

CLIENTS TALK ABOUT BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT Are We listening?

The messages are unanimous, clear, and should be second nature to most design firms by now. If they are, then why are clients still talking about them today, and why have the issues they raise remained the same for decades? Are we really listening to our clients? Consider this outpouring of concerns from a group of clients from different sectors and project types on their views of how design firms should and should not conduct front-end business with them.

Vice Director of Planning & Architecture: Art Museum

Their facility went through a design competition 15 years ago, which included two smaller firms. They didn't win, but have stayed in touch all those years and have won the trust of the client.

"They offered us advice when we needed it, they maintained contact with us, and we have recommended them to others for many other projects."

"We're looking for a fit - the firm's expertise and the project - and it has to be targeted. We only want to see examples of the type of project and specialists involved, and an understanding of our institution. The job might be the first installment of a long phased project, so show us examples that address how you've handled such phasing."

Director of Engineering Services, Office of Facilities Management, Health Care Facility.

After banning all PowerPoint presentations to their committees, they received panic calls asking what to talk about. Their response:

"We know the principal won't be showing up on the job, so bring in a sample project, your PM, and the people who will show up for work each day to address our issues. We want to know how you think, so talk about the process. I look at resumes for specific health care experience, because I want the "A" team.

Director, Department of Space Planning and Capital Budget University facility.

Every funded project is advertised in city and state publications. They do not keep a backlog of information on firms, but if they need specific expertise, they expect that firms answer that aspect.

"It's important that they know the exact type of information that the specific group reviewing the submissions is looking for."

"It's important to point out how you lay out a series of options that helps the client make informed decisions. What cost reductions you have made that saved value, when funds were limited, but the client's expectations were high"

President, Development Company

He runs a family business in an urban setting, and has advice on how not to sell to his company. When he receives a call from an unknown marketer that begins, "John, let me help you. I can save you money. Can we go out to lunch?"

He maintains that assuming familiarity does breed contempt, and contends that people who promise help, need help themselves.

"Instead, I need your guidance, your coaching, to work with me, but find a way to say it without sounding arrogant."

Another turn-off to him is the use of names of people of influence that creates an obligation on the client to listen. He maintains, "Know to whom you're selling. With the web today there is no excuse for ignorance."

Deputy Director, Department of Design & Construction

As a large city agency with many project types and infrastructure, they have in-house capabilities to produce half the work and look to consultants for the balance. Since many of the projects are small to medium size facilities, small firms are encouraged to seek their work. The advice on what to submit:

"Go to our web site to see the kind of work we do, so you can be responsive. You have to know who is reviewing your material and what they are specifically looking for.

Don't submit proposals when you don't have the expertise, and be sure to address what the specific role was on the project. (The new SF330 comes down hard on this issue). We'll find out real quick if you've exaggerating or not, once you're on board."

Files should be updated often, not with voluminous brochures, but with periodic short messages.

"We have 20 year-old brochures on some firms, but updates need to be brief. We don't have time to go through volumes."

Finally, be careful about the image you project with your material and that it really represents your firm.

Project Manager, Real Estate Services firm

They interface with the market in soliciting RFQ's for everything from leasing to CM services and advising owners. How do you get on their list? It isn't easy. Much of the private sector operates by word of mouth, previous clients, and repeat business. The advice:

"One sheet summaries are a good way to communicate, as long as there's a clear and concise description of services. We like to know in which ways you can contribute to the project, without going off on a tangent. The owner's staff have identified particular items of interest - stick to those."

"Client relationships are the most important on the private side, but persistence overcomes resistance. Maybe it's not this particular job, because a previous relationship at the top got in the way, but the exposure may lead you to the next opportunity."

Final words of advice

Real estate client: "Know your client, know the project. Know who they are and what approach they like."

Health care client: "One consultant invited us to their continuing education program. They kept their name in front of us, and it's a wonderful way to meet people."

Health care client: "Remember, you're only as good as your last satisfied client."

Design & Construction client: "If I'm on a committee and I'm being pursued there by a consultant, I find it distasteful. It turns me off. If it's a networking event, that's different."

Real estate client: "I once accepted a dinner invitation with a consultant, and in the course of dinner mentioned that my wife was expecting. Later, a case of champagne arrived. I found it distasteful (not the champagne), that my home and address were violated."

Developer client: E-mail is a tremendous liberator and gives instant access, but it should not be abused. I can teach you how to automatically send them to the trash. I prefer to receive information in the mail."

CLIENTS COMMENTS:

Q. On De-briefing

"We only select two firms per RFP, so we turn a lot of firms away. Some are sore losers, and are very difficult to deal with. We meet some of them socially and wonder how you could have worked with them. Keep the doors open, even if you lose."

"One firm came in for a debriefing after coming in second five times. We listened to them talk for an hour, and they didn't learn anything from us about why they lost."

"We got an irate phone call from a firm that submitted for six RFP's and didn't get one. As if the more times you submit, the more chances you have to get one. They never came in for a debriefing on any of them. They would have been better off teaming, but they didn't want to go that route. They need to look at their competition, and figure out how they could be most competitive so they could get the next job."

Q. When is it best to get back in touch?

"ASAP is best, since it is fresh in our minds, and we still have our notes. Some people don't even ask."

"We have to wait until the contract is approved before we can talk to the others, but you can send in your request anytime for a debriefing in the future."

"It's difficult for us to do when we only have the committee's notes and scores, and weren't there at the interview."

Final word of advice:

"In your marketing material, how does what you do relate to the project at hand and the client. Some keep it a well hidden secret. Know your client. I was astonished at how many firms respond without knowing anything at all about the project."