

Best Practices

Make Research Pay for Your Firm



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Research is not a familiar topic in the minds of most architects, says the October 2006 issue of the *Principal's Report*, (PR) and most principals categorize research as an overhead expense. When dovetailed with marketing, however, research can generate revenue.

Nearly every project entails some level of research into new materials, systems, tools, and techniques. Some of this research can be billed through as a direct project expense; some cannot and must be budgeted as part of the firm's overhead.

Shun surveys. Use the phone.

That resulting knowledge needs to be viewed as an asset, though, and

not an incidental byproduct. One can either use accumulated knowledge on one project and effectively toss it away afterward or make every lesson learned a part of the firm's collective knowledge base. Any firm can catalogue its accumulated knowledge. Virtually every firm has a products library, reference books, and model specifications. Many firms also have a structured way to retain lessons learned from project development (aka, best practices), project procedures, checklists, conference notes, training manuals, employee guides, and the like.

Improve your market reach and retention

PR turned to A/E management consultants ZweigWhite for some ideas on how to use research to generate revenue. Their ideas focus on marketing and personnel:

- Call clients who worked with you

once but haven't come back over the past few years. Ask why and make their answers part of your own self evaluation. It may have been that a particular client just wasn't a good fit. That's understandable; it will happen. Listen also for recurring themes on things you can improve within your firm. Improve in those areas and you will improve client satisfaction on subsequent projects and, in turn, your marketing position.

- Maintain an up-to-date list of key client contacts, such as the decision makers of your top 10 clients in every market in which you work.
- Go back to staff who have left the firm in the past five years. Hopefully, you already have an exit-interview process in place. For many reasons, though, exit interviews seldom give you a clear view of why your people may have seen (are still seeing) greener grass elsewhere. Put some distance between those people and their former experience—in addition to the years since they left—by using impartial interviewers; someone the former employees would not know. And don't use surveys. They're too impersonal and uninformative.

Show people what you know

Don't stop with gathering the data, suggests *PR*. Organize findings from both your primary research (interviews, testing results, and field observations) and secondary research (such as readings and conference notes). Expand on your findings and synthesize them into articles, best-practice tidbits, and enticing statistics.

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Most importantly, publish them in your marketing leave-behinds and mailings and on your Web site.

Topics of interest abound. School administrators want to know how to secure funding and stretch those funds to improve facilities. Energy costs are still high, and energy-conservation strategies are in high demand across the board. Environmental sustainability is on everyone's mind, too. The general principle: If you have an expertise, let people know; make them hungry for more.

And get creative. With the Internet you have capabilities within the scope of even modest marketing budgets to make on-air personalities out of your principals and specialists. Offer streaming video of presentations, do slide shows with voice-overs, offer podcasts.

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There is one caveat, though . . . just because you can do something flashy doesn't necessarily mean you should. Always have people whose opinions you trust give you some honest evaluation.

Another important point is that all of these projects demand a good writing/editing person on your staff who can develop them. You're not in the publishing business, but these reports will improve your marketing position and need to be considered seriously and executed likewise.

If you do this, you won't be the first, PR reminds their readers. Firms such as Arup and CRS are using these tactics to boost their already-strong reputations among clients, peers, and bright young job candidates. But even if can't be the first, you certainly don't want to be the last.

Try it.

Reference:

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