

The Power of Marketing

Keys to Building a Successful Practice

Craig Park, FSMPS

One of the primary and ongoing strategic needs for the architectural design practice is to market its services. After all, you cannot design it (and they can't build it) unless you sell it.

Finding and leveraging resources that can improve marketing and business development acumen is often the key differentiator between the good and the great.

Because there is often confusion, or a least misunderstanding, when it comes to the term "marketing," let us begin with some common vocabulary. Richard Nelson, vice president of building industry application service provider (ASP), Cosential (www.cosential.com), defined the differences very well, saying, "Marketing builds the image of the company and its brand identity, in order to *pull* clients into the firm's sphere of influence. Business development builds channels through which the company *pulls* in new business opportunities, such as strategic alliances and partnerships. Selling is all about *pushing* business into the company by pursuing specific clients and opportunities."

Notwithstanding the natural inclination for architects to avoid the "S" word, marketing, business development, and sales are all

necessary to convey and secure the opportunities to demonstrate the services a design practice can provide. The key elements of marketing excellence are easy to identify. Mastering them is the ongoing challenge. To succeed, professional service providers, whether in the design/bid/build or design/build arena, must learn to articulate those strengths that set them apart from their competition.

The Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS; www.smeps.org) is one group specifically developed to assist the building industry professional with education and networking opportunities. Celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2003, SMPS is a nation-wide gathering place for more than 5,500 practitioners responsible for marketing or business development for their companies.

When it began back in 1973, "Bird Doggers Anonymous" (as it was affectionately known) was a small collection of architectural and engineering professionals in San Francisco, Houston and Boston, who would meet surreptitiously at local restaurants (because their principals and partners forbade their speaking openly with each other) to compare notes on client trends and buying habits. In 1982, SMPS was formally incorporated as a not-for-profit, chapter-based association of like-

minded professionals. It has continued to grow and expand since.

Out of this collection of "deviants" (to use Watts Wacker's terminology^{1[1]} for positive transformation of the status quo), sprang a new approach to developing and implementing marketing and business development strategies. Imagine the surprise for those early "marketers" if they were to look at the sophisticated networking, business-to-business web options, and database management tools that exist today. In reality, they would probably just comment, "it's all about relationships—everything else is just 'frosting'."

Today, SMPS serves its members based on a vision "to become the premier source for marketing and management education, information and resources for the built and natural environments." Their mission parallels that vision with goals to enhance the abilities of the Society's members to 1) advance in their careers; 2) to secure profitable work for their firms; and, 3) to create positive client relationships. With more than 50 chapters throughout the U.S., SMPS provides local, regional, and national programs and resources designed to improve the value and perception of its members and the Society overall. To achieve their vision and in support of their mission, SMPS leadership at both the

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national and chapter level, continues to develop new and innovative learning programs. They are also building affiliate “relationships” with other design and engineering associations, including the AIA, IIDA, and ACEC, by providing marketing-oriented educational programs, publications and other resources for their members.

Back in 1985, as a young professional myself, beginning a new role managing one of my firm’s branch offices in Los Angeles, I found SMPS to be a great resource for learning and shared interests. While attending a California AIA-sponsored program on securing federal government contracts (those infamous SF254/255 forms), I spoke with the moderator, Lloyd Backen, FSMPS (then a principal with a large regional AE firm; now a marketing consultant in Sacramento). His recommendation for learning more about marketing my firm’s services: “Join SMPS. You’ll learn everything you need there.”

I took his words to heart, and those relationships—built around the common goals of communicating the value of each of our services to meet each client’s needs, and understanding the power of the “team”—have continued to this day to help me secure new work for my practice. I always have believed that you get more by participating than observing, and so I got involved in SMPS leadership. First at a chapter level, then later at the national level, I found that not only did I learn new marketing and business development skills, but also I was able to learn and apply leadership skills that directly related to the increasing responsibilities I had within my practice.

SMPS builds their service offerings for architects based on six “Domains of Practice” designed to

provide mastery of professional service marketing. These areas of knowledge include:

- **Market Research**
- **Market Planning**
- **Statements of Qualifications & Proposal Preparation**
- **Business Development & Client Service**
- **Public Relations & Communication**
- **Information Management & Organization**

The local chapters typically offer these programs monthly. So much has the interest in business development skill building increased (probably as a direct result of the ever-cyclical economic downturn) that SMPS has created a unique special interest group, known as the Business Development Institute (BDI), designed to provide educational programs focusing on improving client relationships and increasing sales opportunities.

Carla Thompson, FSMPS, Marketing Director for Seattle-based MulvannyG2 Architecture (www.mulvaneyg2.com) is an active participant in SMPS for a variety of reasons: networking, continuing education, and more recently, for project opportunities and client connections. She noted, “Clients come in all shapes and sizes nowadays. It was not so long ago that architectural firms were at the top of the feeding chain at SMPS events and it was like being surrounded by a bunch of hungry sharks.” Marketers from engineering firms and contractors wanted to get close to you so you’d put them on your project team.”

With the slowdown in the economic climate and its impact on the building industry nationwide, today engineering firms are often in the prime position and general contractors are the lead in design/build projects, so architectural firms are now looking to team with *them*. Thompson continued, “Marketing in the 2000s is much more of a team sport and today’s competitor could be tomorrow’s joint venture partner. Architectural firms who are not participating in SMPS are missing a client-rich networking opportunity.”

Each year, SMPS stages a national conference (in 2003: August 13-16 at the JW Marriott Desert Ridge in Phoenix, AZ) that combines teaching and interactive learning from some of the premier thought leaders on marketing with practical applications for business development. In recent years, to further the value to the program’s attendees, SMPS has co-produced the conference with the Professional Services Management Association (PSMA; www.psmamet.org) to offer leadership development, organizational development and technology tracks that provide increased opportunities to find new ideas and new resources for building the successful design practice.

Past conferences have featured out-of-the-box thinkers like Tom Peters, Ken Blanchard, and Harvey MacKay, along with concurrent learning sessions on all aspects of marketing, business development and personal and professional development. All SMPS programs, at both the chapter, regional and national level, qualify for AIA-approved learning credits.

Peter Keinle, FSMPS, Vice President of Business Development for Columbus, OH-based architects, Moody Nolan

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(www.moodynolan.com), added, “By far, the best value of being in SMPS is the nationwide network of 5,500 A/E/C marketers.” Moody Nolan has worked in more than 35 states. They continue to grow by pursuing “the right project” anywhere in the US that matches their specific areas of expertise.

Keinle added, “Our biggest area of specialization is collegiate and community recreation centers. If I hear of a project, I ask myself ‘do I know an SMPS member there?’ If not I go to the SMPS directory. When you call an SMPS member you are calling someone who markets fulltime or has marketing responsibilities, a professional who will answer your call because he or she is interested in finding work, whether it is on his/her own or with another firm. Teaming

today is more the norm than ever before.”

What Keinle finds refreshing is that SMPS members will openly discuss project opportunities and see if there is a fit between the firms. If the local firm is not interested in collaborating, they will usually provide other information as needed such as the local competition, consultants or another local SMPS member that can help. He finds this information is invaluable.

Keinle concluded, “I often say that if I find out about a new lead in the morning, I will know enough about the project by the end of the day to make go/no go and teaming decisions, largely from information given by SMPS members I have contacted.”

At the end of the day, finding new clients, developing mutually satisfying (and profitable) relationships based on providing excellent service, creating the teams to provide those services, relating those successes to other potential customers, and as a result building “the brand” for your firm is all about “marketing.” The Society for Marketing Professional Services is the best place to learn and apply those skills and to develop a personal professional network that will help your firm succeed.

For more information about SMPS, visit their website at www.smeps.org, or call 800-292-SMPS.

Craig Park, FSMPS has been active in the audiovisual industry for 30 years, and has held positions in design, project management, marketing and operations. He holds a BS Architecture from Cal Poly SLO. Craig is an Associate member of the [American Institute of Architects](#) and is a Fellow of the [Society for Marketing Professional Services](#), and currently serves as their national president. He is a regular contributing consultant to [System Contractor News](#). Craig can be reached craig@craigpark.com. His personal website, www.craigpark.com, provides a portal to information and resources for multimedia design, business practice, and marketing.

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