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AEC Project Photography Survey

Posted on 03/04/11

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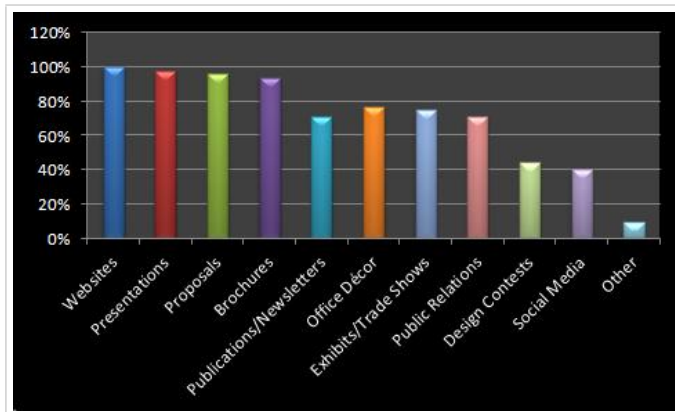
by Scott D. Butcher, CPSM

After my last post, [Spring is for Photography](#), I decided to conduct research into how architectural, engineering, and construction firms obtain and use project photography. A survey was created on SurveyGizmo [it is still open, please take it here if you haven't yet: <http://bit.ly/eGtZMI>]. Once the survey was posted, I Tweeted a link on March 2, 2011, then followed up with a post to the SMPS CPSM Listserve. Several people Re-Tweeted the link to their followers, and within the first 30 hours over 145 people had clicked through the link and 54 had completed the survey.

This data, which I'm classifying as preliminary because I'm hoping that more people take the survey in the coming days and weeks, is based upon the original 54 responses.

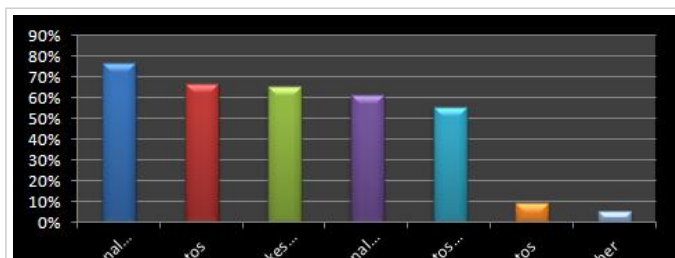
Here are the findings:

Q1 How does your firm use project photography?



The purpose of this question was to determine how AEC firms are using photography of their projects – buildings, bridges, roadways, landscapes, etc. A full 100% of respondents identified websites as one of their purposes for photography, edging out presentations (98%), proposals (96%), and brochures (94%). These results demonstrate just how importantly companies view their websites as part of the overall marketing mix. Office décor and exhibits/trade shows were the next most popular categories, followed closely by public relations and publications/newsletters, which all scored between 71% and 77%. Design contests and social media also garnered significant scores, 44% and 40% respectively, but not nearly as high as other categories. However, the social media score most likely indicates the growing importance of social networking sites and blogs as marketing tools.

Q2 How do you obtain photographs of projects?



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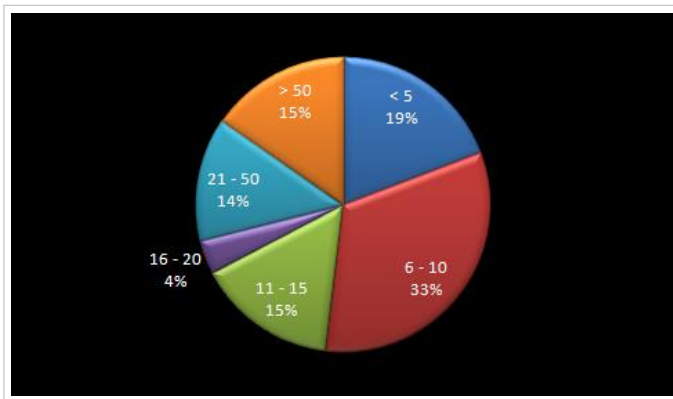
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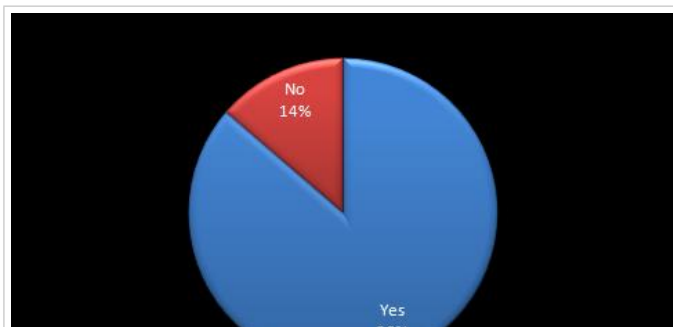
Now that we know the primary purposes for project photography, the next question was asked to establish how AEC firms obtained those photos. Good news for professional photographers – the highest category was “hire professional photographer directly,” which was selected by 77% of respondents. However, the next two most popular categories specifically relate to using internal staff for project photography: 67% of participants indicated that technical staff take project photos while 65% indicated that photos are taken by marketing staff. Overall, photography by internal staff (either technical or marketing) was selected by 79% of respondents, indicating that the use of company staff is equally as common as retaining professional photographers. Slightly over 61% of survey participants selected “share cost of professional photographer with other team members,” which is a great way for firms to afford professional photography. Many professional photographers will help their clients arrange for the design and construction team to share the expenses. Interestingly, approximately 55% of companies get project photos from other sources, like a team member who may have commissioned a professional themselves, and then shared the photos with other team members. Interns are also sometimes used to take project photos, though less than 10% of respondents selected this option.

Q3 How many projects are photographed in a typical year, either by internal staff or professional photographers?



The purpose of this question was to determine how often AEC companies need to obtain photographs of their projects. The most common answer selected by respondents was 6-10 projects per year, which was chosen by one-third of survey participants. Another 19% indicated that they photograph less than five projects in a given year. The 11-15 projects, 21-50 projects, and >50 projects categories were each selected by 14-15% of respondents. Interestingly, the volume of projects photographed in a given year does not correlate directly to the size of a firm. Two firms with over 500 employees indicated that they photograph less than 5 projects annually while one firm with 11-25 employees selected >50 as the number of projects they photograph in a year. Firms who photograph 6-10 projects per year represented every size category except 251-500 employees.

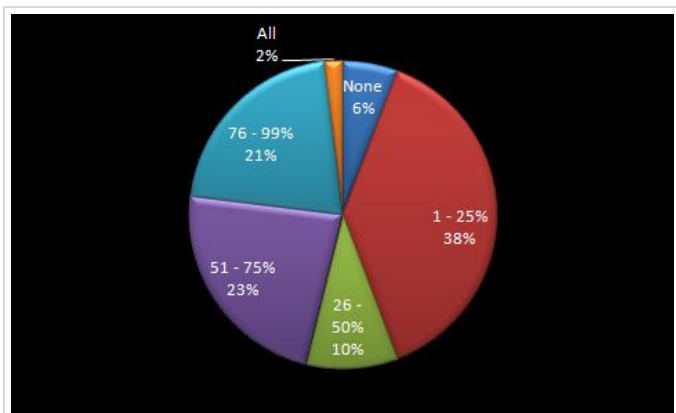
Q4 Are there projects that do not get photographed in a given year, even though you could use them for marketing your firm?





This simple yes-no question was asked to determine if AEC firms are able to satisfy their photography needs. Most are not, with 86% of respondents indicating that they have additional photography needs.

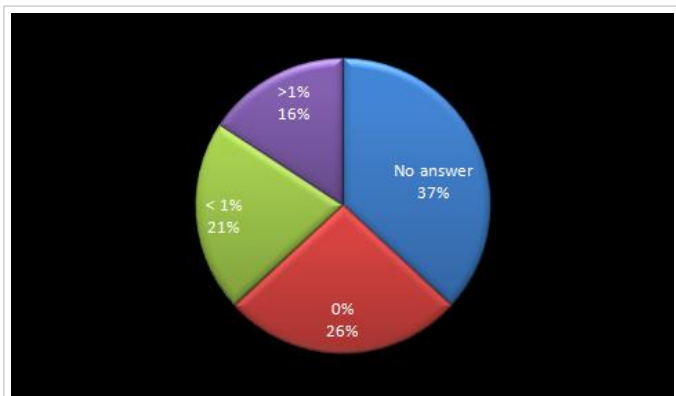
Q5 What percentage of photographs used in your sales and marketing efforts were taken by a professional photographer?



This question sheds further light on Q2, which asked how firms obtain project photographs. The most popular answer to this question was 1-25% of a firm's marketing photos were taken by a professional, with 38% of respondents selecting it. Six percent of participants do not use any professional photography while 2% only use professional photography. Of the type of firms commissioning professional photography, Architect/Engineers and Construction Managers use professionally-taken photos more often than the other categories. Architects use of professional photography varied widely, with 36% of architectural firm respondents selecting 1-25% while another 29% chose 76-99%.

Again, there is no direct correlation between the size of a firm and their use of professional photographers. While no firm with 25 employees or less indicated that they use professional photographers more than 75% of the time, over one-third of firms with more than 250 employees indicated that they use professionally-taken photographs in their marketing materials 1-25% of the time.

Q6 What percentage of your net revenue is spent annually for professional photography?



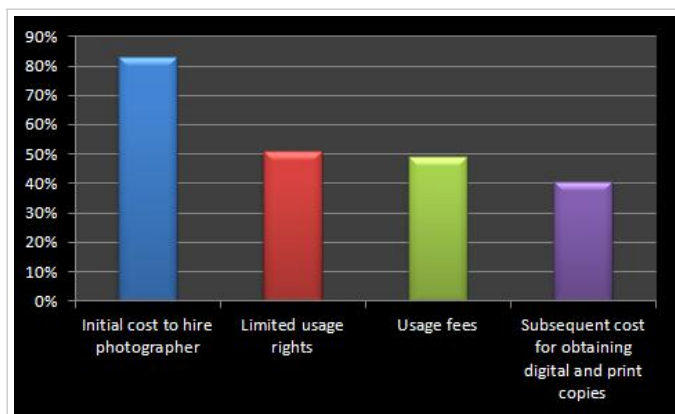
With 37% of respondents skipping this question, the data is less reliable than with most of the other questions. Participants may simply have not known the answer. Even when there were answers to the question, they weren't always reliable, either. One participant wrote 8000% while another wrote 10,000%. Most likely, these are dollar values meant for the question that followed. There were also answers of 5% (2x) and 15%, which are most likely incorrect. According to industry metrics from organizations like PSMJ, A/E firms spend between 1.1% and 1.7% on non-labor marketing and business development expenses, including such items as travel, entertainment, trade shows,

brochures, websites, design contests, public relations, etc. If photography expenses account for 10% of this total, this would equate to .011% to .017% of net revenue. A quarter of respondents indicated that they have no photography budget. Of these firms, 60% employ 25 people or less while 40% employ over 50 people. One firm with more than 500 employees indicated that their photography budget is zero.

Q7 (Optional) What is your annual budget for professional photography?

Like the previous question, a significant percentage of survey participants skipped this question. In fact, almost 60% did not respond. The most common response was \$0, which was selected by 15% of respondents. Of the 24 participants who did answer the question, one indicated that their annual company budget is \$100,000 while another wrote \$50,000 and a third indicated \$25,000. In total, 79% of participants who answered the question indicated annual photography budgets between \$0 and \$10,000.

Q8 What are your concerns with commissioning professional photography?



Why don't AEC firms hire professionals more often? This question was asked to get a feel for concerns that companies have with commissioning professional photography. The top concern by far was price, which was selected by 83% of survey participants. Even companies that use a significant percentage of professional photography in their marketing materials indicated that the initial cost of hiring a photographer is a major concern. Usage fees and limited usage rights were identified as a concern by half of the survey participants. Of less concern, though still significant, is the subsequent cost paid by AEC firms to obtain digital and print copies of the photos. Forty percent of participants selected this category.

These concerns – and others – were also expressed under Q11, additional comments or concerns. Relevant participant comments included:

"Finding a professional with both technical skills and creative skills."

"It's nice when photographers offer half day pricing."

"Some are very difficult to work with, want a lot of money and want all the control."

"The rate between photographers seems to vary greatly but the product is often the same."

"There are budgetary concerns but we do hire a professional for signature projects."

"We are a small consulting firm – it's hard for us to afford professional photography."

"As a small firm, our budget for photography is extremely limited. Had a huge budget when I worked for an arch firm; not so much in being a subconsultant/engineer."

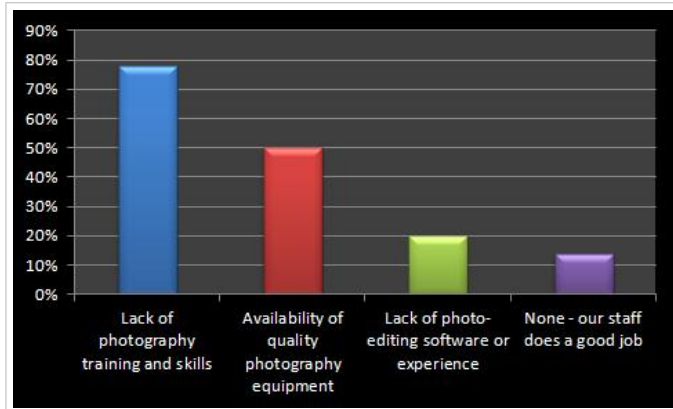
"Due to limited marketing budgets, professional photos are primarily used for higher-end marketing projects."

"We choose photographers based on criteria including creative eye/quality, compatibility in working together, flexibility in schedule, price. Emphasis on compatibility – for us, life is too short to work with the egocentric few, no matter how good they are."

"I worry when the picture stops being about the designer's art and starts being about the photographer's art."

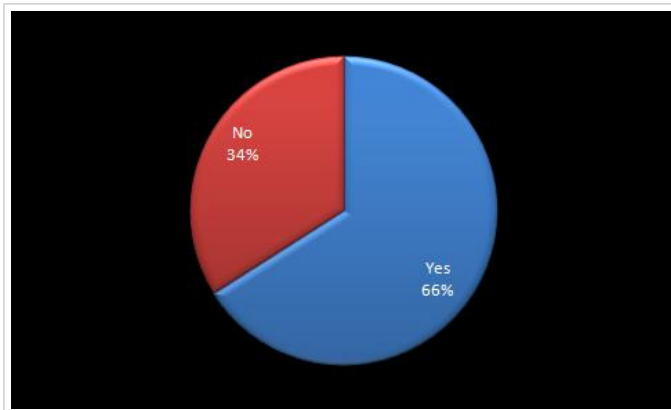
"Good photography is worth the effort, but in a tight economy it's difficult to justify the expense."

Q9 What are your concerns with having internal staff (marketing, technical) take project photos?



Just as concerns with using professional photographers were addressed in the previous question, this one addressed the issues related to having internal staff handle the photography duties. Lack of photography training and skills was by far the most common answer, selected by 78% of participants. One of two respondents selected the availability of quality photography equipment as a concern. A third concern, selected by only 20% of respondents, is the lack of photo-editing software or experience. Interestingly, 14% of survey participants have no concerns – they believe that their internal staff is already doing a good job.

Q10 Have you ever purchased stock photography?



Another simple yes-no question, but with a result that somewhat surprised me. Sixty-six percent of survey participants have purchased stock photography. Why would they do this? Two answers to Q11, additional comments and concerns, shed some light on this:

"Increasing client restrictions."

"We use mostly stock photography because our 'projects' aren't photographic."

The concern about client restrictions is valid; my company has designed a number of manufacturing and food & beverage facilities, and the clients are so concerned with revealing trade secrets that in some cases, not only are we prohibited from taking project photos, but we can't even list them as a client.

Q11 Do you have any additional comments or concerns related to project photography?

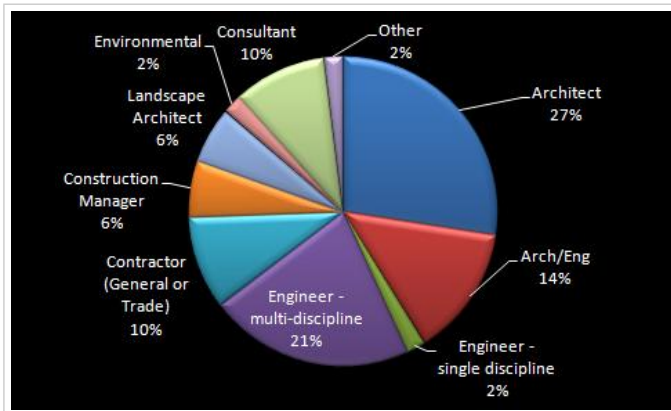
Most of the responses to this question were listed previously, but here are a few additional comments:

"Firm leadership does not value professional photography; resident likes to do it himself."

"ighting – we found an Arc photographer who understands lighting design."

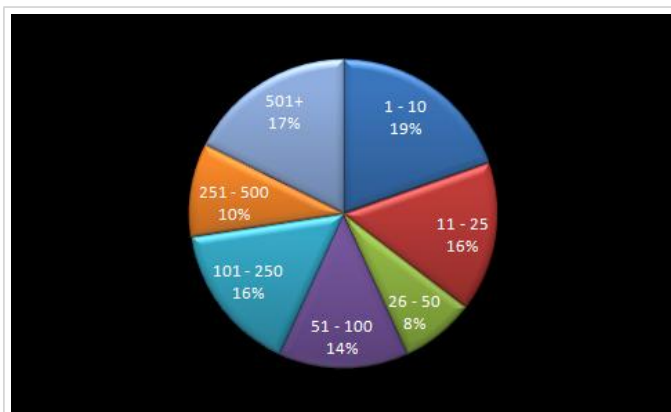
"Marketing staff will scout projects prior to hiring photographers. Major or significant design projects are shot by professionals. In-house is used for some minor or repair projects."

Q12 Which category best describes your firm?



As these results depict, a diversity of firms participated in the survey. Architects represented the largest category, accounting for 27% of participants. Engineering firms (multi- and single-discipline) accounted for another 23%, while architect/engineers provided 14% of the responses. Contractors and construction managers were also represented, though to a lesser extent (16% combined). Consultants to the AEC industry constituted 10% of the survey sample. Though not listed, the geodata provided by SurveyGizmo provided additional insight about the survey participants, who are located in 25 different states as well as the District of Columbia.

Q13 What is the size of your firm?



The final question of the survey asked respondents to indicate the size of the firm they work for. Again, the answers were diverse, with 19% of participants working for small firms with 1-10 employees and another 17% of respondents working for large firms with more than 500 employees. Everyone else fell somewhere in the middle, with each size category representing between 8% and 16% of the survey sample.

conclusions

Quality project photography is an extremely important component for marketing AEC services, and most companies use a mix of photographs taken by professionals as well as images shot by internal staff. Seventy-seven percent of firms represented have hired professional photographers while 79%

have used internal staff for their photography needs. Over 80% of participants are concerned with the initial cost of hiring a professional photographer. This indicates a need for professionals to either address their pricing structure, place a greater emphasis on selling the value of their services, or better help their clients share photography expenses with other firms involved in a given project.

The good news for professional photographers is that most firms represented in the survey seem to be cognizant of the difference between professionally-taken photographs and those shot through in-house staff, even if they only use professionals for the most important or signature projects.

Conversely, while almost 80% of companies represented in the survey use internal staff for project photography, a lack of training and photography skills is the single biggest concern of this approach. This shows a need for companies and professional societies to provide training programs that will increase the skills of marketing and technical staff members tasked with project photography.

The major changes in technology over the past two decades have resulted in increased needs for project photos. This has corresponded with an increase in client/owner sophistication. When I got into this business 20 years ago, firms were using project photos that were 5, 10, or even 20 years old. Now it is common to receive an RFP that requires five similar projects completed in the past three years or even ten similar projects completed during the last five years. The "shelf life" for project photographs is decreasing. And while AEC marketers were once able to get away with only featuring a select A-List of project examples, we now need to showcase a deep portfolio of experience for every type of project we chase. This has resulted in the need to photograph the vast majority of our projects. Websites, social media, and other electronic marketing efforts have also created a continual need for new, quality photos. In my opinion, this appetite for constantly obtaining new photos will not diminish anytime soon; rather, going forward it will probably be accompanied by an increasing need for videos of completed projects.

What do you think? Does this study mirror your experiences with project photography? Share your comments below, or e-mail me directly at sbutcher@jdbengineering.com. And if you haven't taken the survey yet, please take two minutes to do so: <http://bit.ly/eGtZMI>. Happy shooting!

One Comment



Greg Premru says:

Friday, March 4, 2011 at 3:03pm

Thanks for the survey. Very interesting, and as a professional architectural photographer, some what disheartening to see firms not finding the right photogapher.

There is excellent talent and overwhelming egos in the Arch Photog world. Finding good talent and someone you can work with can be a challenge. But keep searching.

More people will see/experience your building from the resulting images than the actual building itself. Your business and brand suffers from poor imagery.

The best value in obtaining professional photography is to share the cost among all parties involved with your project. Your photographer should be helping you with this. The second best value is your photographers contacts and marking savvy. We are the back door into getting published.

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