

Expanding Your Services

Lessons learned from working to grow market share with an existing client base.



BY ANNE SCARLETT

WHAT DO BUILDING INFORMATION MODELING (BIM), Leadership in Environmental and Energy Design (LEED), Integrated Project Delivery (IPD), and Private and Public Partnerships (PPP) have in common?

At first glance, perhaps not a lot. But all of them are—in varying degrees—considered relatively new in the architecture/engineering/construction industry. As structural engineering professionals, you may not directly connect with all of those abovementioned services. Even so, you certainly recognize that new services and approaches are essential for strategic advancement, as well as to elevate the sophistication and success of your firm. But there's a catch. Your clients need to *want* what's new. They need to see the value and the expected return-on-investment. Your firm may have added a great new approach to your repertoire of services. But without clients, this “new thing” will quickly fade away to an under-appreciated good idea.

There are two typical drivers behind a firm adding new services/approaches. First, there is a real and direct need—either identified by your technical professionals or requested by the client. Second, your firm did its homework around the latest advancements in the built industry and beyond, and then discovered services worthy of investment and integration.

Even if the new service/approach is prompted by a client request, it still requires keen education skills on your part (especially if you plan to sell that same new thing to others). It's up to your firm to make it crystal clear to other clients and prospects that this new service makes good sense. In other words, you need to educate.

Educating clients and prospects with the intention of closing new business is neither intuitive, nor easy. Consider these questions:

- *Is the service/approach a win-win solution: value-add for the client in addition to making your own work more efficient?* If yes, then perhaps it serves as a differentiator from competitors rather than something for which you would charge a premium.
- *Can value be measured from this new thing?* If yes, in what timeframe?
- *Are your current client contacts the right people to talk to about this service, or is there someone else in the organization who would be more appropriate?* It will fall on deaf ears if you are selling to the wrong

person. Often, architects and engineers rely on existing client contacts to help influence decisions within the client organizations. This can certainly be helpful, but ultimately, you need to identify and work with the proper decision maker for the particular “new thing” you are trying to sell. Just because you are working with a university's physical plant staff on a particular project does not mean those same people would be receptive to another service your firm offers.

- *Is there an opportunity for you to conduct a case study, as a mutually beneficial arrangement, with a client or prospect?* For example, perhaps you can provide the service/approach in exchange for their permission to talk about the experience in your future marketing efforts.
 - *Is it something where you are targeting two different groups—owners/end users and consultants/business partners?* If yes, then analyze the priorities of these groups. Both groups may or may not respond favorably to a particular pitch, so it may require modification depending on your audience.
 - *Is this a service where—by virtue of promoting its benefits—you will be de-valuing your other “typical” service/approach?* If yes, you will need to balance your message so that you do not diminish the value of that other service.
 - *Do you have someone you can trust from the client or prospect side who will hear you out and challenge your pitch so you can refine it to perfection?* If yes, start testing the message immediately. Look at every angle before you introduce it, because your first introduction of the service should be highly impactful, not wishy washy.
 - *How do you get the pitch to move beyond just an introduction?* There may be a lot of polite, positive head nodding, but they must ultimately respond to your call for action (“buy this!”) This means you need to be prepared and willing to ask for the business, rather than just telling them about it.
- Here's a story about a new service launch that taught me a lot. More than a decade ago, I worked for a firm with a prominent commercial interiors practice. To differentiate ourselves—and because we sincerely felt it would add value to the end result—we created a new process called “design planning.” In short, the process took a management consultancy approach to the programming and

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schematic design phases of our interiors projects. The research was more in-depth; the design process more intimate. It was more expensive than a traditional approach, but we believed the long-term results justified the additional cost. We had to convince not just owners of office spaces, but also corporate real estate brokers (our lead source). The solution was to create a road show where we would put the prospects into an experiential environment so they could see firsthand (in narrative form, but with the actual visual and tactile tools used in the process) how it worked. We shared a case study or two, and we made it fun and interactive.

Did it work for us? Yes and no. Lessons learned:

1. Enthusiasm for your new approach/service is great, but it doesn't necessarily turn into real sales.
2. As mentioned earlier, pitches need to vary based upon audience preferences. In our case, commercial real estate brokers had much different priorities than the actual owners/end users, yet we needed to present the concept to both of those groups.
3. Your first order of business is to have them fully articulate every challenge, and then share how you can address those challenges (or not) through this new service. Then shape your pitch as a response to those challenges.
4. As with any good sales effort, make sure to ask for their opinion and reactions. Even more important, find out in what context might your new offering make sense for them and ask bluntly what barriers would keep them from using this new service/approach.
5. Make sure the right professional from your firm is the one making the actual pitch. We tried to educate colleagues within

other studios at our firm so that they, too, could pitch Design Planning as a cross-sell. While they were interested (mildly, at best), they were unable to effectively tell the Design Planning story to their own client base. We learned that in this case, only professionals from our studio could successfully sell it

6. Even if what you're offering is somewhat complex, make every effort to simplify it. This can be a challenge when it is honestly esoteric, but you will lose sales opportunities quickly if you make it seem like more work for the client (In my own example, this did happen a few times).
7. Experiment with charts, drawings, photographs, video, and other visual tools to describe your new approach/service. As much as you do prepare your pitch in advance before launching, there will be some trial and error in terms of how to elicit the most favorable response.
8. Be accessible. Make your experts available to answer questions about the "new thing" at a moment's notice. These days, it's best to publish dialogues, questions and comments through blogs and other social media, converting your "new thing" from a mystery to an accepted—and desirable—practice.

Remember prospects will be more open to learning about (and buying) anything if they have a need/vision or a desire in the first place. Do your best to get them into that frame of mind before you actually present your new service or approach.

As your firm continues to evolve, I wish you the best of luck at selling your "new things." Please feel free to share your own stories and lessons.

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