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## Going Beyond RFPs and Proposals

Transforming Your Firm's Marketing with a Modern, Strategic, and Proactive Approach

By **Tim Asimos, CPSM**

For decades, marketing departments in the A/E/C industry have existed primarily to support business development efforts with RFPs, proposals, and interviews as the primary focus. But it's a new day. The modern marketing ecosystem requires different strategies, tactics, skills, and tools. Are you ready for the changing landscape?

### The Need for Transformation

The A/E/C industry is undergoing a sea change and firm leaders are recognizing the need for their marketing departments to play a larger role in positioning their firms for new business. Firms that aren't adapting are missing out on an opportunity to gain a competitive advantage.

With the proliferation of digital content, social media, mobile devices, and technology, marketers now operate in a world that is vastly different. In fact, marketing is rapidly becoming one of the most technology-dependent functions in all of business.

However, it's not only the tools that have changed: The way in which professional services are procured is evolving, too. More and more prospects are going online to find and vet potential firms and partners. They're better informed and more self-sufficient than ever, researching online—often extensively—before making a selection.

In many cases, they are pre-qualifying firms before ever issuing an RFP. Their decisions are being based not only on qualifications and previous experience, but also on what they've learned about you online through your website, blog, content, and social media.

Unfortunately, a lot of A/E/C marketing does more to equalize than to differentiate. When firms consistently boast the same basic list of service offerings, markets, and accolades in their content and messaging, you're left with a crowded sea of "me too's." And let's face it: If clients were basing their selection decision solely on marketing materials, most would have a really tough time distinguishing one firm from the next.

In many firms, proposals are synonymous with marketing. Having managed a marketing team for an engineering firm in a past life, I've seen first hand the immense burden that proposals place on the day-to-day activities of the marketing department. I don't mean to discount their importance in A/E/C marketing, as they play a critical role in helping firms win new business, but for too long, proposals have been treated as the holy grail—taking precedence over every other area of marketing. Actually, in most other industries, proposals are a product of the sales department, not the marketing department—representing the final phase of the business development process.

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### Transforming Your Marketing

Leading firms are initiating and nurturing relationships in a different manner than ever. The time has come to move past "marketing as usual." Here are some thoughts to consider:

- A solid marketing strategy tied to the firm's business goals should be at the center of every marketing plan—defining and directing each activity. A true strategy is narrowly focused on a specific audience with specific objectives and is supported by a comprehensive marketing and communications plan.
- Content marketing represents a huge opportunity for A/E/C firms. When you think about it, the creation of content has been a part of business communications for a long time. But most of it focuses on the company's own services, accolades, features, and benefits—not what's of value to the client. Content marketing is a fundamental shift in how companies communicate with prospects. Instead of selling, companies share insights, answer questions, solve challenges, and educate



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through information that prospects will find valuable.

- Every facet of your marketing efforts should be embraced by the content marketing mindset—your website, social media, email marketing, conferences, and even your proposals. And, in an industry where differentiation is difficult, content marketing helps position companies as thought leaders and subject matter experts, long before an RFP comes out.
- Most A/E/C firms have been operating from the same basic marketing playbook for years, with company-centric collateral, brochure-like websites, print ads, and mass broadcasted e-newsletters. But as the ecosystem and buyers have changed, so has the playbook. Interruption-based marketing is being replaced by marketing tactics like blogs, webinars, e-books, lead nurturing, and marketing automation that are more conducive to building both relationships and thought leadership.
- Modern marketing is all about customization, personalization, and contextualization, so your marketing communication strategy needs to consider the entire client journey, not just the selection phase. That means your communications need to be much more focused than in the past—making sure you are sending the right message, to the right audience, at the right time, using the right channel.

- Many firms fail to realize the role that their website plays in business development. In fact, a website is perhaps your most valuable and critical marketing asset. It's where your prospects go to learn about you and to arm themselves with additional information to inform their selection decisions. Your website likely makes more introductions and creates more first impressions than your business development people. Ideally, your website should serve as a platform for business development, helping to attract prospects, generate leads, and convert leads into clients. It needs to be planned, designed, written, and developed with content marketing and lead generation at the core.

### Measuring Is Key

You've probably heard of John Wanamaker, the 19th century retailer and a pioneer in marketing. He once famously quipped, "I know that half of my advertising doesn't work. The problem is, I don't know which half." But today, tracking and measuring the effectiveness of your marketing efforts in real-time is not only possible, it's imperative. For every marketing initiative, both digital and offline, you should be setting specific goals and determining the quantifiable metrics that align with those objectives.

Your marketing efforts should be approached with an agile mentality: constantly testing, measuring, tweaking, and refining as you go along. Don't be afraid to fail—just don't fail to redirect if something isn't working. Ultimately, by setting goals and tracking the right metrics, you'll have a better understanding of what works to improve the effectiveness of your marketing efforts.

If there is anything I learned in my tenure in corporate A/E/C marketing, it's that the industry is steeped in an "it's always been done this way" mentality. As a result, I spend a lot of time educating A/E/C leaders that change is not only needed, but absolutely essential.

I think this quote from Stephen Covey sums it up well: "Most of us spend too much time on what is urgent and not enough time on what is important."

In order to transform your firm's marketing, change must be embraced from the C-suite down. The firms that will win in this new marketing ecosystem will be those that find the right balance of immediate proposal demands and disciplined strategic marketing that sets them apart from the competition. ■