

# Best Practices Working With Varied Firm Sizes in A/E/C Marketing

By Gabe Lett, FSMPS, CPSM



Over my 17-year career in the A/E/C industries, I've worked as a marketer for small, medium, and large firms. While the dynamics of each firm were unique, the similarities and differences in each span the A/E/C marketing profession.

I cut my teeth marketing for a small, 30-person engineering company later acquired by a large 1,200-person national engineering firm. Overnight, my perspective had to change from a small- to a large-firm mentality. After several years, I transitioned to a midsize, 130-person firm. Like *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, I felt like I found a home with a firm that was just right for me.

These experiences have given me valuable insights on marketing best practices. I've observed planning, strategy, proposal writing, promotions, and all things marketing at companies of every size. I've learned the following best practices remain consistent, no matter the size of the organization.

## Superior Communication Skills

Effective communication skills are priority No. 1. This is true no matter where you fit into your organization and no matter the size of your company. Natalie Pagano, CPSM, director of marketing and communication at Manhattan Construction Group in Tulsa, OK, shares, "The method of communication and implementation might vary, depending on firm size. Larger companies need more structured processes/workflow for consistency across geographic regions. Messaging needs to consistently cascade throughout all levels of the organization."

Marketers should not only demonstrate superior communication skills, but also teach these skills to colleagues. This is the foundation for the rest of the best practices to flow.

## Marketing Leadership

Marketing leadership is critical for all high-performing and profitable firms. Strategic and well-planned marketing goes together with sound financial performance, fee structures and billing, ownership, operations, and workforce management. If you remove good leadership from any of these business elements, you greatly limit that firm's ability to perform consistently and profitably.

Great marketing leadership is demonstrated by what's practiced, not always what's titled or recognized in the C-suite. Whether or not marketing leadership sits with firm ownership or at the executive table, good leadership needs to be recognized, resourced, and prioritized. The key to developing into a successful marketing leader is to learn and understand every part of the business, so you can impact the long-term vision.

## Marketing Strategy

Strategy naturally flows from excellent leadership. Great marketing leadership drives strategy that's focused on helping the organization reach its goals and ultimately its vision. No matter the firm size, when your strategy drives your marketing decisions, you stand to create more profit opportunities and less staff burnout and turnover.

What's beneficial in great technical project management is also true in marketing management. There must be forethought, strategy, and planning if you want to maximize efficiency.

Marketing strategy is about finding the right target audience—clients and projects—and conveying the right solutions to their pain points through marketing collateral or resources. It's vital to understand the intersection of these two concepts when deciding when and where to spend your resources. And remember, a sound and successful marketing strategy always supports a detailed business development strategy.

## Resource Allocation

Once you've created a solid marketing strategy, you need to figure out how to execute your plan. Jen Newman, FSMPS, CPSM, reminded me that resource allocation may look different depending on the size of the firm, but the importance of making good decisions is critical. Newman, a principal with Elevate Marketing Advisors, instructs, "The highest and best use of the staff you have may mean using outside resources like consultants for marketing support like proposals, social media, or thought leadership. Larger firms may have more budget to hire these experts."

The best practice for all firms is to think critically and strategically about resource allocation. How can you get the most bang for your buck on labor costs and/or consulting fees?

## Metrics and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

There's one very significant lesson I've learned in my career. Technical professionals tend to be numbers people. Good marketers, therefore, must speak the language of numbers. That means your magical, persuasive powers that work on most people won't necessarily work on technically minded, logical thinkers. So, measure what you do.

Everything is measurable in some way, whether by ROI (return on investment) or ROO (return on objective). Every firm should track at a minimum KPIs for proposal hit rates (number and volume), social media and website analytics, repeat and new client revenue, sales pipeline, market sector and client measurable goals, business development activities, conference participation and results, and networking objectives, just to name a few. Additionally, every marketing campaign should have its own set of objectives and KPIs.

## Go/No-Go System

According to the 42nd Annual *Deltek Clarity A&E Industry Study*, about 51% of firms have a formal go/no-go strategy for all opportunities. The necessity for a strong go/no-go process is more important than ever. Those that have

successfully implemented go/no-go decisions understand their power and persuasive abilities. Good marketing at all A/E/C firms must include a consistent decision matrix regarding project pursuits. The one-office, small firm may use a few pointed questions. A large, multi-office firm may use a more complex scoring system.

The results of a strong go/no-go process are an increase in hit rate and decrease in wasted resources—after all, we haven't figured out how to make more time in the day or how to clone yet (if you have, let's talk).

When we divert resources from a must-win pursuit to submit a might-win pursuit, we've significantly reduced our chances for success. My current firm has seen a win rate of 94% with a 75 or higher (out of 100) go/no-go score, and a win rate of 0% for a 65 or less go/no-go score. And yet, I still fight the battle of spending precious marketing hours on go/no-go scores below 65. Keep fighting, my friends.

Communication, leadership, strategy, resources, metrics, and go/no-go are all essential gears in the A/E/C marketing engine. How these gears are sized may vary, but they all must be in place for your firm's long-term sustainable success. ■



GABE LETT, FSMPS, CPSM, is senior marketing specialist with Allgeier, Martin, and Associates, Inc., in Joplin, MO. Lett is past president of SMPS Ozarks. Contact him at 417.680.7200 or [gabe.lett@amce.com](mailto:gabe.lett@amce.com).

Resultant, Indianapolis, IN. DELV Design. ©Susan Fleck Photography, fleckphoto.com.

