

EDITORIAL

Positioning your firm to serve market sectors

There is a lot of confusion about this, Mark Zweig says, offering six ways to develop an attack strategy.

One of the most critical attributes of firms that prove they can continuously reinvent themselves is their ability to make adjustments to their service offerings based on client interaction and feedback. My belief is the best way for A/E/P and environmental firms to do this is to reorganize themselves around market sectors.

There's a lot of confusion about just what is a market sector. To me, this refers to a group of clients (or potential clients) who have common wants and needs. Examples would be "higher education," or "health care" or "the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers."

Geographic markets are NOT market sectors. There is no "Fayetteville market" as far as I am concerned. It is a geographic area made up of clients



Mark Zweig

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from many different market sectors. Ditto for service types or disciplines— there is NO "environmental market," nor a "mechanical engineering market." "Environmental" is so broad it is not even a service type, besides the fact that every type of client one can imagine buys environmental services of some sort.

So, the key is focusing on market sectors, i.e., groups of clients with common wants and needs. Each market sector is potentially vastly different from each other. The people who work in these organizations, therefore, want something different from their design and environmental professional service providers. In order to effectively position your firm to serve these markets, you need to consider:

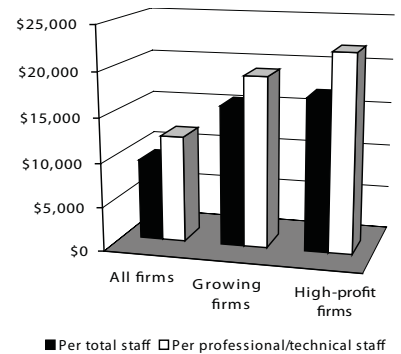
■ **Your organization structure.**

This is one of the single most critical elements to effective positioning of your firm to serve a market sector or sectors. Organize your firm around them. Don't set it up based on disciplines or departments, or cities or regions. Set it up around the sectors you serve (or want to serve). There are ways to still ensure you produce high quality discipline-wide. But don't forget that one of the major distinguishing factors among market sectors is DIFFERENT expectations about quality! So one standard,

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TRENDLINES

Firm growth



While the A/E industry still reels from the economic downturn, there is a segment that has continued to show high profits and firm growth in the past three years. According to the 2010-11 *Successful Firm Survey*, growing firms also show higher earnings than the overall sample. Growing firms report a median pre-tax, pre-bonus profit/loss per technical and professional staff of \$19,279. Meanwhile, the median for the overall firm sample is \$12,101, a drop from \$15,295 in 2009.—
Margot Suydam, Survey Manager

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GUEST SPEAKER

Business etiquette: the silent path to marketing and BD success

The way you speak and your ability to form relationships is as important as the work you produce.

When asked how etiquette pertains directly to this industry, the answer has to be chosen carefully. In this world of political correctness and a dire lack of human resource departments within smaller A/E firms, it becomes harder and harder for younger people to really know why they have been passed over for a higher level position, or why they weren't asked to go to networking events, or why they weren't successfully acquiring major projects when going to interviews.

Many people think that it's all about their work product. They think advancement in a firm has nothing to do with how they speak, or their ability to form positive team relationships, or their understanding of social norms and proper societal decorum. That is often a wrong assumption for many reasons.

AT THE INTERVIEW. A developer once said that if an applicant is overweight, then he automatically rejects that person's bid for employment. It's not just because he detests obesity; he



Marilynn Mendell

believes people have no self-discipline if they can't control their diet and exercise regimen. A prejudice? No, self-discipline and time management directly correlates to the workplace. Personal habits are easier to pinpoint quickly than what's written on a resume. People often have "tells" that show up in how they take care of themselves and/or navigate in social settings.

A *Fortune* 100 executive has said, "I look for dirty and chewed fingernails as signs of nervousness, and poor cleanliness." As he interviewed one upper management prospect, he said he never heard a thing the man said, as he decided not to make the hire simply on his appearance. He added, "If someone negotiated major deals, and chewed their nails, then they could lose the advantage. Another CEO has said, "If someone dresses perfectly and has unpolished shoes, then he might overlook details."

HOW ETIQUETTE WORKS IN SOCIAL SETTINGS. At receptions when one sees flip-flops instead of dress shoes, shirts that hang loosely, casual clothes outnumbering business attire, and hair that appears dull and unmanaged, anyone can quickly see who prepares for success.

Events provide a set of opportunities for clients or principals of firms to observe and judge. What may be all right for a personal evening at a country club event is rarely acceptable at a formal business occasion. If a lady wears a strapless long gown to a business black tie event, then she may be seen as unable to correctly gauge social decorum. Learn critical taboos. For business, visible undergarments are a huge red flag. Obvious statement? Amazing? Look around. No one says, "Oh, I see your underwear." It's politically incorrect to say that out loud, but such inappropriate behavior can be fatal if a client becomes offended.

Executives expect employees to learn business etiquette without mentoring. It's important to know that it's wrong

to butter a whole roll, to ingest copious amounts of alcohol, to set napkins on top of plates, or to talk during prayers and the color guard entrance.

LEARN TO IDENTIFY SOCIAL CLUES. Reading a room's discrete social norms is essential, as successful business development pros will say: People align with their respective communities. Social groups have many sub-categories and they can overlap just as zoning ordinances often do.

Heading for the top? Those women wear real gold jewelry, have regular facials, and get their hair oiled and cut on a regular basis. Men need to recognize details of peer groups too. Nordstrom men's shirts have distinctive buttons—a tiny detail that conveys a quiet immediate code. Understanding social norms and becoming attuned to societal tags and nuances distinguishes people. It's a tiebreaker. The fact is etiquette, dress, and the ability to shift easily from one social situation to another become differentiators. It is naïve to think that an e-mail is equal to a handwritten note on Crane's stationery.

Expensive is not the point. Filene's sells inexpensive silk dresses. Shirts go on sale. It's about understanding that at higher levels of the business world, it's silk over polyester, quality and well kept over cheap and sloppy, polite over rude, and correct grammar over slang.

Dumb and Dumber gets laughs or feelings of disgust because it over exaggerates missed clues in social behavior. Those same smirks occur in the workplace when such a faux pas occur. In business, a slip in social manners could mean the difference between a promotion and being overlooked.

Get educated by going online or buy a book on etiquette. Attempt to improve. Realize that successful executives do not dumb down. They expect the best, they want to see proper business etiquette adhered to and improved, and they want to feel comfortable in any situation with people who work and party with them. Etiquette is always about making someone else feel comfortable. ▲▲

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