



This article appeared in the Zweig A/E Newsletter in 2005

Bridging the Divide by Andrea Norman

“What’s the difference between an engineer and an engineer who markets? The regular engineer looks at HIS shoes when he talks to you. The engineer who markets the firm looks at YOUR shoes when he talks to you.” This joke is good for a chuckle but there is a nugget of truth that sometimes makes communications between engineers and architects sometimes challenging. This translates to some frustration by engineers as to how to “get work” from architects.

The gap between architects and engineers can be cultural but I would argue is more about the lack of relationships and the engineers’ lack of focus or clear market niche. Here is some insight about the criteria that is considered and conversations that occur when architects choose engineers.

There are several ways architects choose their consultants:

Relationships. Principles will often first turn to the consultant firms with whom they have a relationship with senior management when they are putting together a team. **Consultants would do well if they spent their time wooing a few architects to build a strong relationship, as opposed to trying to get in front of many firms and hoping that some of the marketing efforts “stick.”** It is also important for relationships to develop between the various levels of the architecture and consultant companies. Principles retire. The relationships that are formed now by the junior people will continue the “goodwill” for both the engineering and architecture firms into the future.

Returned favor. As a business development director, I rely heavily on the engineers to help me keep my ear to the ground. They are tapping into different circles than I do and I value their help and market perspective. I reward their assistance whenever possible by proposing them for new projects. In fact, I specifically track where I get leads and then make every effort to send those engineers business.

Exceptional client service. I have participated in very disciplined approaches to consultant selection. We would sit as a group and discuss which consultants were needed for the proposed project and then we would discuss each type of consultant and recent experiences with each consultant. The conversations would go something like this.

“Which MPE firm should we use for this project?” asks the marketing director or principle.

“Not ABC firm!” pipes us one of the architects. “We are working with them on that office building project and they are always late with RFIs.”



“What about DFG?” asks another architect, moving on to another possible firm. “We owe them a favor because they gave us a few qualified leads recently.”

“Do we know if they have the experience in this type of project?” questions the partner.

“Yes, they do,” answers the marketing director.

“Okay, let’s move on to decide the structural engineer,” he answers.

The conversation was literally that brief. The quickest way to be rejected is to give poor client service to architects. They understand when errors occur but unresponsiveness or poor communication skills eliminate an engineering firm from consideration. Conversely, they also remember exceptional client service. There was one structural firm that was consistently put on our teams because they met deadlines and bent over backwards to ensure projects were successful.

Well-defined market niche. Surprisingly, at another firm, there is no group review or discussion. It is purely about comfort level and routine. It is doubly difficult for new engineers to gain new business. However, another recent situation gives a clue as to the best way. When a recent engineering firm went out of business our retail team was left without an MPE consultant. Coincidentally I was meeting with a firm that had exactly the retail experience that the new team needed. By pushing their unique experience and qualifications (they are registered in all 50 states,) we were able to consider them almost immediately for the projects.

Some national firms have made an excellent penetration into regional markets and they have done this primarily through a well-defined market niche. Many firms think the best way to expand their business is to come with a list of all of the different areas that they can offer services. Instead the most memorable approach is to emphasize one service repeatedly until your market niche is known. Then, you can expand from a position of strength.

The best way to earn work from architects is to build strong personal relationships, do what you do best, give excellent client service, and emphasize your unique value proposition. Good luck!