business issues

SET UP YOUR TECH PROFESSIONALS TO SUCCEED

Getting your production employees away from their desks and out into the world benefits your employees, your firm and your clients.

BY ANNE SCARLETT

AS AEC BUSINESS DEVELOPERS, we go to great lengths to fill our firms' pipelines with long-term, robust clients.

Because this is a daunting task, we often hope that the entire firm will jump on the "Everyone sells!" bandwagon. Yet there are days when it feels like we're alone—as if our internal colleagues are impatiently waiting for us to produce more business.

While we recognize that our technical staff have their own pressures—billable hour quotas, client interface, successful project delivery, the works—when it comes to "sales," we implore them to share some of the responsibility. The first step, perhaps, is to build empathy and manage expectations.

Acknowledge everyone who contributed, big or small, to an effort.

Empathy and Expectations

Cross-educate. When you first began *your* business development role, did you come from a technical background? Whether you did or didn't, you surely experienced a learning curve to become highly versed with the firm's service offerings and project details. Was there a formal process in place for you to tour projects, review drawings and talk with the existing clients? Or were you left to your own self-education devices, such as perusing marketing cut sheets and hoping you'd be able to talk intelligently about the work? The latter doesn't sound like a recipe for success, does it? In order to be credible and portray a sincere respect for the work and for the value your firm brings to clients, you simply must be educated.

The same holds true with technical staff. We cannot sign them up for a networking event and then hope that they figure out a way to maximize their time. We cannot buy a table at a black-tie fundraiser and hope they will magically schmooze with prospective clients. We cannot tell them to "grow business with existing clients" without giving them tips and direction on how that can be accomplished. They are smart and competent; let's not unwittingly put them into situations where they feel otherwise.

Cross-empathize. We struggle. They struggle. We have stringent sales goals. They have to deal with headaches such as scope creep and indefinite project holds. Given that, it's important for marketing and technical staff to stick together, serving as one another's rock during the tough times. Inquiring (and listening with empathy!) about their in-progress project challenges—however minute or grand—may be more worthwhile than you realize.

Avoid generalizing. It's unwise to place all technical staff in one bucket. Actually, it's not even fair to sub-categorize (architects as academic dreamers, interior designers as elegant yet edgy and engineers—the whole lot of 'em!—as process-oriented and precise.) We all are guilty of this generalizing. The best approach is to select individuals that exhibit strong people skills, regardless of their technical background.

Keep in mind that many technical staff view business development as a secondary (or lower) priority relative to their primary responsibilities. So in addition to creating a stronger bond with the technical staff, it's important that you understand their key motivators.

Motivating Technical Staff

The early bird catches the worm. If a technical staff member identifies a legitimate, desirable project lead, then that same staff member should have first dibs to work on the project if it materializes. While this is unspoken in most firms, perhaps it should be further underscored as a motivator.

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Money talks. Add "marketing contributions" as an important line item on performance reviews. Let them see the direct relationship between tangible marketing tactics and a performance raise or bonus. It will make an impact! Ideally, their manager (or, in the case of a senior leader/principal, their peers) will outline some specific activities, along with metrics for measurable results.

Providing Resources

Specific tasks should be accompanied by resources—training, mentoring, literature, etc.—to support their efforts to help with marketing. Here are some ideas:

Let them observe first. As a low- or no-pressure experience, take them to an industry event. Rather than assigning goals, give them a "Networking 101" overview, but then tell them that you're perfectly fine if they want to stick by your side throughout the event. They can watch you as you comfortably network. Make sure to debrief afterwards.

Take 'em along! Include them in prospective client visits. Share the meeting agenda and expected outcome, propose tag-team approaches for the conversation and build a friendly rapport with them in advance by spending time together. Often, this can happen on the ride to the meeting, but you could also plan to have coffee in advance to warm up. As you know, sales visits are exponentially more successful when you have a technical person along to boost the richness of the conversation.

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Be expansive with ways they can contribute to building new business. Perhaps you already prepared a laundry list of marketing and sales activities for the technical professional. These might include things such as providing results-oriented project descriptions, speaking with existing clients about their favorite industry meetings and resources and collaborating with you to craft a stellar project understanding for a proposal. Since sales activities are not limited to relationship building and networking, it often helps to begin with steps that are more comfortable (AKA less scary)!

Set them up to cross-sell. If your firm is large, then you likely have business development counterparts in other departments. Why not brainstorm with those folks on opportunities to expand services with existing clients? And *then* match up technical people from the two departments (let's say the high-rise and healthcare groups or the master planning and corporate business units). Provided one of them is reasonably agile with business development, it will be a great growing experience. Alternatively, you can join them if the meeting will involve an appropriate balance between the client side and the service provider side.

Take a bigger step; demonstrate your commitment to their growth. Continuing education is your best bet if you want to ramp up your commitment. One key tactic: a series of sales training sessions (but only if you also provide follow-up coaching on real-life situations to make it stick). You can also send the individual back to school for an MBA. Or you can match them with a mentor who coaches them every step of the way.

Communicate Openly

Finally, you need to be open with the technical staff.

Be transparent about the business. Obviously, not all levels of the firm can be actual decision-makers, but they can be contributors on some level (focus groups, brainstorming, etc.). Whether you are thriving or struggling, in-the-know technical staff members are far more vested in the company's long-term health.

Share success stories step by step. Most firms in the AEC industry have regular office gatherings where they announce new business wins and future pursuits. In those meetings, they might share tidbits about how a client was won. Take this further by truly explaining the steps that led to the win. Acknowledge everyone who contributed, big or small, to the effort. Share stories of pitfalls so that they see the selling process is real and not always rosy. When you put all of the pieces of the puzzle together in a fun way, the others are sure to glean some of the enthusiasm.

All in all, Jerry Maguire had it right when he pleaded, "Help me help you." In your case, though, you want to help *them* help *you*. You cannot possibly expect technical professionals—many of whom have no formal sales training—to magically execute skills that you consider second nature or intuitive. Not all engineers, detailers and architects are created equal. Empower them to help you develop new business. ■