

Lessons learned 2012



Mark Zweig

Twelve takes for the New Year, straight from Mark Zweig.

Every year about this time I force myself to think back on the year and ask myself: What lessons did I learn? I know that as a typical professional/business founder/owner in his 50s, my experiences were probably not dissimilar to those of many of our readers.

So here you go... in no particular order:

1) Just because it worked in the past does not mean it will work today. The past may serve as a source of inspiration but following past practices today will probably not create the same results. Times are changing so rapidly that many of us will be caught off-guard and find ourselves offering services the market either doesn't want or feels they no longer have to pay for.

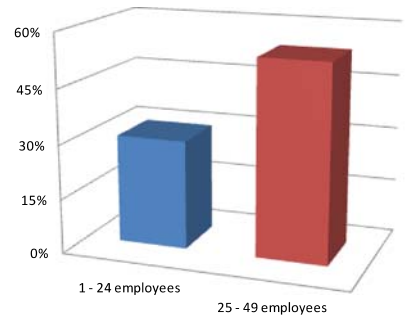
2) Marketing-wise, we now live in the era of rapid experimentation. You have to keep trying new things to see if they work – and if they work this month they may not work next month. We see this in our client organizations and we have surely seen it at ZweigWhite. And, by the way, e-marketing is rapidly taking over the role that direct mail used to play throughout our industry. But it isn't free. If you want to stay off the "spam" lists, there are a variety of parasitic service providers who have to be paid to "distribute" your e-marketing messages and more.

3) It's not all about personal selling but you do need people who can close. The fact is firms with a brand name can survive the comings and goings of any of their people. That's why they are a brand. And most clients today get the information about the firm from their website or other online sources. You have to recognize and embrace that! What do clients see about you online? What happens when they send an email to your firm?

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TRENDLINES Marketing matters



Spending money on marketing is certainly recognized as an important part of getting new business, but finding the budget can be a challenge for many firms in the current economic environment. Moreover, it seems that smaller firms are less apt to have a marketing budget than their larger brethren. According to 2011-2012 Small Firm Survey, 54 percent of firms with 25-49 employees report that they have marketing budget, while only 30 percent of firms with 1-24 employees say they budget for marketing.

– Margot Suydam, Survey Manager

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On doing good

How a marketer and firm's efforts are making all the difference.



Marilynn Mendell

GUEST SPEAKER

If one starts out by doing good, thinking positively, and acting with kindness, then everything else basically falls into place. I started the World Water Center several years ago with a belief that water is an inalienable right, that water sold in plastic bottles is inherently bad for the Earth, and that there are many people doing marvelous water projects around the world and, even with Internet access, they aren't always easy to find. I didn't know anything about how to start a nonprofit (some would say I still don't after six years), but I did it anyway. For my whole life, I have felt that we all have to give back, and in marketing, where there is so much stretching of the truth and Barnum and Bailey tactics, I feel that attaching one's campaigns in some way to supporting the community helps to legitimize a company's actions. There are abundant studies that show that having a purpose in one's life that goes beyond self leads to a happier and healthier life. The old saying, "It is better to give than receive" certainly continues to have merit. A company that promotes community volunteerism to do good also gains happier employees, who in the end perform their day jobs with more enthusiasm.

While social marketing can't in itself make a company good, it can help build trust and help others with similar inclinations to do good align with a firm. Again, there have been many studies that show that just by acting a certain way, one can transform and so it might happen with corporations. For my clients, there's an added benefit, terrific public relations from events where, in the case of **Hickok Cole Architects**, they annually raise (even in down markets) \$80,000- to-\$90,000 for the Washington Project for the Arts (WPA) with a project called ART NIGHT. In the case of the Phipps Botanical Gardens and Conservatory, their mission is to do wonderful things for the community – so they must always be setting the bar even higher. They are currently in the process of building a Living Building – that's just about as high as you can go in the realm of green by today's standards. They epitomize doing good and giving to the community.

Whatever direction a company takes in order for a project to succeed has to be a win for everyone involved. When I started working with Hickok Cole, they were doing a nice show with friends and family and they had a curator bring in some funky pieces. It was fun. They involved the company's employees by asking them to compete to design the announcement card, or to design lights for the office with only a \$29 budget. Creativity soared. I thought that

by formally partnering with an organization like the WPA we could build a greater cause. We could reach out into the community. It would no longer be about us. There would be a mission and purpose. Then I had the idea that half of the money raised would go to the artists and the other half would go to the WPA, with Hickok Cole picking up 100 percent of the costs. Fortunately, this client is not only forward thinking but also extremely generous with its marketing budget. Oh, and they trust and allow enormous amounts of autonomy. To raise even more money and to make the evening a bit like an auction, that is to build tension, we developed Art Angels. How do sponsors win? Give them back something amazing. They would agree before the event to prepay \$2,000 and when they came to the party, they got to pick a piece of art up to that amount and take it home (or to the office). Oddly enough, given this opportunity many Art Angels opt to donate the entire amount to the WPA. Who said altruism is dead? People and companies now call to become an Art Angel without being asked. There's never any pressure (well, I call some of them a lot – they're all good sports).

People want to do good. They do it without looking for rewards but the act of thanking people beyond what they might expect makes all of the difference.

Another component that underlies the success of this event is the PR that the Art Angels enjoy along with the many ways they are thanked and touched with consideration and gratitude. They all get a call from me – some get many calls before they agree to be Art Angels. These calls are not to nag them but to find out how we can make it happen for them in the easiest and most efficient way for THEM. We put them on all invites – there's only one level, making everyone equal. The \$2,000 limit allows easy entry for even small firms. They all get to have their logos on Hickok Cole's website and on a board the night of the party. They get a formal ask letter, even after they have said yes, and a confirmation letter from Hickok Cole and The Washington Project for the Arts. They pay ahead and can't be on the invite if they aren't paid in full. They get sent a large red envelop that they've come to identify with their Art Angel package, with a CD of all of the art that can be purchased, and their special Art Angel voucher card and another thank you. They get invited to the VIP party just before the doors open. They get a special Art Angel pin (which builds peer pressure), and they get priority in buying the art if they stand in line and can beat a regular guest as the formal sale of art never starts until 6 p.m.

Tension is a good thing. Most people agree that the party is one of Washington's best and draws 700 people every year. After the night is over, all Art Angels get HAND-written "thank you" notes from me and from the Washington Project for the Arts. Mike Hickok and Yolanda Cole send out a letter that they sign. That's three letters. Sometimes the artists send letters too. My letters go out to an even broader mix. I thank my clients for their huge contribution,

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firms in the past few years, the real concern is the long range experience gap within the industry that may exist as a result of so many professionals leaving the profession.

STRATEGIES: At SGA, we talk openly with our staff and our clients about these challenges. Information is power, and we believe that discussing the issues directly builds mutual trust. If the people that work with you understand your business better, they tend to be more willing to listen when you voice concerns and can help address the problems.

“As many firms struggle to maintain staff and cash flow, they are more willing to significantly cut their fees simply to get the work.”

Regarding commoditization, our firm’s strategy has been to hire the best people we can find to deliver superior services. Our people have the education, skills and character to uniquely partner with our clients to help them realize their goals – this is what makes us more than a commodity. Educating our clients and staff on what the architect’s responsibilities are and finding ways to highlight the value that we bring to the table are also essential.

Regarding increased competition, SGA is well positioned. Our business model has never been about offering the lowest fees, but instead working in collaboration with our clients and consultants to carefully define the scopes of work to deliver the value that our clients care about. Knowing the competition and putting a mirror to our face to understand how we are different allows us to solidify, and at times adapt, our approach.

Finally, regarding the economy, there are some things simply outside of your control. Fortunately, we have terrific clients and we have continued to pursue additional opportunities. I’m proud to say that SGA has been in a positive growth mode over the past few years. We have not taken every project that comes our way, but we have taken the right projects.

More staff has become licensed this year, and we continue to improve and expand our mentoring and professional development programs. At SGA we talk about our collective future – a lot. We are training our next generation of leaders to perpetuate our culture for years to come. ▀▀

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the caterer, the photographer, the WPA and so on. Then, later in the year, I send a hand-written note to everyone I called who didn’t become an Art Angel, thanking them for letting me pester them. (I can be a bit persistent.) That’s a lot of handwritten notes. Thank you notes are a powerful motivator – never underestimate them.

A year ago Cindy Allen, the editor of Interior Design magazine, called from the stage of her annual gala for people to help her raise money for chairs for an opera house in Italy. I was sitting in the nose bleeds of the Waldorf and texted her that I would pledge \$500. I was the first. Not a lot of cash, but she touched my heart strings. (She can do that.) She said on the stage, “I’ve already got a pledge” and the rest is history as more just came rolling in. What I never would have guessed in a million years is that she would thank my company in her editorial for her White Knight’s edition. I still get teary-eyed over that. People want to do good. They do it without looking for rewards but the act of thanking people beyond what they might expect makes all

WINNING, from page 4

TEAM-DRIVEN. Sullivan International Group, Inc. (San Diego, CA), a 150-person professional services firm offering science, environmental and technology services, is a team-driven organization, says Annie del Rio, market research assistant. In most cases, when setting out to create a project team, the following set of questions is asked at the time of proposal preparation and then revisited at the time of project award:

- What is our understanding of the project, including scope, potential costs and schedule?
- What specific information do we have regarding the client’s needs on this project that should influence our team selection, including desired team members?
- What particular skill sets or roles are required?
- What are our internal staff options to provide these skill sets and fill these roles?
- Do we need subcontractors or outside consultants to complete this project?
- Do we have a potential project manager who is familiar with the project scope, site, and/or client?
- Who is the ideal project manager for this project?
- Does this project require site visits? If so, where is the site located with respect to our offices?
- Do we have experience with particular subcontractors or specialist consultants for the scope or location of this project? ▀▀

of the difference.

As a competitive person, I set goals for myself. Neither the WPA or Hickok Cole pays me to make the calls that raise \$40,000- to-\$60,000 before the doors even open. They’ll all tell you that I don’t stop until the invites have to go to print. Someone in charge has to really love what they do. It can’t be work either. No one can pay me to raise money for a charity.

When the event brings in national sponsors and is such a financial success the PR part just flows (well, with a little help the night of the event, when we send out great images – all different – to local and national editorial contacts). Just pick projects that directly correlate to your company’s message and goals. Let people do it themselves and the rest will happen. Oh, and they may need a little capital – there’s this other old phrase that I tend to repeat fairly often: “You have to spend money to make money.” ▀▀

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