

Insight and intelligence for architecture, engineering, and environmental consulting firms

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The marketing plan is about us, isn't it?

How to control the two most unpredictable factors in your strategic marketing plan.

By ANDRA MILIACCA
Correspondent



Perkins+Will, Kristen Harp

The strategic marketing plan defines the means to an end—the policies that will accomplish the goals of the firm. The planning process is a way to get leaders to form a clear mindset about future direction.

Client psycho-graphics

Much of the plan involves a set of known factors, such as strengths and weaknesses, current situation, product and brand, and

financial allocations.

“What is my client thinking?” is the first most unpredictable factor a firm needs to tackle. Scott Butcher, vice president of **JDB Engineering, Inc.** (York, PA) and director of business development for two affiliate

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companies, says, “It all comes down to personal relationships... by being authentic and by being a resource to them,” you can better understand their motives.

The 75-person firm has clients in the manufacturing, food and beverage, higher education, and federal government markets. These clients face their own pressures, so

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EDITORIAL

Debrief and learn

Though lessons could help turn next proposal into a winner.



Debbie Frederiksen

A solid interview, the project team left feeling confident. But then you get a call from the client, “I’m sorry, but we’ve decided to award the project to another firm.” Ugh, your stomach drops.

These are business decisions, but at times they can feel as personal as getting dumped. So what do you do? Have a good cry; get some fresh air or a stiff drink. Maybe all of the above, but eventually you’re going to sit back and reflect. Why didn’t we get it? Was it something we said? Didn’t they like our team? I shouldn’t have worn the red tie.

Sometimes the answers are clear, but in many circumstances they aren’t, and if formal debriefs aren’t a part of your firm’s marketing process, you may never uncover issues that can help in future pursuits. Client debriefs are important, but I would encourage you to openly invite feedback from a broader group, including internal staff and subconsultants.

Client debriefs

There is an exorbitant amount of information regarding potential questions and formats for client debrief

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Plan

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one of the goals, according to Butcher, should be to “strive to make your client look good within his or her organization— this builds trust. Only when you establish trust will you be able to understand your client’s behavior.”

Victoria Dower, marketing manager at **Perkins+Will** (New York, NY), a 1,500-person architecture, interiors, branded environments, planning and strategies, and urban design firm, suggests that great client communication leads to a deeper understanding of “how their markets and organizations are shifting and how this changes their needs, their priorities, and their decision-making.”

The markets Perkins+Will must gain insight to include corporate, commercial, civic, cultural, aviation and transit, health care, higher education, K-12 education, sports and recreation, and science and technology.

Due to the diverse business challenges each sector faces, Dower says, “We work internally to do research and communicate with each other about the markets we practice in so that we can be an informed partner for each of our clients.”

Advertising platforms

The second most unpredictable factor in strategic marketing planning is how to allocate advertising to media and methods that may not yet exist. New technologies continue to rapidly change the game.

“Generally speaking, we make an effort to look at the message first and the medium second,” Dower says. “In preparing our overall communications planning, we tend to start by identifying our key messages and stories.”

In this way the firm takes control of their message upfront, and then “we’ll determine the channel or channels that make the most sense to communicate the various messages and allocate resources accordingly.”

Dower explains that “it’s less of an exercise in splitting resources between specific media platforms and more of an effort to give our primary messages greater resources so that we can stay flexible in our communications approach as media platforms evolve and shift.”

Perkins+Will makes the “commitment to learn all the new and merging media platforms” to “effectively use the ever-increasing variety of available formats, tools, and channels.”

For JDB Engineering, the approach differs based on their size and markets.

“Strategic planning should help narrow your focus to those markets or building/project types that your firm should be pursuing. If you have a razor-sharp focus, you can build your practice, staffing, and technology around it.”



Scott Butcher,
VP, JDB
Engineering,
Inc.

“We have minimal annual advertising budgets, preferring to be more direct in our marketing,” Butcher says. Along with targeted print and electronic direct mail, the firm has found that social media and blogging have significantly increased traffic to their web site. Butcher tags social media as one of the fast-changing, highly technological platforms that is “changing the way B2B (business-to-business) marketers brand their companies and connect with prospects, clients, and the media.”

Predicting the unpredictable

Is strategic marketing planning still relevant? “Absolutely,” both Butcher and Dower say. “You can’t get where you are going if you don’t have a map,” Butcher says. He advises that the plan must be “dynamic... part of your day-to-day business operation,” and not just an annual exercise that “collects dust in between strategic planning retreats.”

“The key is to create tactical action plans to implement the longer-range strategic goals,” Butcher says.

Shorter-range tactical plans provide the fluidity needed for changes in the business and technical landscapes by guiding actions from month-to-month that will accomplish the overall strategic plan. The trick is that by their nature these plans “require an ongoing evaluation of industry trends and the ever-changing marketplace.”

JDB engineering’s planning strategy, by necessity of size and markets, is not broad, but focused.

“Strategic planning should help narrow your focus to those markets or building/project types that your firm should be pursuing. If you have a razor-sharp focus, you can build your practice, staffing, and technology around it,” Butcher says.

The planning style for the larger, multi-markets firm is inherently inverse to the smaller firm— broader rather than laser-like.

“Our approach is to remain flexible by focusing on the broader strategy over the details of the execution,” Dower says. “The stronger and more defined the vision and goals of a strategic plan are, the easier it is for the execution of the plan to respond to shifts and changes in the marketplace.”

Strategic planners sometimes create predictions of future scenarios and plans of action for each one. But not all decision makers take this route.

“I think it’s more valuable to build a framework for future decision making than to try to envision all the different scenarios and the resulting action plans that could occur,” Dower says. “The broader strategic direction and the vision are critical to having an effective strategic plan that can also flex to the changing marketplace.” With a clear vision, Dower believes, decisions become easier and more consistent along the path to a firm’s goals. As for the strategic marketing plan, “I think their value lies more in the effort of determining the strategy than the plan itself,” Dower says. ■■

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