

STRATEGY:

How to Add or Create Value for Your Firm

BY RACHEL ELAINE YOKA, CPSM, LEED AP

The past two years have not been kind to the A/E/C industry, or many other industries. Despite glimmers of improvement, the next 12 months do not hold as much promise as many of us had hoped. Marketing budgets and staff have been slashed to improve the bottom line for many firms—and may continue to be reduced. Streamlined marketing and business development departments will do more with much, much less. (This may or may not be a wise decision, but that is not the subject of this article.) So what are you going to do about it?



This article examines multiple strategies for marketers and business developers to add value to their organizations. Challenge yourself and your staff—at all levels—to view their work, and their positions, in innovative ways. Each person holds many of the cards for their own success and can work to improve their position and personal brand. Use these recommendations, ideas, and questions to take a hard look at your position, your work ethic, and your firm. Decide if you are creating value for your firm and your future, or simply treading water. Not all of these concepts are relevant for everyone, but a few may just be helpful for you. These are loosely organized into a few primary categories: Leadership, Specific Marketing Skills, and The Softer Side.

Leadership

“Control is not leadership; management is not leadership; leadership is leadership. If you seek to lead, invest at least 50% of your time in leading yourself—your own purpose, ethics, principles, motivation, conduct. Invest at least 20% leading those with authority over you and 15% leading your peers.”

—Dee Hock, Founder and CEO Emeritus, Visa

■ You are responsible for your own success.

At any level, it is not your supervisor's or “management's” job to encourage you to succeed and give you the tools to do it. Many great organizations offer truly amazing education and skill building opportunities; many do not. Make your way, and your plans, regardless. Write down your goals—short, medium, and long term—and work toward them.

■ **Don't make a living: Build a life.** Marketing and business development are not punch-the-clock, nine-to-five jobs. This is not to criticize those folks who work very hard on nine-to-five schedules, in different industries, but to showcase the distinction between them. If we wake at the start of the week with an anti-Monday-can't-wait-until-Friday attitude, we constrict our ability to succeed and short-change the value of the work we do. Don't just make a living and get a paycheck at your job. You spend 40, maybe 50, or even 60 hours a week engaged in the work—value your time, your commitment, and your work enough to build a life around your personal and professional goals.

■ **Know your priorities.** Regularly review your personal and professional goals, lifestyle, and time commitments. Develop a firm and steady grasp on what is truly important for you—and prioritize around those goals. As a serial over-committer,

I reached a point when I had to make tough decisions about how I was spending a resource I could not get back: time. I made difficult decisions; I quit, I stepped back, I took a lesser role in activities and organizations that were not aligned with my goals and family. If your tendency is to guard your time more jealously, and you are less engaged than you could be, consider utilizing some of your time to engage in activities that will support and enhance your goals.

■ **Forget your job description.** Be willing to extend yourself. Look for ways to do more to support your organization and add value. Don't limit your activities to the bulleted list in your job description. Many of the suggestions and ideas in the next section expand the traditional role of marketing or even business development. Push the envelope of what you typically do, or are told to do, to serve clients, supervisors, and colleagues. At our firm, we regard job descriptions with some trepidation, because they can limit an individual's potential. Our written core values include “Go the extra mile” to encourage each person not only to develop their skills further but also to exceed expectations. Starbucks's *Little Green Book* asks staff to “surprise and delight” customers to create unique experiences—same idea, different industry.

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■ **Read extensively and widely.** Take note of book recommendations from a multitude of sources and create a reading list for yourself. Read quality material that will align with your goals. Most of us like a trashy beach novel or sci-fi thriller now and again—and there is a time and place for that. Becoming well read requires a certain self-discipline—creating the list, carving out the time, and setting goals, whether it is a book a week or a month, or finishing every issue of *Marketer* and *Urban Land*.

■ **Develop a personal network.** As you develop relationships in your work and personal life, collect people: people who share the same values and ethics, the same type of work, or are simply like-minded. You can go so far as to create a formal or informal networking group, with a shared purpose such as marketing and leadership. Or it can be a loose

network of individual relationships based on shared experiences and values. These are your “go-to” people. Stay in touch, know what they are working on, and ask for their input. From these, choose a mentor who can help you, offering advice and positive criticism along the way. I don’t know what I would do without my “go-to” people, so I encourage you to develop yours.

Marketing Skills

“There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work, and learning from failure.”

—Colin Powell, former U.S. Secretary of State

■ **Write well and publish.** With enough time for research, anyone can write well on any topic. Develop multiple styles of writing to serve a wide range of purposes, including proposals, personal letters, articles, and technical and editorial pieces. The ability to write well can add considerable value to your role. So many of the positive attributes for marketing staff are difficult to quantify, but a portfolio of good writing on behalf of your firm shows tangible results. Look for opportunities to write—in your firm newsletter, in industry publications, and even blogs or a personal journal. Build a portfolio of work to showcase your hard-earned skill and time.

■ **Do BD.** Guilty as charged: I have uttered, “I’m in marketing, I don’t do BD.” We all know we are ambassadors for our firms, and we are all engaged in business development activities at some level. If your position rarely requires participation at external project, client, and networking meetings, look for ways to get out and about anyway. (Forget your job description, right?) If this is not “in the budget,” in any given week, there are at least a few free opportunities in the A/E/C community for networking, you just have to look. Get your name out there, and your firm’s name out there, in a positive way. Go to pre-bid meetings and ask to be included in client meetings, when relevant. As always, go early, look the part, and never forget to do the follow-up!

■ **Do project work.** As marketing staff, we have the tools to create attractive, well-written documents. Many of our firms do studies and reports—and often they do not have the same visual and written appeal as our proposals. Offer to read, review, and format documents to assist technical staff; most will be happy to take advantage of these services. As an aside, master all the software you have access to, from the basics through the graphic design programs. Teach yourself how to use the programs. You may remember more this way than with formal classes.

■ **You run the day or it runs you—your choice.** Sometimes the day runs you anyway, and there is nothing you can do about it. Know what you need to achieve and work on the most critical items first, within your workload and deadlines. If you aren’t writing down and prioritizing all the tasks you need to do in the day, start by taking 10 minutes before you leave to summarize what you need to do tomorrow. Some say a clean desk is the sign of some sort of mental imbalance. Maybe so. But a clean desk and organized files limit visual distraction and reflect well on you and your work.

■ **Strive for balance and squeeze your day.** Anyone who knows me knows I am not an advocate for long days and overtime work, pushed schedules, and working on weekends. We work to live and to build a life with our families and friends. To achieve as much balance as possible, squeeze as much productive time out of your day as you can. Reduce or eliminate personal email, develop systems to increase efficiency, and limit office conversation and gossip. You know where you lose time: Focus on getting that time back to invest it in more productive efforts. You will achieve more, and people will notice the difference.

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- **Get technical, earn some letters.** Pursue and achieve certification as a Certified Professional Services Marketer, Green Associate, LEED AP, or other professional designation. Your intelligence is not a function of letters after your name, but contacts, colleagues, and competitors will view you differently. In the process, you will improve your ability to write and speak at a professional level and open up opportunities to publish articles and offer speaking engagements.
- **Come to work with your boots on.** I stole this one from Tim Haahs, our president, but it was perfect for this article. So much of success is dependent on outlook and attitude. If you are on a cruise ship, feel free to wear your slippers or flip flops. If you are coming to work, to beat out the competition with better service and smarter solutions, put on your work boots.

The Softer Side

"Today is your day! Your mountain is waiting. So...get on your way."

—Dr. Seuss

- **Ask for feedback, and really listen.** Firms review staff typically once or twice a year, quarterly at most. These reviews are often so broad and far apart that we miss out on response to much of our work. Get in the habit of asking for feedback on your projects soon after completion—and be willing to listen. Ask, "How could I have done this better?" You can do this on major proposals and other work assignments, or just ask for a touch-base with your supervisors and principals. It reveals a propensity to improve and allows those you work with to give you candid suggestions.
- **Connect with social media.** Get up to speed on the business side of social media. Learn how LinkedIn and other sites can work for your network and your firm's branding. Use them to reinforce your network of connections, but don't limit your networking and contacts to online communities.

- **Crumbs for further thought.** Use your free time wisely. Ask for training if you need it. Start an office book club. Get involved in your community to give back, and get people at work involved. Teach others what you have learned. Be a resource, be the "go-to" person. Be a team player, but if the team isn't working in the right direction, work to lead them there. You are a force to be reckoned with (in a good way).
- **Write it all down.** Keep a written log of goals and results, or a journal to capture your thoughts and observations on your work and professional goals. Take stock of your accomplishments, and they will be available as a resource for discussions with your supervisor. This takes time, but it is an investment in you. What could be more worthwhile?

In conclusion, marketers and business developers can employ a variety of strategies to enhance their positions within their current firm, or prepare for their next venture. If you are in a supervisory role, these strategies can help you motivate and energize your staff to achieve more, from both a professional and personal perspective. The ideas detailed here are intended to be fodder to develop your own ideas—to maximize your impact in your organization. ■

About the Author



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