

From Good (Coordinator) to Great (Director)

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Thanks for inviting me to talk with you today. For those who don't know our firm, we are an executive search consulting organization focused exclusively on the design community (A/E/I/P) and we work all over the country ... in fact, a little internationally as well. At any one time we have about 20 executive-level positions that we are trying to fill for firms in various locations. I tell you this to give you some context for a troubling statement that I'm about to make:

The most difficult searches we have had in the history of our firm have been Senior Level Marketing Directors. In fact, two such searches in the past two years have taken us over one year to fill. This is not good news to my firm, to my clients, but especially to the community of professionals involved in marketing within the world of the built environment. Why should Executive Level Marketing Directors be so difficult to locate and convince to make a positive change?

Last year at this workshop, I addressed this point, drawing largely from an article I have written for the newsletter *Design Intelligence*. I'm not going to repeat my remarks from last year, but the article is available on our website, www.breuerconsulting.com. In general, I would say that there are two main reasons why it is hard to recruit qualified senior marketing staff:

1. There aren't very many

- Burn out
- Unclear expectations of principals
- Compensation

2. Those who are successful are very committed to their firms

- Principals understand marketing
- Valued and make a contribution to the firm's future

As some of the people in this room know, because I have talked about this problem with them, I have been on a mission to identify rising stars in design firm marketing to help address what I believe is a chronic shortage of talented marketing professionals, nationally.

So I was happy when Daniel contacted me: it gave me the chance to talk about this problem with people at the start of their careers about what you might expect, how you can manage your own career development, and how you can position yourself to be a great contributor in this context of what I'd call confusion and scarcity.

I'd like to think of these remarks in the same way as Jim Collins, the author of the book *Good to Great*. He acknowledges that there are plenty of good organizations, but few great ones. He talks about leadership on a personal level (moving from "highly capable individual" to "level 5 executive") and the corresponding excellence that such leadership achieves in organizational performance. If you haven't already, read this book: you can learn a lot about how personal behavior in leaders makes an enterprise great.

Our interest here is in how to make a good marketing coordinator into a great marketing director. So I want to talk about your career. Let's explore three things:

- what the market for your services (AEC firms) wants
- what design firm owners want in their marketing directors
- the current trends in the world in which Marketing Directors operate

While it's a much larger topic than we have time for today, I'd like to at least touch on how you can build your career to respond to these influences. I believe that there

is a HUGE opportunity in the AEC community for very serious marketing professionals.

What the AEC “market” wants

What are the skills most needed to become a successful Marketing Director?

- **Comprehensive understanding of and experience** with the four aspects of the marketing function:
 1. Business Development
 2. Research and planning
 3. Information management
 4. Marketing Communications
- **Facilitation skills (herding cats):** Being able to run a great meeting is a powerful thing. Summarizing is a magical tool to bring people to a decision. By listening carefully and representing all that has been said in a concise summary, you'll get people to take action.
- **Exquisite time management capability.** Marketing Directors live in a deadline-driven world where you don't have control over your own time. This means that you have to always be conscious of your priorities and recognize when something will deter you from your goal.
- **Ability to procure and organize information quickly.** There are many ways to collect and present information. Successful marketing directors know what networking can do for them is way beyond trying to find a lead. They rely on their network to provide information at a moment's notice. They build libraries of secondary research that allow them to make observations from the work of others. They understand that less information can be more and that speaking in the language of the audience is more important than being eloquent. Finally, they know that their colleagues will simply do a better job with more information.

What are the skills most valued by principals?

While they may not state it this way, most principals in the AEC world want:

- “A people person”
- Ultra-connectedness (“he knows everyone”)
- The marketing equivalent of a CD machine
- A general go-to person

Why are the skills that I think are necessary to be a great

Marketing Director somewhat different from the skills most valued by principals? Let's just say that AEC firm principals are not always attuned to what marketing is and what it can do for their firm. My favorite aphorism on this subject:

Marketing is the price you have to pay for not being famous.

Many professionals really believe this, missing the point that being famous is often the result of good marketing ... even if marketing takes the form of having a personality of IMPei or Philip Johnson who do it naturally. They feel that marketing is like medicine rather than a powerful tool to position the firm, understand clients better, and in the end, do better work. Some think that if they hire people who like to do the things they don't (like attending events, meeting with the press, etc.) then they've got their bases covered and the whole thing doesn't taste so bad.

In general – and there are some stunning exceptions – I don't think you can look to Principals in the AEC community to suggest what you need to do to be more successful. It's just not their thing.

What do you need in addition to technical skills to be a strong Marketing Director?

I'm going to talk now about some behavioral traits that I have observed that could make a good marketing coordinator a great Marketing Director. These are not technical skills that you can acquire: they are softer and fuzzier traits that, from my perspective, Marketing Coordinators could do well to at least think about, if not adopt, if they want to stay in the industry and become one of the great ones.

- **Gravitas and personal presence:** I cannot stress this enough. Clients want to deal with individuals who they sense are highly competent peers. Principals want to be represented by people who are like them. Procuring work for a firm is serious business. You must personally be someone who people feel they can learn from or at the very least someone with whom they can engage in a meaningful dialog.
- **Ability to work with a range of personality types:** few firms rely solely on their Marketing Director to sell work. Clients look to the principals for that task. You'll need to understand how to motivate each of the principals in your firm to do what they need to do to be compelling and persuasive with their clients. I think

of this as having a PhD in Psychology coupled with multiple personality disorder.

- **Intelligence:** It is your job to read the publications that your principals probably don't read. Being an architect or engineer is very absorbing. Few technical professionals read business publications or smart general information periodicals like Atlantic, New Yorker, or Slate.com. Marketing directors are people whose job it is to be informed about trends, attitudes, and influences.
- **Resilience, optimism and thick skin:** In a roller coaster profession – just like advertising agencies – where winning accounts is everything and losing can be devastating, you'll be confronted with some heavy situations. I'm sure that you've already experienced the need for these qualities. It doesn't ever go away.
- Knowledge that silence is powerful. In a field of people that are known for the gift of gab (marketing and sales people), isn't it refreshing to encounter an individual who doesn't feel compelled to state an opinion or even keep the conversation going when there is a lull. Just absorbing and thinking deepens the level of exchange, inviting reflection and observation.

So those are some ideas for behavioral contributions you can make.

Trends in the world of AEC Marketing

The possibly changing role of senior marketing professionals

Thankfully, some in the AEC world have figured out that good, tough, strategic thinking coupled with tireless implementation can be the engine that drives the firm. If that is the case, they reason, shouldn't this person be in the ownership group of the firm so they truly understand our objectives? I'm happy to say that some firms do understand this concept and right here in SF there are several examples of Marketing Directors who are principals in their firms: Jennifer Altenhoff @ A+A and Howard Weiss @ MBT are two that come to mind. This is by no means typical, but it is a growing trend.

Market sector specialists

If you think about it, being equally facile and knowledgeable about all of the market sectors in a firm of over 50 people (where there will be at least 3 sectors) is a big task ... probably impossible. As clients request

specialist designers, many design firms are asking their Marketing staff to become specialists as well. This is particularly true in very active market sectors like healthcare, science and technology, and higher education, where some firms segment their marketing staffs like their technical staffs.

Principal-led marketing programs

It is no secret that many clients are getting tired of being approached by business development professionals who are not the people who will be doing their work. Some firms have decided to forego having a Marketing Director who does BD and put the burden of marketing the firm on the shoulders of the firms' principals ... supported by marketing coordinators. Marketing directors in some of these very successful firms have become like movie directors ... assigning roles and orchestrating the event. This is not a bad thing: few clients want to see a non-professional without the in-depth content and insight that only a technical professional can bring to the table.

Push marketing

Clients respond best to solutions: information about their issues and how to reach conclusions about them. They don't respond and may have a highly negative reaction to being sold to. Successful Marketing programs provide information that clients need. The result is that clients will want what you have. Simplistically put, they'll call you. It's all about the delivery of information to the right people at the right time.

Building your career

The decisions you make in building your career will influence your personal brand once you reach the age of 40 or so and consider yourself to be at your prime. What will you be qualified to do? What will potential employers think you can do based on your track record?

Here are the kinds of questions you should be asking yourself now to build a personal portfolio of skills and attributes that can be useful to the firms you choose to work for.

The umbrella question is "do you want to stay in this profession? If so, what kind of firm and position are you working toward?"

- Should you specialize in an aspect of marketing (e.g. communications, business development, systems, or research/planning) or market sector (e.g. higher

education, healthcare, science and technology, etc.)?

- You will have opportunities to leave the AEC professions. Should you? Why would you stay? Can you re-enter the AEC community?
- What goals are reasonable as a Marketing Director? Is principalship an option for marketing people? Is that where you're headed?
- How will the employer choices you make influence your career?:
 - Firm size
 - Perceived quality of work
 - Discipline (e.g. civil engineering; landscape architecture; interior design)
 - Length of tenure in your positions

Summary

I hope I've given you some things to think about as you evolve your career in the AEC world. There is a lot of room for exceptional people in marketing AEC services. Sometimes I think that many people could be exceptional in Marketing, but that there are so few role models that people tend to stay with the pack: competent and qualified but not exceptional. This problem could be

called self-referential. That is, you look to your peers for best practices and advice. This is not a bad thing and it is probably a necessary first step: SMPS has provided a great forum for you to do that. But self-referential groups tend to be kind of stuck. Without information about what others are doing who are not in our industry or even what others are doing to be good at their jobs, I fear that there is a kind of self-perpetuating dynamic that is easy to fall into

I would just caution you to read all you can, consciously broaden your circle of acquaintances to include people from all industries, examine marketing professionals in other environments, immerse yourself in your clients' issues (you will find that you have uncanny access to all kinds of information that other people don't!), and above all, ask lots of questions.

But most of all, please stay where you are. The community of professionals serving the built environment is rich in creativity, intellect, and challenge. The role of senior marketing professionals will continue to evolve. The design community needs you ... stick with it and develop a position for yourself in a decade or so where you can be counted among the great.