinary value for the fees they pay, and ensure a long lasting, high quality facility investment. If that firm was founded two weeks ago and has a way to bring those outcomes, the client will hire them.

The fact that your firm has been around for decades is irrelevant. ‘So what?’ says the client. What is relevant are the lessons you’ve learned that will bring them a solution more quickly, the procedures you’ve developed that will ensure high quality on their project, and the network you’ve established that will smooth the way for an early completion for their project.

In order to persuade successfully, start by learning how the ‘persuadee’ thinks. Crawl inside their heads, find out what’s important to them and identify the benefits they’re seeking. Once you understand the ‘view’ from your client’s side of the desk, tell them how the direct benefits they’ll enjoy while working with you will be the answer to their every prayer. And while you’re at it, leave the trite statements to your competition.

**About the Author:** David Stone is the founder and President of Stone and Company. Trained as an Architect, he has owned his own design firm, been the VP of Marketing and Sales for both a \$250 million construction company and an international design firm. He has been a Senior Marketing Consultant with

both and PSMJ Resources and FMI Corporation. He is the author of 12 books on marketing, business development and project management and is a regular speaker at design industry gatherings around the world. He can be reached at [dstone@stoneandcompany.net](mailto:dstone@stoneandcompany.net)

## **Credit Where Credit is Due**

*by Cynthia L. Taylor, APR*

Your client holds a groundbreaking ceremony, but there's no mention of your firm in the press materials. The local newspaper publishes your rendering, but pairs the image with a caption that says, "An artist's rendering..." When the building opens, the newspaper quotes the contractor, but your design efforts—and the name of your firm—are overlooked, again.

Sound familiar?

Securing basic credit and even modest visibility for design projects is a frequent frustration for architects. If your firm doesn't have the resources for a high-impact publicity campaign, a few simple steps can still help you receive appropriate credit. The process doesn't have to be time-consuming or expensive, but it does require a little creativity and follow-through.

### **Write It Down**

One of the first and most important steps begins with your contract. Include a requirement that all project publicity will mention your firm. Whether your firm is the "prime," part of a design-build or JV partnership, or design architect or architect-of-record, be sure this is addressed in your professional agreement.

Next, create a solid description of the project. While you may need to refine this profile as the project moves forward, develop the overview as early as possible. Include the basics that will be helpful to reporters, such as:

- Size and major program areas
- Key objectives: what will the building accomplish for the owner/user?
- Design highlights and unique challenges
- Sustainability measures
- Notable use of building materials

- Schedule milestones
- Your company's name and role, along with other key firms on the team

### **Give It Away**

Give the description to your client for their approval and use. They will appreciate having the architectural perspective; it may help in their own public/media outreach. Once approved, share the description with subconsultants, contractors, public officials, brokers, and others who may find it helpful. If your internal marketing team hasn't already been involved with developing the project profile, make sure they are also copied: they'll need to add it to resumes and the project database. They may also be able to assist with additional steps to get the word out.

### **Post It**

Use the information as the basis for a news release. Include a rendering if available, and clearly indicate that the image should be credited to your firm. Again, be sure to have permission to post and send out a news release—don't preempt or surprise your client. If your client wants to lead the media outreach effort, ask if you can contribute to their media list or send your own version—subject to their approval of the timing—to a supplementary media list (including AIA newsletters, design trades, beat reporters who cover architecture, etc.).

Sending out a news release early on accomplishes many things. Ideally, you'll receive publicity during the design phase. You've contributed to the searchable archive of information on the project that reporters may draw upon later. You've also signaled to your client and other team members your pride in the project—and the expectation that you will be mentioned in other press materials that may be generated.

Kirby Lee Davis, Tulsa Bureau Chief with *The Journal Record* in Oklahoma, offers this advice to architects: "Many times we don't hear of your work until construction starts – and the emphasis then is on the firm building the project, owning it, or moving into it. My first recommendation would be to remind people of your existence by putting out a press release on each contract you land or complete."

### **Share the Credit**

It's worth repeating: be sure to credit other firms contributing to the project design and construction, as well as the client. "It's critical that anyone who submits a press release about a building project identify all the major players," says Ned Cramer, editor-in-chief of Architect magazine. "Every publication, Architect included, does its best at fact checking. And it causes a big problem for editors when the subject of an article isn't fully transparent about the project team, whether intentionally or not. I have seen firms lose out on opportunities for publication because of their bad habits when it comes to sharing credit."

### **Stick With It**

Perseverance pays off. In addition to sending out a news release and having your project profile readily available, use social media tools to post updates about project progress. Think of your "photo ops": from charrettes and public meetings to construction progress. Blog about interesting challenges and opportunities the project has presented, and link the blog to future news releases at key milestones.

### **Speed It Up**

Once a project is nearing construction completion, many architects don't think about publicity again until they have final photography in hand. But on the local level, this delay often means you'll be left out of the spotlight when the building opens. Be sure your design description is updated and ready for use at media tours and the ribbon-cutting ceremony. With your client's permission, send the updated overview or a news release, along with media-ready quotes, in advance to newspapers and any public officials who may be speaking about the project.

### **Show Up**

Show up for all of the major milestone events—groundbreakings, topping out ceremonies, and ribbon-cuttings. Seek an opportunity to speak at the event if appropriate. Look for reporters and share your insights on the project. Have your project overview with you—it will make their job easier.

*The Journal Record's* Davis emphasizes the importance of explaining your design, whether in writing, at the podium, or in a one-on-one conversation with a reporter: "One thing to keep in mind is that many journalists, even at business papers, have only a rudimentary education on business at best. The key is

to explain what you do in not just laymen terms, but in ways that help them grasp the complexity, importance and long-term impact of architecture. Help them see the beauty and poetry of the designs, the excitement and joy architects have in their work, and that may just fuel reporter interest.”

**About the Author:** Cindy Taylor is the founding principal of [Capstone Communications](#). An accredited public relations practitioner, she has been specializing in the design and construction industry for more than 25 years. She can be reached at [ctaylor@capstonestrategy.com](mailto:ctaylor@capstonestrategy.com).

## ***Best Practices***

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One of the PMKC's initiatives is to continuously improve the AIA's Best Practices. AIA Best Practices represent the collective wisdom of AIA members and related professionals. We like to highlight a new best practice article in each issue of the Practice Management Digest that relates to our theme, and this quarter we have "[When is the Best Time to Conduct Business Development Training?](#)" by Rich Friedman of Friedman & Partners. You can see all of the best practices at [aia.org](http://aia.org). Just click "Practicing Architecture" at the top left, then "Best Practices." If you would like to share a best practice with your fellow practitioners, contact the chair of our Best Practices Committee, David Richards, AIA, at [drichards@rossetti.com](mailto:drichards@rossetti.com).

## ***Webinars***

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Our upcoming webinar, *Best Practices in Business Development* will be presented by Karen Compton with A3K Consulting on October 18, 2012 from 1:00-2:15 EDT. Registration is free and you will earn 1.25 CES credits. You can learn more and [register here](#).

## ***2012 Fall Conference***

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As you receive this issue of the Digest, your Practice Management Knowledge Community, along with the AIA South Atlantic Region, will be kicking off our annual fall conference consisting of a day dedicated to practice management programs on Wednesday, September 19 in Atlanta preceding the AIA South Atlantic Region's conference, *re:inventing architecture*.

## ***Online Resources***

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See everything that the Practice Management Knowledge Community has to offer at <http://network.aia.org/practicemanagement/home/>

Visit the Practice Management Digest [archives page](#) for past issues.

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