



Letter from the Editor

By David Brent Richards, FAIA

This issue of the Practice Management Digest is focused on Business Development. Special thanks go to Karen O. Courtney, AIA, a Past President and Fellow of the Society for Marketing Professional Services for envisioning the content and coordinating the contributions to this edition of the PM Digest.

Many sides of Business Development are discussed in this issue. In her article, *Developing Good Business Development Habits*, Karen Courtney, AIA, FSMPS, the CMO of Fanning Howey provides insight to improving your BD bottom line. BD from a small firm perspective is provided by Jeremy Welu, AIA, Chris Lake, AIA, and Cara Weber, AIA, from DELV Design. The transition from Project Manager to Principal is discussed by Scott Braley, FAIA from Braley Consulting & Training. Michael Hall, AIA, president and senior project executive with Fanning Howey, has addressed the advantages of *Partnering to Enhance Your Value Proposition*. Tim Barrick and Tony Steinhardt, both Fellows of SMPS from RATIO describe the team sport of BD. Craig Park, FSMPS, Assoc. AIA, a Principal at the Sextant Group considers the advantage that consultants can add to the architect's proposal.

Morris Nunes and Andrew Pressman, FAIA, share an excerpt from their book *Designing Profits*. In this part of their book, Nunes and Pressman share ways to increase a firm's scope of services by creatively reimagining their practice model.

And finally, in what is destined to become an AIA Best Practice, Josh Miles of MilesHerndon shares a *Principal's Guide to Website Design*.

We hope you enjoy this issue. We appreciate any comments or input you may wish to share. You may contact David Richards at drichards@rossetti.com.

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.

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By Scott Braley, FAIA, FRSA

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Partnering to enhance your value proposition

By Michael Hall, AIA, REFP, LEED AP

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Differentiating: the power of strategic collaboration

By Craig Park, FSMPS, Assoc. AIA

It is with consultants that many architects are finding increased value. How can your firm leverage its consultant relationships to better build relationships, identify new opportunities, and successfully win more work?

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The principal's guide to responsive website design

By Josh Miles

With the advent of responsive web design and the ever-changing role of search engines, best practices are constantly evolving. Here are the top ten things your firm can focus on today to stay ahead of the curve.

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Business development is a team sport

By Tim Barrick, FSMPS & Tony Steinhardt, FSMPS, CPSM

To win work, firms must assemble a team of both business developers and seller-doers that work well together, share intelligence and leverage each other's unique skill set to accomplish a common goal.

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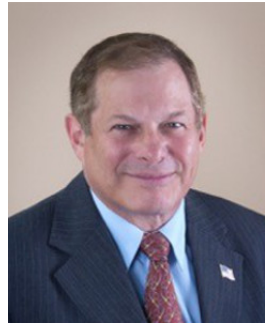


A book excerpt from *Designing Profits*

By Morris A. Nunes & Andrew Pressman, FAIA

What the Firm delivers must be seen by the client as - and in fact be - worth the fee. Here are some ideas about some ways to envision, select, package, promote and perform your firm's services.

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Small firm, big strategy

By Jeremy Welu AIA, LEED AP BD+C, Chris Lake AIA, LEED AP BD+C & Cara Weber AIA, LEED AP BD+C

At the core of most architects and design firms is the desire to create beautiful and meaningful design. So how do startups and small firms win work? Where do they scope out potential great commissions?

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by Michael Marshall, AIA, NOMA and Paola Moya, Assoc. AIA, NOMA

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Developing Good Business Development Habits

By Karen O. Courtney, AIA, FSMPS

So much of business development (BD) is doing the little things right as well as focusing on the big things that really matter and can bring work in the door. For the busy architect, getting business is often a natural progression of doing good work for clients. But to grow, a portion of time should always be devoted to acquiring new business to replace the inevitable turnover of clients. Here are some insights that can make a difference in improving your BD bottom line.

Understand Your Brand

Branding is “marketing speak” for your reputation and what that means for your clients and prospects. Having a positive brand helps jump-start BD, which begins indirectly when a prospective client has heard something positive about your firm. Whether or not it is formally developed and documented, every firm has a brand; you may just not be in control of it. Getting control of your firm’s brand is the first BD habit to master.

Brand manifests itself in all the touch points or interactions with a firm. Be deliberate about what those touch points are and then be relentless and consistent in living and communicating the brand at all times. This includes little things like email signatures, one of the most overlooked and yet most utilized of brand touch points in our email centric world. Have standards for how this looks and enforce them.

Do the same with your presentation boards and drawing sets, not to mention marketing materials. Be bold and distinctive in your logo and make sure it tells a story that reinforces the brand promise made to your clients.

A strong brand identity conveys information about a firm’s core essence and what it stands for and what it does not. It serves to position the firm in the client’s mind and is expressed visually, verbally and experientially. Brand messages are the key attributes that clients need to know and remember about a firm, and brand voice or personality is how those messages are expressed to the target audience.

Make sure everyone in the firm is clear about your brand, its messages and what it stands for. Take the time during new employee orientation to explain this and periodically review it for all employees so that they can be great brand ambassadors for your company.

Invest in Training

Too often in design firms, it’s assumed that those with good people skills or the extroverts in the office are natural salespeople and can do all the business development for the firm. Sales acumen and learning business development is an acquired skill and can be taught to technical staff who typically have had little or no formal training in the subject.

Invest in basic sales and public speaking training so that good practices are developed and years of potential missteps and frustration are eliminated. Toastmasters offers an inexpensive and convenient way to sharpen

speaking skills. Many options exist for basic sales training, both online and in person, and through allied professional societies like the Society for Marketing Professional Services.

Mentoring staff new to the BD process is also a good way to train others, so consider including two staff on each sales call to increase the learning opportunities.

Start Relationships Early

Once potential clients are identified, start early in the relationship building process. Don't wait until there is a defined project to get to know the client. Start by doing your research, and make the first visit heavy on listening to the client and light on talking about your firm. Then, armed with this information, figure out a way to share something of value to aid the trust and relationship building process. This can be simple advice, technical information, a connection or resource or even an article of interest that relates to a client's pressing business issues.

Don't hesitate to use third party bridges to get an introduction, which is asking those who know the prospect client to introduce you to them. However, be prepared to pay it forward in the future. Use relationship visits to gather intelligence and really understand the drivers of potential design commissions so that when the RFP is released, the information to create a compelling sales strategy is already in hand. Make the BD process ongoing, deliberate and consistent during both busy and light work load periods.

Research shows that the earlier a firm is invested in a relationship, the higher the information flow and ability to wire the work. This is another way of saying "know more than the competition and use it to outsell them." Then, after investing the time and energy in making that first visit, be relentless about staying in touch with hot prospects, both directly (face to face) and indirectly (email, mailers, etc.). Too many first visits never result in second visits until an RFP comes out, and by then it's usually too late to acquire quality project intelligence to bolster your sales strategy.

Use Capture Planning

Capture planning is a tool developed for pursuing high value complex opportunities with long sales cycles and committee decision making, usually in context with federal procurement. It is a written, action-oriented plan designed to positively position a firm in the buyer's eyes before a proposal is requested.

The basics of capture planning can help design firms stay on top of the BD process and document the steps that lead to a winning sales strategy. Capture planning can be done for a client or a project and a good habit is to do them for must win projects that will make or break a year's success.

The elements of a capture plan include intelligence gathering of key client issues and project drivers; competitive analysis to discern differentiation; and development of a sales strategy that offers unique value and information on client decision-making criteria, personalities and preferences - all written and documented as action items to do by the pursuit team over time. The capture planning process encourages teamwork in developing a strong sales strategy and helps to keep all involved in the pursuit accountable.

Make Better Go/No Go Decisions

The not-that-far-gone recession caused many design firms to abandon wise go/no go decision making and chase after any and every project to get work in bad times. Now that some normalcy has returned to the marketplace, reinstate a go/no go process and use it regularly. If relationship building has started early, the information to make better and more strategic go/no go decisions should result.

Don't hesitate to apply the process at multiple points in the business development cycle, as more knowledge from the relationship building is uncovered. The issue is rarely if a firm can do the work but whether a firm can win the work. The go/no go process helps to remove the rose-colored glasses and be brutally realistic about the investment and odds to capture desirable work. And don't submit proposals so that a client can get to know the firm, but redirect that time and money to something with a better chance of success.

Prepare and Rehearse

If all the above is done well, opportunities to interview for work should flow. However, now is not the time to slack off and ignore the necessary time to prepare and rehearse for competitive interviews. Use the capture plan and intelligence gained from the process to build the interview framework around strategic selling points. Then use these to sell, not tell in structuring an interview. Make these messages about the benefits your firm can provide the client and not the features of the firm.

And lastly, rehearse so that timing, body language and transitions can be managed. This practice leads to more confidence for the presenters and hopefully more chemistry developed with the audience by demonstrating more competence. Don't spend all the upstream effort doing the right things in business development, only to fall short with the win in sight. Make interview preparation and rehearsal something your firm takes seriously and watch it pay dividends in increasing win rates.

Solid business development is a process done well over time. It's slow, steady and built with value exchanged via relationship building. Keeping it targeted and consistent helps raise the chances for success. By applying some of these little, but important, ideas to the business development process, the payoff gained can be big indeed.

Karen O. Courtney, AIA, FSMPS is the Chief Marketing Officer for Fanning Howey, a national education design practice. With over 25 years of marketing and business development experience in design firms of all sizes from coast to coast, she is a past national president of the Society for Marketing Professional Services. She is the author of "Building Client Relationships" in the 13th edition of the AIA Handbook of Professional Practice, the BD subject matter expert for the upcoming SMPS Markendium Body of Knowledge and has written chapters on marketing and business development for past editions of the SMPS Marketing Handbook.

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PMs and the inevitable fork in the road

By Scott Braley, FAIA, FRSA

What would you do?

A talented Project Manager was arguably among the best PM's in the firm. Highly regarded for talent and accomplishments, the PM seemed to be on a sure path to becoming a Principal of the firm. One day two leaders of the firm asked that they meet for lunch. One of the leaders was the PM's informal "mentor," and hinted that this was an important discussion. Surely this had to be something good – really good.

Indeed it was. The leaders wasted little time in moving to the key topic – the PM's opportunity to become a Principal of the firm. Then, in the conversation took an interesting turn. The leaders noted that the PM's responsibilities would shift more toward bringing work into the firm. A bit surprised, the PM said he had helped with proposals and presentations of course, but the real talent was leading teams and delivering excellent projects.

The leaders spoke very candidly – they said the firm could always hire people to "do the work," the key to future success was bringing work into the firm. In fact, from now on the PM's main responsibility would be to extend a service line and grow a market sector. The leaders ended lunch with a request. "Give that some thought. We have great confidence in you, but we want to be sure you want to take this on. Let us know within a couple of days, the Board meeting is next week."

Later that day the PM's mentor stopped by and might as well have landed a solid punch to the gut when he said – "Here's the truth. You either learn to be successful in marketing and business development, or you might as well resign. You're going no further unless you can bring work into the firm."

So, what would you do? Or, perhaps more appropriately, what *will* you do?!

This story repeats itself over and over in our industry. It's not a hypothetical fable – I was that Project Manager. My mentor was absolutely right, I was going no further unless I stepped up and took on the task of helping grow the firm. After some discomfiting soul searching, and reflection on my other options, I decided that it was time to change behavior and focus.

Some might say it was time to take the next step in "growing up" in the design and construction industry. I did just that. With the predictable bumps along the way and a lot of trial and error, I learned to "sell." Today I am genuinely grateful for the wise counsel those leaders offered – and the kick in the pants from my mentor. Frankly, I was able to enjoy career successes that I never would have known had I remained at the PM level.

Today's A/E/C Industry

As we look at today's A/E/C industry there is much talk about a "talent crisis" in general, and a wide gap at the Project Manager level in particular. Most firms are influenced by shifting firm cultures, redefinitions of "work" and "workplace," integrated delivery, sustainability in concept and substance, and exponential client expectations for quality of service and result.

PM's are in great demand, and they are at the center of practice and business success. However, even within this environment rich in potential for PM's, there is an impenetrable "glass ceiling" of sorts – no work means no need, no marketing means no opportunity, and no ability to sell means no advancement or security.

You can study it, argue with it, cuddle up to it or even convince yourself to embrace it out of necessity – whatever your personal approach; you must make peace with the core question "how will I bring work into the firm?"

Two Ways from which to choose

In my 30-years of practice experience as well as in our consulting work, we observe that there are two distinct and effective ways of helping your firm secure work. One, you can go into the market place and ask clients to hire you. Two, you can do work so well, and yourself become so highly sought, that clients will come to you with work. Frankly, when you get right down it those are just about the only ways!

The good news is that there are two choices. The other news is that in our industry the predominant method is to "go out and ask." By the way, that's also the relatively easier method! It's humbling but true that only a few PM's can become so exceptional that clients beat a path to their door with work in hand. However, clients will often quickly open the door to PM's who seek to talk about the client's needs, work and opportunities.

This view is reinforced by multiple sources. In 2013 the Society of Marketing Professional Services (SMPS) completed a 15-month primary research and analysis effort focused on the fundamental questions – how will clients behave, what will business development look like, and how will clients hire A/E/C's in the decade ahead. The initiative culminated with the publication of [A/E/C Business Development - The Decade Ahead](#).

That focused research and critical analysis painted a vivid picture of what lies ahead for you. The research addressed inputs across multiple market/client sectors and virtually all types of firms. In one of the most provocative findings, clients across the board said the traditional roles and ways of "business development" are on their way out. Clients confirmed they have shifted tectonically – the majority of buyers of services said in one way or another "I am no longer going to meet with or talk to non-technical business developers. I want to talk with PM's and others who will actually deliver the services."

The message was crystal clear – buyers want to talk to and with those who know and focus on the client, those who will solve their problems, and those who will make their short and long-term work easier. Some were strategic, some were operationally focused, still others were thinking about managing their own time and resources – they all wanted to talk with the person who could help them get results and do their job better. In many cases the clients looked for PM's who could help them determine just what to do – or not do – in the first place!

One client captured this pivotal change in a seminal statement "I want the Steve Jobs of design and construction. Somebody who can tell me, show me, what I need to be more successful." In virtually all cases, the buyers labeled that person as someone with "a technical background" and often said it was the Project Manager or PIC.

Seller/Doer's – Mixing Business and Practice

The term "Seller/Doer" says it all. In a nutshell, Seller/Doer's are design or construction professionals who blend bringing work in the firm with actually leading teams and delivering the services. They are in fact "selling" and "doing" simultaneously. As mentioned above, the clients love them – and those same clients will likely welcome you as you offer your personal involvement and commitment to deliver the services related to their projects.

Most successful Seller/Doers begin by concentrating on the "Doing" component and move deliberately into more of

the “Selling” activities. Eventually, the most successful settle in on a mix that is proportionately 60/40 Selling/Doing.

First Steps and an Action Plan

First steps can be scary, but they lead to incredible journeys. So, take the first step and decide for yourself which of the two ways you are going to employ to bring work into the firm – ask for it, or attract clients. Don’t forget, a mix of both may be the most comfortable place to start.

Next develop an action plan. Here are a few suggestions to get you started.

- **Revisit Your Career Plan** – Revisit your career goals and objectives, rethink your plan. Either reconfirm or change your approach to success.
- **Focus on Current Clients** – Concentrate on your current work and clients. Enhance your working relationships, and engage your clients in more and new work. Never let these key relationships fade away.
- **Get Out, Get Active** – Get into the marketplace, get active with client-focused organizations, be around people who can hire you and your firm. Build a network.
- **Polish Your Skills** – Brush up on those skills that enable you to present yourself and your ideas well. Focus on communication and business savvy.
- **Learn About Marketing** – Dig into your firm’s marketing and business development plans. Talk with your best “sellers” and learn from their successes.
- **Get Help** – Talk with your colleagues in the “marketing/BD” group, maybe get a mentor. Look both inside and outside your firm, there are many resources.
- **Set Goals** – Set goals for yourself, be aggressive but make the stages achievable. Identify what works and what doesn’t for you, grow and evolve your role and responsibility.

While “selling” does not need to be the only thing on your mind, you’ll benefit from moving it to a more prominent place in your work ethic and routine. Take heart, if you are now a successful design or construction professional chances are you have what it takes to be a great Seller/Doer!

Scott Braley is Principal of Braley Consulting & Training. He helps design and construction firms in the areas of strategy, leadership, ownership, marketing, management and project management/delivery. During 30 years of A/E/C practice, he was a highly successful “seller/doer” and served as Managing Principal in an ENR “Top 40” firm. In addition to senior leadership roles, he helped sell and managed projects representing more than \$2.0 billion of in-place construction.

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Partnering to Enhance Your Value Proposition

By Michael Hall, AIA, REFP, LEED AP

For as long as there have been architecture firms, there have been strategic partnerships. In the last 20 years, this practice has become increasingly common. Today, finding a strong local partner or a national thought leader is as easy as a Google search. Yet like any Business Development strategy, there are right ways and wrong ways to partner. Done well, partnerships with other firms are a relatively low-cost way to enhance your value proposition and bring new benefits to potential clients.

Getting creative with partnerships

The issue of value is at the heart of any successful partnership. Fanning Howey has partnered with architecture firms in more than 30 states, the District of Columbia, the Philippines and the island of Guam. Many of these associations took a traditional form, where a local Architect of Record teamed with a Design Architect. In our experience, this arrangement comprises 90 percent of the associations between firms.

However, approaching collaboration opportunities with the sole goal of finding a firm to enhance a segment of your portfolio is a very limiting mindset. Instead of asking, “How does this partnership help us win this project?” try asking, “How does this partnership benefit the client?”

This simple change in focus opens up a wealth of new partnering opportunities. For example, your association strategy should prioritize partners with critical service lines beyond the realm of architecture, such as planning or engineering. This gives you the flexibility to team in multiple ways, even on different projects for the same client.

It is also important to identify proprietary tools the partner firm might bring to the project. For example, many larger firms have proprietary facility assessment and facility management software programs that would bring additional value to a master planning team. Add value and you increase your team’s chance of success exponentially.

Thinking Win/Win

The way your firm approaches a partnership is critical to short- and long-term success. A successful working relationship start with a simple concept: Think Win/Win. For example, there are many national firms who require complete control of the exterior building design when associating. We often take a different approach, encouraging our local partners to put their aesthetic mark on what is an important community icon. Above all, we take a flexible approach that allows each team member to utilize their strengths in the best way.

But while the way you associate may change from project-to-project, partnerships should not be a “plane built while you are flying it.” There are several key elements you must identify to provide a solid foundation for success:

1. Identify the type of relationship (joint venture, association or lead firm/consultant) and agree whether this is an exclusive partnership or if each firm is free to team with others.

2. Clearly outline the tasks and scope of work for each firm from the beginning. Figuring it out later is a recipe for disaster.
3. Address design credits for the project or projects up front, as well as the team's approach to sharing public relations opportunities.
4. Make sure that all firms are prepared to do what it takes to win the project. That means quality proposal preparation and a commitment to interview practice. Agree ahead-of-time how you will share these costs.
5. Document all agreements in a written format that is signed by all parties.

These are the issues that you must discuss for single-project partnerships. For longer-term collaborations, several other factors come into play, such as what types of projects you will pursue, the geographic area served and the length of time the partnership remains exclusive, if that applies. One-off partnerships may be valuable for pursuing specific projects, but long-term collaborative efforts are an essential part of an overall growth strategy.

Making It Work

Long-term strategic partnerships have the ability to grow your business. But before you pursue this strategy, make sure you have the resources in place to “work the plan.” In particular, ask yourself three questions:

1. **Do We Have the Right People?** – To make partnerships a viable strategy, you need a Road Warrior – someone who is willing to spend a significant amount of time in hotels and airport terminals. This takes a person with Business Development skills and an entrepreneurial spirit.
2. **Do We Know the Law?** – Licensing requirements vary from state-to-state, so it is important you know where you can practice easily and where you can't. For example, in Mississippi, you cannot even offer to provide architecture services until you are registered in the state. So the next time you get a phone call from a local firm asking to partner, make sure you look before you leap.
3. **Are We Willing to Show Up?** – While technology has made at-distance collaboration easier, you still need face-to-face meetings at key points in the project. Be prepared to be there when you're needed.

Finding the Right Partner

Finding a partner firm is easy; finding the right partner firm is much more complex. Often, partnerships are a strategic response to targeting a geographic area, or even a specific bond program or project. But don't let your desire to find a partner keep you from making good decisions.

A careful vetting process is required. Do your firms have shared values and cultures? Do your business development and design goals align? Are you able to work together effectively? Again, always prioritize value for the owner.

When searching for a partner firm, your own network is a good place to start. Professional associations, AIA committees or alumni groups are fertile ground. In the 1980s, Ron Fanning, AIA, PE, co-founder of Fanning Howey, was on a plane as part of an AIA trip. During the flight, he met Ernie Verges, AIA, a young architect with the New Orleans architecture firm VergesRome Architects.

Ron and Ernie became fast friends and stayed in touch over the years, but never had a chance to work together. But when the rebuilding effort began after Hurricane Katrina, almost 20 years later, Ernie remembered Ron and called him about pursuing K-12 school work in Louisiana. That was the beginning of a 10-year partnership between our two firms that has spanned more than a dozen projects.

They say the best Business Development comes from working with people you know, trust and like. This is true for professional relationships as well as client relationships. What begins as a business relationship invariably ends as a friendship. I am privileged to have partners and friends in communities ranging from Albuquerque to Cincinnati to New York City, and the relationships I have formed are just as strong and dynamic as the buildings we have designed together.

Michael Hall, AIA, REFP, LEED AP, mhall@fhai.com, is the president and senior project executive with Fanning Howey, an architecture and engineering firm with a specialization in K-12 school planning and design. Michael directs Fanning Howey's national association initiative, which has resulted in work in 37 states, the District of Columbia, the Philippines and the island of Guam.

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Differentiating with Consultants: The Power of Strategic Collaboration

By Craig Park, FSMPS, Assoc. AIA, *Principal*, The Sextant Group

Most architectural firms rely on principals or their marketing and business development staff to identify and build relationships with key decision makers in the markets where they choose to serve. Whether your firm is a generalist or works primarily in one or two market niches, developing a market research and outreach plan is the first step to building business. The implementation of the plan — the business development effort — identifies opportunities that firms can pursue. As much as we would like the decision process to be objective, the success of any pursuit effort is contingent on a number of subjective factors.

In the public sector, the near ubiquitous qualifications-based selection (QBS) request for qualifications (RFQ) process purports to address differentiation by establishing baseline metrics or qualities that substantiates each firm's relevance through the long-list, short-list, interview, to selection process. Alignment of firm history, portfolio, expert resumes and documented approach form the primary criteria for sorting through the selection progression. In the private sector, the request for proposal (RFP) process includes some elements of basic service experience, though it tends to favor established relationships and lowest cost, often at the expense of differentiated expertise.

One of the most important of these factors is differentiation. Differentiation may be one of the most over-used term in marketing professional services. Differentiation, often defined as a “unique value proposition” is cited as the Holy Grail for the architectural professional. This is primarily due to the difficulty in establishing substantive differentiators between like focused firms.

With the ability to research on the Internet, most clients looking to hire an architect for a specific project type — say an academic building — find the websites, portfolios, resumes, and even “thought leadership” content of many firms look, not surprisingly, alike. How can a client differentiate one firm from another?

This differential — more often than not — is not the design practice's own portfolio of experience, but the expertise and experience of key consultants on the design team that client sees as critical to the success of the project. How can your firm leverage its consultant relationships to better build relationships, identify new opportunities, and successfully win more work?

In most cases, the clients soliciting new work identify the technical strengths required or expected of the prime architecture firm to complete the project. This list often includes the typical basic services consultants — civil, structural, mechanical, electrical — necessary to round out the design team. Increasingly, specialists — geotechnical, landscape, interiors, food service, technology, acoustics, lighting, etc. — are also flagged as important participants in the process.

It is with these consultants and niche specialists that many architects are finding increased value to their business development efforts.

Experience-Based Strategy

Many consultants have direct contract relationships with the facilities teams within public and private clients. These can be related to ongoing maintenance, service or advising on planning and design for moves, adds and changes or for the renovations and remodels that reflect the ongoing evolution of most workplace facilities. When targeting new, potential clients, these consultants should be the first points of contact for building your network.

As firms build portfolio depth, the on-going, long-term relationships with consultants can also be an element highlighted by the client. The shortened learning curve of prior experience working together is often cited by clients as the most important factor in team selection. This sometimes poses a challenging dilemma: whether to choose a firm with a strong working history, or opt for a new relationship with strong client contacts. Each case will be different, but this highlights the importance of understanding the strengths of the consulting options you have.

Scouting for Leads

Like most architectural firms, the marketing departments of consultants are also scouting for new work. Because their focus tends to be more market-sector driven, they track those client types that best fit their expertise. The proactive consultants will share these findings with the architects they trust and enjoy working with. Recognizing this attribute, architects can build a network of consultants who can help identify pipeline opportunities.

Collaboration Benefits

“Great buildings are designed by great architects who use great consultants,” said Michael Wagner, a former editor at Architectural Record. The best consultants bring a collaborative approach that starts at programming and continues through construction administration. The complexity of projects today makes the “master builder” history of architectural practice much less relevant. Finding and developing strong consultant relationships brings the benefit of expertise, experience, and ultimately, project excellence to the practice.

Exclusivity

Loyalty begs for exclusivity. When a consultant provides a truly unique benefit to a project pursuit — because of strong client history or specialized expertise — it is a good strategy to get them to commit to being exclusive. However, many niche consultants (especially the premier ones) are so well known for their expertise that they are the default selection for many firms, often without pre-knowledge. A good practice --- as with all teaming --- is to discuss exclusivity early in the pursuit timeline and verify whether or not the consultant can commit to being exclusive to just one team.

Strategic Partnerships

In the end, building strategic partnerships with consultants that have similar business and cultural values can help differentiate your firm from the competition. Building a long-term cooperative and collaborative relationship can bring the best of both worlds: more and better project opportunities, and higher quality and greater innovation in project delivery.

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The principal's guide to responsive website design

The top ten things to consider for your architecture firm's next website.

By Josh Miles

Summary

Your website is potentially the most underutilized business development and validation tool in your practice. But are you doing everything you could to leverage this opportunity? While a successful website could range from a single landing page, to hundreds of pages deep, a site that uniquely positions your firm, your expertise, and your people is invaluable. With the advent of responsive web design and the ever-changing role of search engines, best practices are constantly evolving. Here are the top ten things your firm can focus on today to stay ahead of the curve.

The website's role in marketing

It's kind of nostalgic to think that not so long ago, some firms probably debated the necessity of having a website. Chances are your firm evolved from that first website, to an all-Flash site, to a content management system (CMS) where your team could update content as-needed.

Now most firms would list their website as one of their most valuable marketing and business development touchpoints.

Generation X continues to move into management and leadership positions, and millennials are pouring into the workforce. The result? Today's owners, influencers, and decision makers are more **digital native** than ever before. That means your website is easily the most readily available research and validation tool your prospects have at their disposal.

As search engines, smart phones, and tablets become the norm for doing business, it's not just that the people have changed, the tools are changing as well.

Many firms are embracing the idea that their website should have a key role in converting website traffic to real business development opportunities. Is your website ready for what's next?

To help you navigate the latest trends, and determine if your website is ready for an overhaul, here are the top ten things to consider.

1. Responsive Design

Without a doubt, [responsive web design](#) is one of the biggest recent changes to how websites are being built. If you're not familiar with this approach, responsive sites allow the layout, content, navigation, and other features to adjust, scale, move, or respond based on the visitor's device, based on the size of that device. To put that another way, firms leveraging responsive design can deliver an optimized experience to visitors, regardless of whether they're using desktop, laptop, tablet, or one of many mobile phone devices. In addition, responsive websites enable marketers to manage their website content for all devices in one place—no more updating the desktop version, then updating the mobile version.

Responsive design expands far beyond making a site mobile-friendly. It's also about how the code is written and organized. Consideration should be made for offering multiple image sizes for various devices, retina displays, slower connection speeds. Responsive sites are lightweight and load quickly on mobile devices, even with slower internet connections.

Google is also playing favorites when it comes to sites that are optimized for the mobile web. Each of these tactics not only speed up your site's performance, but also decreases your long-term site maintenance costs.

With an increasing amount of traffic originating on mobile devices, some are taking a [mobile first](#) approach, meaning that the design of the website is considered first from a mobile perspective, and those design considerations drive the desktop experience.

If you're planning to redesign your website, don't do it until you're ready to invest in a responsive website.

2. Positioning and Differentiation

The next key consideration in your website redesign has nothing to do with code or technology—it's simply about how you choose to position and differentiate your firm. Think about the last time you were shopping an item online. You probably did a search, clicked the first link, and spent about two seconds determining if this site had the item you were searching for. One, two... back button. Does your current website pass the two-second test? And if so, once you begin to dig into the content, does it position your firm differently than your competition?

Once your website has successfully passed the two-second test, does it successfully differentiate your firm? With many competing firms, if we simply cover up the logos on their websites there would very little remaining to differentiate them. A successful site should incorporate the firm's identity throughout the language, photography, and visual language of the site.

3. Goals and CTAs

Calls to Action (CTAs) are marketing-speak for the graphics or messages throughout your site that invite visitors to take a next step. You might want a visitor to read more, fill out a form, download a PDF, or pick up the telephone. As marketers, we work so hard to send traffic to our websites, but how many of us actually consider what we want the visitor to do once they arrive?

For each audience group who visits your website—prospect, competitor, potential employee—what is *your* goal? What would you want each of them to do when they land on your homepage, project, or blog post? And most importantly, are those goals obvious to the visitor?

4. Great Photography

The web is an incredibly visual medium. As such, the quality and impact of your photography can have a marked impact on how visitors respond to your site and content.

Yes, professional photography can be expensive. But if you're teaming together with other firms for a particularly high-profile project, talk to them about hiring a professional photographer, and splitting the costs to license the images. How many truly great photos do you have of your people and projects? Here's a hint: if it was taken by one of your staff with a phone, it's probably not a great photo.

5. Elevate your People and your Process

In the past, many firms may have been a little skittish to feature their key staff for the world to see. "What if someone tries to poach my best people?" But in a world where your best people are already on LinkedIn and various other social networks, there is far more benefit to allowing your prospects "meet" your team on the website first.

So while introducing prospects to your team has huge implications, describing your unique process goes a long way towards demonstrating your expertise. Feature your processes online, by name if applicable, and find a way to showcase them prominently on your site.

6. Content Management System

Unless you're looking for more excuses to make requests of your IT department, a content management system (CMS) is a must-have for professional services marketers. From fully-custom software, to the ubiquitous open-source giant, WordPress, a good CMS will allow you to edit text, update images, create posts, and add projects simply and easily.

7. SEO

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) refers to the ongoing efforts of sending search traffic to your website for the right reasons, and the science of optimizing your website to be found for specific searches. The first may require ongoing consultation, but the latter is essential to take into account as you build your new site. If you understand nothing else about SEO, the key is very simple: be consistent. A page on your site with a keyword found in the page name, title, headline, and body copy is far more likely to rank for that keyword than a page that doesn't leverage consistency. And as Google's focus on mobile continues to grow, SEO and responsive web design will go hand-in-hand to improve search rankings.

8. Content Marketing

Content marketing is all about sharing great content that helps your prospects solve problems, make decisions, and build affinity, without selling. Chances are your firm is already creating content on some level: writing white papers, making presentations, and answering prospect questions. Consider how you could leverage more of that content on your website. Some of the most popular content marketing approaches include: blogging, videos, podcasting, how-to lists, in-person events, and infographics.

Firms who create a culture that leverages the expertise of their subject matter experts across marketing channels, will find content marketing to be a natural extension of their brand.

9. Social Media

Beyond simply connecting with friends and colleagues, social media is also a powerful platform to share thought leadership and content marketing. Think about how the by-products of a single case study could be leveraged as project photography on Pinterest, a client quote on LinkedIn, or a memorable phrase on Twitter, all linking back to the full case study on your website.

It's great to introduce website visitors to your various social networks, but don't get this backwards—use social media to drive traffic to your site, not to coax them away from it. When social media is overemphasized on your website, you're practically encouraging visitors to leave your site to find a new distraction.

10. CRM and Marketing Automation

Once your website design and content is ready to go, what if you could know specifically “who” was visiting your website, which pieces of content they were interacting with, and which tweet or link from your email marketing efforts sent them to your site? What if you could employ A/B testing to determine which call to action was most effective? As powerful marketing automation platforms and CRMs begin to work together, those things are all possible.

Conclusion

Website design best practices will always in flux. Responsive web design is a significant shift from how sites were built in the past, and the next big thing is probably equally difficult to predict. However if your new site is built with accessibility, flexibility, performance, and your firm's goals in mind, you're far more likely to have a website that will be a greatly beneficial business development tool.

Josh Miles is a caffeine and Twitter addict, and principal of Indianapolis-based national branding agency, MilesHerndon. His role consists of leading brand strategy, business development, and firm-wide marketing.

Josh Miles is the host of the podcast, “Obsessed with Design.” Josh speaks from coast to coast on branding, digital marketing, and social media, and is a past TedX presenter. Miles was honored as 40 Under 40 by Indianapolis

Business Journal and ENR Midwest's 2015 Top 20 Under 40. Josh is the author of the Content Marketing Institute book, Bold Brand.

Josh is an advisory board member of the Purdue University Brian Lamb School of Communication, and is involved in several start-up tech companies based in Indianapolis.

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Business Development is a Team Sport

By Tim Barrick, FSMPS and Tony Steinhardt, FSMPS, CPSM

"Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence wins championships." - Michael Jordan

This quote – from a guy who knows something about winning – fittingly describes the “team sport” of business development in the AEC industry. To win work, firms must assemble a team of both business developers and seller-doers that work well together, share intelligence and leverage each other’s unique skill set to accomplish a common goal.

The Business Developer’s Role

The business developer plays a vital role in the process of winning work by initiating new relationships and “starting the conversation” with potential clients or partners. This initial contact takes some of the pressure to bring in revenue for the firm off the busy design practitioner, who likely has a minimum billable percentage to reach.

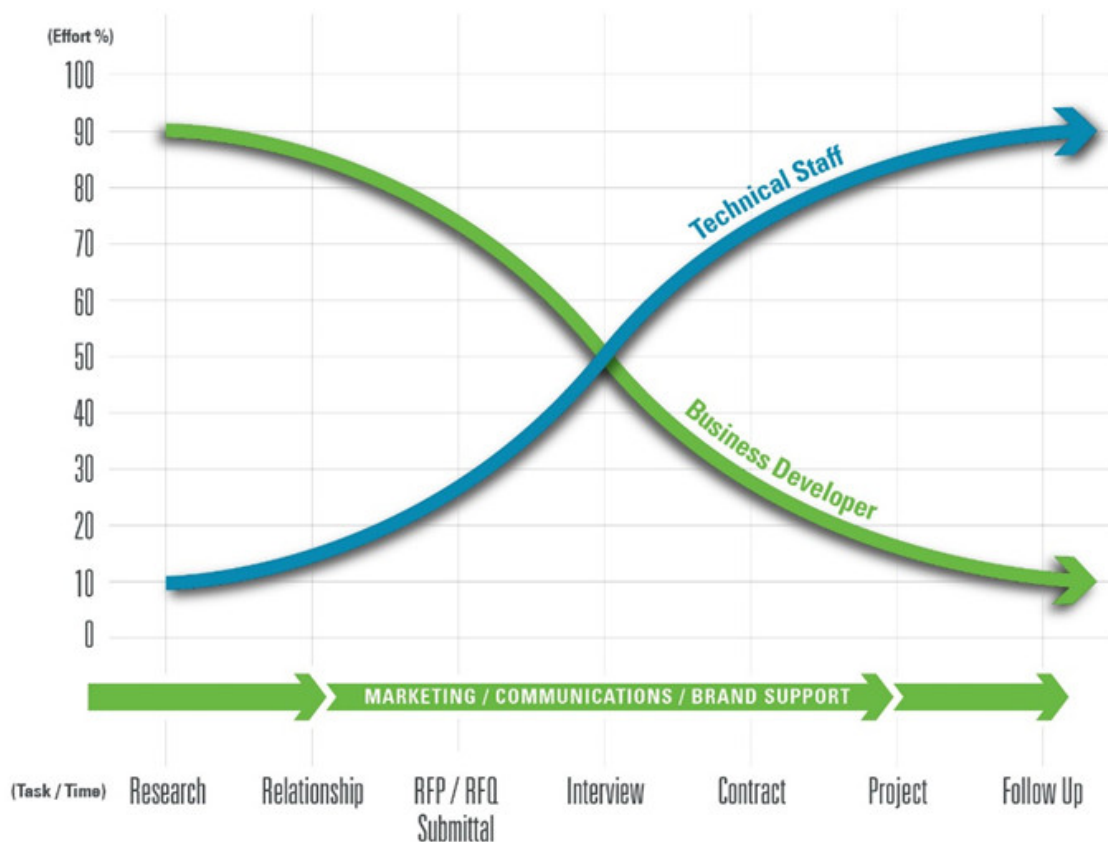
Before the conversation can even begin, however, a business developer must first evaluate the potential client based on the firm’s expertise, values, experience, sales strategy and marketing plan, plus determine if it’s the right fit for them. Consider pursuing clients first, not projects, as this philosophy leads to more strategic pursuit decisions, longer relationships and can ultimately lead to an increase in repeat work.

This evaluation process is followed by extensive background research, so that the business developer can provide ample knowledge of the client, the client’s business and the players involved, and thus set the table for a deal to be made.

Once a deal is struck and a project is underway, the team’s job is not done; there is no off-season when it comes to building relationships. Though the client relationship can now be handed off to the seller-doer, who becomes responsible for its long-term continuation and growth, the business developer must still be involved in a support role, mentoring the technical professional on subjects such as competitor analysis and identifying trends in the marketplace. Design professionals sometimes lack these research and sales skills that come so naturally to business development specialists.

The business developer is also responsible for providing a level of accountability for the team, periodically putting pressure on the seller-doer to ensure they are doing the things necessary to nurture their newfound relationship and find continued success. Thus, throughout the process the business developer will act not only as teammate but also as coach, mentor, strategist, researcher, knowledge-sharer, door-opener, community networker, talent agent and information gatherer.

Leadership & Education: Role of BD vs. Technical Staff



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The Tools to Succeed

This give-and-take between the business developer and the design professional relies on teamwork, trust and communication. To achieve success, the firm must have robust mechanisms for sharing knowledge and data internally, and the BD team must have the discipline to only pursue relationships that align with the firm's marketing plan and strategy. Often it falls on the business developer to be objective enough to ask questions like, "Can we win this job?" and "Why should we pursue this client?"

Most importantly, establishing, developing and maintaining relationships take a significant investment of time and money. Business developers must be given the latitude to seek out and begin relationships, and seller-doers must be empowered to continue them.

Room for Debate

There is some current debate in the AEC industry as to whether the strategy of investing in a dedicated business developer has value. As business developers ourselves, we believe that value is provided in the time and energy needed for the market research and relationship-building efforts that are critical to eventual sales success.

Today more than ever, knowledge sharing and creation is a crucial differentiator for professional services firms,

allowing design professionals and business developers alike to establish credibility while also giving them the ability recognize the alignment of firm and client. Often, business developers are best positioned, and have the non-billable time, to recognize client pain points, identify knowledge gaps within the firm and produce content to share with clients.

In fact, some highly-specialized firms assign specific business developers to champion each area of expertise, which creates the opportunity for more in-depth conversations with potential clients and further lifts the burden of relationship-building from busy design practitioners, who typically are relied upon to provide that knowledge.

Investing in dedicated business development talent is essential for a robust client pipeline; however, each firm must make their own strategic and financial decisions when it comes to building and deploying their BD team. Though smaller, more generalist firms may not need the skills and services of a dedicated business developer, as firms grows and specialized knowledge becomes ever more necessary, business developers can provide great value by developing client relationships and bringing in new work, thus allowing design professionals to focus on what they do best. Now that's a slam dunk!

Under the business development and marketing leadership of Tim Barrick, FSMPS and Tony Steinhardt, FSMPS, CPSM, RATIO (www.RATIOdesign.com) has grown from a small Midwestern studio to a multi-office firm working nationally and internationally. Founded in 1982, RATIO is an award-winning design and planning firm offering services in architecture, historic preservation, interior design, landscape architecture, urban design + planning, graphic design and economic development. Its collaborative studios combine professionals from all disciplines to work on education, community, life science, workplace, lifestyle and cultural projects.

In 2012, RATIO formed a strategic alliance with Chicago-based smdp, LLC. The partnership offers clients an expanded list of services and allows both firms to pursue growth opportunities and continued stability in the new global economy.

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Entrepreneurial Practice Models - A book excerpt from *Designing Profits*

By Morris A. Nunes and Andrew Pressman, FAIA

Introduction below by David Brent Richards, FAIA

In their book, *Designing Profits*, Nunes and Pressman create a case study based on a fictional architectural firm, M&B Architects, and their advisors, Sloan and Warton. The advisors lead the firm principals to understand accounting basics and then help them apply that basic knowledge to managing the firm, growing the firm and making key business decisions, along with reimagining and planning the future success of the firm; proving that it is “indeed possible to be as creative in establishing and operating a practice as in designing and constructing a building.”

Many architects graduate without understanding the basic financial aspects of running a practice that provide the foundation for making wise business decisions. *Designing Profits* provides an accessible format to gain that understanding, describes how it applies to managing a successful practice and makes it feel real through their use of the case study throughout the book.

Late in *Designing Profits*, Nunes and Pressman include the chapter, “Rethinking Practice: Tactical Innovations for Financial Prosperity and Professional Satisfaction”, where they consider “the big picture: what’s profitable, what’s enjoyable and can they intersect?” In the attached excerpt, they consider ways to develop business by reframing resources that exist in the firm.

Morris A. Nunes is an attorney with over 30 years’ experience as outside counsel for businesses and professional practices. He has served as Adjunct Professor at Georgetown University and Catholic University. He has written 5 previous books on business topics, and holds a law degree from Georgetown and degrees from the University of Pennsylvania and its Wharton School of Business.

Andrew Pressman, FAIA, an architect, Professor Emeritus at the University of New Mexico, and Lecturer at the University of Maryland, leads his own award-winning architectural firm in Washington, DC. He has written numerous critically acclaimed books and articles, and he holds a Master’s degree from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design.

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ENTREPRENEURIAL PRACTICE MODELS

“This is exactly where the rubber meets the road,” said Joseph Sloan bluntly. “You’ve completed enough self-analysis and reflection to *finally* ask the right questions and have an attitude that leads you to *embrace* change in order to prosper in today’s challenging business environment. Alfred and I were hoping you would arrive at this point (with a little subtle direction from us) so that you would be excited and invested in pursuing new heights in practice with your feet on the ground. By ‘feet on the ground’ I mean that you are well prepared—and this is, and always has been, our mantra—to make wise business decisions informed by financial basics and tools (as described in previous chapters). Going forward, I implore you—as only you two can do as creative architects—to view the development of new practice models as a unique design problem for *your* Firm.”

Sloan continued his discourse. “You recall that the Profit Target Analysis works fine *if* your marketing efforts are successful. Hiring a Marketing Specialist aids those efforts; but, when all is said and done, the Marketing Specialist can only succeed if the steak is there with the sizzle. In other words, what the Firm delivers must be seen by the client as—and in fact be—worth the fee. That’s ultimately the foundation for good client relations, good reputations, growth, and lasting profitability. So we have ideas about some ways to envision, select, package, promote, and perform M&B’s services.

“Some of the ideas we’re going to discuss come from the profession’s literature, others are from other professions, and some are our own. To a very great extent in considering these suggestions, we’ve looked for ideas that require little to no additional expenditure but, rather, can be adopted by reframing and/or redeploying the resources you already have. We recommend that you use the analytical financial tools that we’ve outlined to model and test the ideas you find appealing and to set realistic targets and budgets for monitoring of implementation and ongoing utilization.”

Sloan said that he and Wharton believe these ideas offer innovative practice models and can also trigger creative thinking. Distinctiveness and competitive advantage will be a function of the specific expertise, skill sets, and personalities of the Firm. Building on some of these ideas and inventing new ones are intended to disrupt the Practice status quo in order to spring into an exhilarating and lucrative future:

- 1. *Establish a super-consultancy and offer a spectrum of services on a project basis.*** One way to get more and better clients is to provide additional services so the client truly believes that they only need to hire one firm, with the highest degree of excellence, to solve *all* their problems. You can engage in the exhilarating architectural design that you love to do as one of those services, but also coordinate expert consultants to address clients’ other needs and requirements. In this super-consultancy model, you build on your core services by applying design thinking, along with a host of highly skilled specialists, to solve myriad client-related problems.

A super-consultancy is created by setting up alliances—both virtual and physical—with experts who complement existing skills and who can focus on the specific issues either articulated by the prospective client or surmised by the alliance.³ The super-consultancy can open up new markets including previously unexplored building types, larger-scale jobs, projects with highly technical demands, and work for clients in search of a range of pre-design and/or post-construction services.

Collectively, the talents comprising a strategic alliance can be very powerful. The combination of seasoned professionals with those who provide fresh perspectives could make a convincing argument for providing the best services—and value—for many clients. Here are a few examples (in no particular order) of specialized services that might spark ideas for the Practice.

- Engage in building commissioning to ensure all systems are working to maximize user comfort together with optimal energy savings.
- Conduct pre- and post-occupancy evaluations to quantify benefits of newly designed space.
- Team with commercial real estate brokers for tenant improvements.
- Collaborate with a good constructor for clients who seek design–build project delivery.
- Associate with developers (see “Smart Fees”, below); engage in speculative real estate development.
- Offer a range of facilities planning services, such as maintenance plans and scheduling, and energy optimization strategies.
- Identify and then assist clients to navigate through the swamp of applicable codes and regulations for their projects.
- Undertake historic preservation and adaptive reuse.
- Engage with building performance, especially façade design.
- Research on a variety of architecturally related subjects is becoming an interesting and rewarding niche. Materials, envelopes and façades, and other areas in the realm of building science are complemented by studies under the umbrella of social science, such as quantifying the constantly evolving challenges of open office productivity versus that of more traditional layouts.
- Offer expert witness testimony and services in support of resolving design and/or construction disputes.

³ For detailed guidance on working effectively with partners in an alliance, see Andrew Pressman, *Designing Relationships: The Art of Collaboration in Architecture*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2014.

Many other services can be packaged together—or separately—to distinguish the Practice. Alternatively, some of the services noted above could be offered independently—with the prospect of an architectural commission in the future. Services related to a fundraising effort for institutional or community buildings are an example: expressing client wishes and dreams through exciting design ideas in the form of three-dimensional architectural renderings with their associated probable costs are much needed for certain client types. Moreover, an architect can serve as a spokesperson and advocate for the project as well as identifying recognition opportunities for donors. So a new fundraising component of the Firm, involving lots of creative design and communication with potential donors, could be dedicated to that service. Architects are indeed *vital* to the success of many capital campaigns, and it is incumbent upon architects to demonstrate how.

With the right alliance, design can be part of a great continuum of services to ensure project success.

It's important to note that we are *not* talking about more subcontractor work with its anemic 10% markup. We *are* talking about arrangements where the Firm gets additional work for itself with good fees *and* obtains a commission of sorts for its ally for providing the work opportunity; e.g. one-fifth to as much as one-third of the ally's fee. This is a model regularly employed by lawyers, for example. To paraphrase their usual description of shared compensation arrangements: "You eat what you kill, but if someone else drives the kill to you, they get a healthy bite."

- 2. Create a niche of specialized services.** Given passion and skill, any one of the services suggested above could potentially be developed into a specialization (or possibly a separate profit center) for the Practice with all of its attendant benefits. Securing a reputation as an expert and as a thought leader could help the Practice market its services locally, nationally, and globally—at the very least, well beyond its current market area.

Here's another example of a niche design service that would especially appeal to Bob: Focused residential design consultations that provide services for schematic design, materials selection, or even an aspect of construction detailing—whatever the overarching idea is toward fulfilling a client's wishes and making poetic, magical space. This could yield a decent profit for the architect, and it is something clients might embrace as well because of the relatively limited scope (and, therefore, fee). There would certainly be a loss of control on the final outcome, but there would be strong design input that would surely influence the project for the better. That concept would direct your Marketing Specialist to focus on a way to publicize within—and outside—the profession.

There are no limits to discovering a unique niche when design thinking is applied to creating an entrepreneurial model that distinguishes a practice with special talent. For example, Mobile Design Studio demonstrates how an innovative design process can result in a niche service.⁴ Their approach is to move their studio on-site for various project phases to collaborate more effectively and, ultimately, significantly speed up the process. With new equipment and technology, this is an updated version of the 1950s "squatters" (the Caudill Rowlett Scott term for brainstorming and collaborating on the owner's home turf).

- 3. Expand the architectural services pie.** Thomas Fisher has suggested that: "Our clients really should be everybody who owns a building."⁵ His argument is that building diagnostics has been a role that architects have relinquished to others; i.e. building or home inspectors (who are typically hired only when there is a sale) or contractors and constructors. Architects are perhaps better suited than anyone to perform this type of work to the highest degrees of excellence given their background in design and construction and their network of industry contacts. Raising this service to professional status could be highly advantageous to both architects and building owners. Catching problems early can

4 Erica Malouf, "Real-Time Design," *AIArchitect*, October 10, 2014.

5 Interview with Thomas Fisher, "Models for the Architectural Profession," in Andrew Pressman, *Professional Practice 101: Business Strategies and Case Studies in Architecture*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2006, pp. 271–276.

save owners lots of money, which can be documented. Analogous to HMOs (health maintenance organizations) in healthcare, architects could create alliances of BMOs (building maintenance organizations) for diagnostics or diagnostics and repair. This would be a recession-proof service since buildings leak, are too hot or too cold, rot and decay, grow mold, and so on, independent of fluctuations in the economy. Taking this a step further, compensation models could be creative as well; i.e. annual premiums. As a function of specific building types, there could be arrangements for periodic building inspections and tune-ups, similar to auto dealerships.

What are some other ways that architectural services can be expanded? Tailor your response and add your own spin by applying creativity and design thinking to forge new entrepreneurial practice models (as in Fisher's example). This could lead to many eureka moments, more work, and more revenue.

- 4. Brand new branding.** In the effort to seek a competitive advantage and differentiate the practice, it makes sense for professional service firms to learn from the corporate world and interpret the notion of branding. In this context, branding obviously can be much more than a well-designed logo; it can embody reputation, expertise, design excellence, firm culture, trust, professionalism, aspirations, and so on. The brand is a tangible manifestation of the Firm's mission and vision—its *distinctive* attributes—reflected by completed projects, staff, consultants, and *everyone connected with any related alliance*. It can serve to engender loyalty with clients (who will also refer the Firm to others), acquire new work, and even help to recruit the best talent. Show what it is you do that's so great (perhaps even indispensable) and how you do it. Easier said than done; this—along with the subjects of marketing and business development in depth and detail—are yet more design problems (and subjects for another book). We would add that embracing an entrepreneurial practice model as suggested above will greatly facilitate and drive an effective marketing campaign.

Small Firm, Big Strategy

By Jeremy Welu AIA, LEED AP BD+C, Chris Lake AIA, LEED AP BD+C and Cara Weber AIA, LEED AP BD+C

At the core of most architects and design firms is the desire to create beautiful and meaningful design. But in order to do those meaningful commissions and win the trust of your clients, you have to first find meaningful commissions.

For the small firm, and especially for a start-up, this poses a unique design problem unto itself. Small firms (under 50) make up 75% of the market, and while many were started by designers with high levels of expertise and competence, it is still their task to convince prospective clients that their start-up has both the brains and brawn to crank out a meaningful design while meeting their anticipated schedule and budget.

Our start-up firm, DELV Design started in December 2014, with four partners, all roaring towards the 'prime' of our careers. We had passion, a decade and a half of experience and a hunger, because we had mouths to feed (our own families' and those of our two employees). So how do startups and small firms win work? What does it take? Where are the best spots to scope out potential great commissions? How do we ensure that where we invest our valuable and limited time will pay off?

Strategy

We quickly realized that DELV would need both a short and a long game plan and that the strategy would be different for each, except for one essential thing - a clear and authentic brand. This we knew we had to get right, and right away. It would be the cornerstone of attracting the type of work we had envisioned those early days with dry erase markers in front of the white board.

Articulate Your Brand

The beauty and danger of being a startup is you have carte blanche; your brand is a blank slate. It is what you want it to be -- untouched and unmarred. It is also untested, unproven and risky. Articulating our newborn brand was so essential to the overall success of DELV, that the four of us got to work early on hashing out what persona best embodied the "collective us" and one that also would attract the type of people we thought would find value in our services.

Subsequently, we also started designing the brand "experience" - all the touch points an outsider might have with our firm. Both will most definitely evolve as we grow, but knowing this from the beginning gave us our center. Externally, it helped others have a clear and consistent answer to the question, "Who is this new firm?" Internally, it became our litmus test for making choices during our first year.

Identify Bold and Specific BD Targets

Once we got a handle on what our brand wanted to be, we asked ourselves, "Who would want to work with us?" So

we drafted a list of our ideal clients. Some of these clients were ideal because of the quality and quantity of projects they have available within our core competencies. Some were ideal because they share our values, culture and vision. And others, well, they just pay on time.

You can also look to redefine the term client. Clients can also be developers, contractors and brokers who, while they are not the end user, have the ability to engage architects in meaningful commissions for clients that might end up fitting into your ideal category. For DELV, this business development approach ended up generating about 30% of our revenue and launched our name out into the marketplace without having to spend a ton of resources on marketing and hours responding to RFPs.

Diversify

It's true of your financial portfolio holdings and it should be true of your service offerings - diversify. From the beginning, we decided to establish multiple service areas for the firm. We recognized early on the unique passions and competencies of DELV's four partners and were determined to leverage them for strategic advantage.

For example, beyond the traditional menu of services that architects are typically known for, we included a market-driven service line that assists clients with the challenges of implementing and integrating BIM into their projects. We coupled this service with a platform of BIM content and direct access support for a wide network of other AEC firms and large institutions.

Other items we added onto our service menu were brand development, visioning and a co-working environment for design partners. Having this diversification offers some protection against seasonal fluctuations, economic or political changes in market segments and other outside factors that can influence the success of a small firm.

BD is Like Dating

Business development is a lot like dating. You're investing time, money and energy, meeting with a lot of people with the end goal of finding someone with whom you can have a relationship.

There's online dating, a broad approach where you digitally post information about how amazing you are and hope someone strolls by and is interested enough to call; and then there's blind dating, where someone you know thinks there might be a connection between you and someone else they know and they make an introduction. Business development for the start-up is less like online dating and more like blind dating. You are using your existing network of relationships to get you closer to a match.

If you are starting a firm and have been in the industry for a while, you will already have an existing network of relationship to which to look for potential matches. At DELV, we started our first business development efforts by examining the unique web of connections and relationships each of us had built throughout our careers. These connections were not limited to inside the AEC industry but outside as well. They included partners, vendors, consultants, accountants, fellow association members, personal acquaintances, neighbors and the guy or gal we knew at the gym.

We found that social media platforms like LinkedIn and Twitter were credible resources for both finding connections as well as sharing news about our firm to a highly-targeted audience. By leveraging these connections we recognized the wealth of opportunity that could be found from simply starting within the relationships we currently had.

An Authentic Message

Then there's the message, which jumps back to knowing your brand, its unique story and its relevant audience. This all-hands-on-deck approach to business development can feel intimidating if your brand message is unclear in any way. As you're meeting with people, you're telling them what you're up to, the backstory of how, and more importantly, why you began doing what you're doing. In this story, tell them the type of person or organization that is mostly likely to find value in what you're doing at your firm.

Be authentic, be honest and be confident. If you are great at one project type and only proficient in another, say that. It's a powerful and confident message to also define what you will not do, and what types of projects are not a good fit for your firm. This helps them make a potential BD match for you. Be confident in not just who you are, and but where you're going. You can't sell what you don't believe in.

Combine a powerful map of overlaid personal and professional networks with a clear and authentic message. Then infuse it with the proverbial entrepreneurial hustle, and this is the making of a sustainable and successful small firm with a robust business development base.

Work Hard

Here's the bad news though. Even the best business development strategy at any level of a company's maturity still won't cut it alone. It takes hard work in execution to succeed. Scratch that. It takes laser-focused, very hard work. You have to be brutally strategic in your efforts. Learn to say 'no', learn to say 'yes'. None of these ideas are earth shattering, but it's doing them with discipline that makes the difference.

If building your firm's business was like a crock-pot ("set it and forget it"), everyone would be doing it. Instead your firm's brand and business development is a living thing and it exists in a changing environment with an assortment of influences at micro and macro levels, including technological, cultural, political and others.

Remember, you are not an island; you are a myriad of relationships. So lean on those you know, and don't just cast a wide net, but a purposeful net. Present an honest, value-driven message about who you are, why you got into this business and how that translates to amazing things for potential clients. And oh yeah - work hard at it!

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Jeremy is a true dreamer and schemer. As the resident idea guy, he's always dreaming of solutions that are both bold and broad for his clients and his firm. His career has spanned the ice hockey leagues in small-town Minnesota, to the high-pace design studios in New York, to Indianapolis where he serves on the executive board of AIA Indianapolis.

Through the span of his career, Chris has led large and often complicated, innovative projects from concept to completion. He has an uncanny knack for making the complex manageable and finding paths forward through even the most tangled of scenarios.

Cara is compelled by a strong connection to art, truth and beauty, and she's driven to help people be understood, be authentic to themselves and to create environments that speak to the worth of each human life and each human

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