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E-Marketing: The Way Forward
Stay ahead of the pack, maintain a healthy bottom line, and increase marketing's value to your firm by harnessing your corporate knowledge for e-Marketing.

By Richard Nelson, CPSM

Is your firm's marketing program really cutting-edge, or barely cutting it? You've tried everything you know – new brochures, new corporate identity, direct mail, getting published, public speaking, hosting special events targeted at your client market, aggressive business development. But it still takes an enormous amount of your time and the firm's money to pursue the work you want to do, and you're still competing based on low fees, in the end. What more can you do? The rapidly developing practice of "E-Marketing" just might hold some answers for you.

Knowledge is Power; Knowledge is *Profits*
Every architecture, engineering, construction and consulting firm brings the same value to their clients: their *corporate knowledge*. Whether its knowledge about designing a particular type of facility (such as hospitals), or specific expertise in a project delivery method (such as design/build), the fact is that the knowledge contained within a firm and deployed for its clients is what makes a design and construction firm valuable.

While marketing has always been about effectively communicating the depth, breadth and uniqueness of your firm's knowledge to your prospects in order to increase your "perceived value" to them, *e-marketing* is all about making the practice of marketing and sales more cost-effective and efficient, thereby increasing the flow of work through the door *and* marketing's value to your organization.

Defining e-Marketing
E-marketing is essentially utilizing the technology tools that are available *right now* to:
- Increase the information exchange between you and your marketplace;
- Capture data that can be mined for opportunities;
- Customize your marketing messages to specific *individuals*;
- Deliver your customized messages in a more cost-effective fashion;
- Deliver your firm's services to your clients;
- Effectively maintain stronger client relationships (customer relationship management).

E-marketing techniques can help professional services marketers and their firms effectively manage company knowledge to save time and money, minimize the amount of "grunt" work in their marketing efforts and maximize the "thought" work, the higher-level skills required to focus on effective messages and marketing strategies targeted at meeting corporate goals and objectives. This will not only improve your firm's bottom line, but it will also increase marketing's value to the firm by moving the marketing staff beyond "proposal-writers" to valuable strategic assets.

E-Marketing Techniques
Methods of e-marketing are evolving as rapidly as new technologies are developed, but many firms are still struggling with the basics of even getting started. An effective e-marketing program should consist of, *at a minimum*:
- Company website
- Email application capable of maintaining lists and groups
- Email application capable of sending and receiving HTML-formatted messages
- Shared company project, personnel and contact database
- Adobe Acrobat software for producing universal-format electronic documents (PDF)
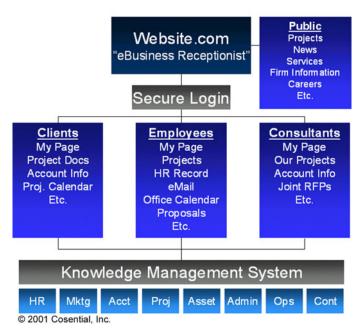
However, even these tools are considered elementary at this point. The AEC industry, as usual, has been much slower to adopt new technologies than other industries, and more sophisticated techniques for advanced e-marketing have been developed and utilized for years already. That being said, there is still time to catch up – if you move fast!

Beyond Just A Website – Your "E-Receptionist"
The core of every firm's e-marketing arsenal should begin with their company website. May firms make the strategic mistake, however, of creating their website as simply an interactive brochure on the web – "brochureware" – or an exercise in gratuitous graphic design and "web toys." Your website may be very dynamic, including animated graphics, even audio-visual experiences, but unless your website actually *engages its visitors in an exchange of information*, it's still brochureware. You want to make the website a valuable corporate asset, rather than an overhead expense.

Powered by the appropriate "backend" databases and security engines, your firm's website should respond to visitors as would your receptionist in your office, in essence serving as your "e- receptionist." Your e-receptionist should direct visitors to the location in your firm's "virtual office" that is relevant to their purpose for being there, just as a real receptionist would. General public, students, prospective clients, potential employees and your competitors would be able to see your public website only, your least secure information. Your traveling employees, however, may be directed through a secure doorway into the online company knowledge system, containing the corporate intranet system and links to all information, documents and files to which the person signed in has permission. Clients and outside project team members may be directed through another secure doorway giving them access to "project conference rooms" containing drawings, documents and information related to specific jobs – as well as their updated "accounts receivable" report, with online payment authorization options! Your vendors and consultants can submit invoices directly through your website to your accounting department, which can then obtain online authorization from the appropriate personnel via the company intranet, then provide an online report to the vendors noting when they will receive payment. And the possibilities go on.

The big point is that *each of your audiences should be coming through your website to do business with your firm every day, representing another marketing opportunity*. With clear and simple navigation and regularly updated relevant content, you can effectively communicate aspects of your firm's knowledge and expertise that your clients and business partners might not otherwise learn about. Also, with the appropriate input forms and search engines, you can allow clients and potential clients to tell you something about themselves that could help lead to a future sale for your firm, while receiving specifically requested information that they may find useful and valuable.

Website.com
"eBusiness Receptionist"

Public
Projects
News
Services
Firm Information
Careers
Etc.

Secure Login

Clients
My Page
Project Docs
Account Info
Proj. Calendar
Etc.

Employees
My Page
Projects
HR Record
eMail
Office Calendar
Proposals
Etc.

Consultants
My Page
Our Projects
Account Info
Joint RFPs
Etc.

Knowledge Management System

HR | Mktg | Acct | Proj | Asset | Admin | Ops | Cont

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Keep 'Em Coming Back
Assuming your firm is not yet ready to take the plunge into much more than a brochure on the web, what can you and should you do in the meantime to keep visitors coming back to your website? Here's a quick list of website content items that can keep visitors returning as long as you *update your site at least monthly*:

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- **News** – Continuously updated stories about new projects, new people, project awards, project completions, and innovations that the firm has developed keep people interested. Don't make the mistake of putting personal information about employees on your website – it's very "mom-and-pop-ish", and your clients really don't need to know that John Doe's baby girl just took her first steps.

- **Employment Opportunities** – Company Websites pay back huge benefits for corporate recruiting efforts. Information beyond just the job listing can make a potential employee decide whether or not to pursue a career with your firm. Last year's 2nd Place Website Award in the SMPS Marketing Communications Awards (MCA) went to James G. Davis Construction's website (www.davisconstruction.com), and one of the major reasons was the quality of their "Employment" section. In addition to job openings, potential employees are presented with a brief, but very effective synopsis of Davis' corporate culture, employee benefits package, and what it will be like to be a member of the Davis family. If you're proud of what you have to offer potential employees, don't be afraid to scream about it!

- **Useful Information** – Nothing keeps visitors coming back like providing useful information that they may not find elsewhere, especially if it is targeted to a specific market. Wimberly Allison Tong & Goo Architects (www.watg.com) posted a report on their website in April 1999 called "Hotel Design and the (Top and) Bottom Line" under a section called "Useful News." The first line of the report reads "WAT&G is the first design firm in the world to measure and quantify how its 50+ years of specialized hospitality design expertise translates into increased revenues for hotel owners and operators." Wow! If you've got the goods, nothing like your website as a medium to tell the world. Hotel developers will be coming back to WATG's site forever with that kind of information available (of course, the challenge for the firm now is to keep it coming!)

- **Business Opportunities** – People will return to a website that provides business opportunities for them, plain and simple. The 2000 SMPS MCA 3rd Place Website Award went to a tie between Barclay White Construction (www.barclaywhite.com) and Boney Architects (www.boney-arch.com). Both firms were recognized because they are using their websites to offer local business opportunities through bidding their projects online, as well as collecting information from professionals wishing to do business with them. Not only does this significantly increase efficiency for them and their clients, but this also dramatically increases their professional referral network by collecting contact data for complementary professionals. And, according to Metcalf's Law, the value of a network increases by the square of the number of users in the network. You can do the math!

- **WebCam** – Not only are webcams cool, but the are effective too. The James G. Davis Construction website mentioned earlier also had a webcam focused on the construction site of the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington, DC, from groundbreaking to project completion. It was fascinating to return a few times each week and watch the building go up – with the exact camera angle and zoom setting that I selected for myself! If I was doing it, I can only imagine who else was too!

- **Free Stuff** – A bit cheesy for professional services firms (my opinion), but people like free stuff. If you have a relevant gift to offer site visitors either through a subscription or raffle, go for it as a way to increase site traffic. My company's free HTML e-mail newsletter, DesignArchitecture.com, started off four years ago at zero, and now we're up to over 20,000 *daily* subscribers! That's an average of 14 new subscribers per day, plus we get an average of about 70,000 unique visitors per month to the DesignArchitecture.com website, about 2,300 per day!

- **Discussion Groups** – Share your expertise with your client base. If you specialize in a particular project type, invite clients and prospects to an online discussion through one of the many inexpensive chat room services out there. Discussion groups are a great, inexpensive

way to share your firm's expertise and possibly pick up some leads for new business. A good discussion group will have a subscription system, so that users can be notified by email whenever someone posts a message, that way you can respond quickly without having to constantly monitor the system.

E-Mail Marketing
Talk about fast, easy, and free e-marketing! If you're not hip to e-mail marketing, don't worry, its easy, and (for those bosses out there) it's virtually free. Probably the best argument for email marketing, however, is this: Not everyone I know reads their mail every day; *everyone* I know reads their e-mail every day. That's the way the business world has evolved, and here we are.

Just a few basics to get you going:

- **E-Mail Signature Files** - One of the most often overlooked, yet extremely powerful, e-marketing opportunities that is available to every firm using email is the signature file. Every email system let's you "sign" your messages with a pre-written message that you create. (Usually you can find the signature file setup screen under your Preferences or Settings menu.) Think about it: How many emails have you received with a little message at the bottom and a link to a website? And how many of those have you clicked on just to see what it's all about? Now, how many emails leave your firm every day *without* that little marketing message and a link to your firm's website? If you are a marketing professional that wants to keep your job within the next year, you've laid this article aside by now and you're scripting a signature file for everyone in the office to start using immediately!

- **E-Newsletters** – As I mentioned before in the example of Free Stuff to offer website visitors, an e-newsletter is a free, effective way to distribute useful information to your audience, while sharing your expertise and branding your firm. If you've gone through the exercise of building an office mailing list database (collected from everyone's Rolodex card file), or if you use an enterprise-wide e-mail system (like MS Exchange or Novell GroupWise), it shouldn't be too hard to gather those email addresses of your clients, send them a note asking if they'd like to receive information and updates from your firm (more on permissions next), then start sending. DesignArchitecture.com went from zero to 20,000+ daily subscribers in this very fashion – and to this day, we are adding about 500-600 subscribers per month with no outside advertising or promotion.

- **Permission/Trust Marketing** – Email Marketing Cardinal Rule #1: Get Permission. The surest way to blow any chance of a relationship before it even starts is to "spam" someone with unwanted emails without getting their permission. This is critical to email marketing success.

I haven't even begun to get into all the great e-mail marketing tips there are to be had out there, but you can get a lot of information for free from one great e-marketing website, the ClickZ Network (www.clickz.com). And, yes, ClickZ has a bunch of great free e-newsletters on various marketing topics that you can subscribe to!

E-Proposals – Get Ready, Because They're Coming to Stay
If you haven't been asked for one yet, it's only a matter of (a short) time now. The financial sector is leading the way, with the government sector not too far behind. More and more clients are getting hip to the idea of "paper reduction," as well as the more practical notions of faster turnaround times in the selection process, ease of distribution for large selection committees and just eliminating overstuffed file cabinets.

A few quick words to help you get started in e-proposals:

- **Adobe Acrobat** – Spend the $250 to buy at least one copy of Acrobat, the software that creates PDF format files, which is a free standard that everyone can use. The PDF format will allow you to create a document using any publishing software (such as MS Word, Quark

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XPress, or PageMaker) and save it to a compressed but universally readable format maintaining your fonts and graphics. Many of the leading-edge firms out there are also now sending clients their CAD drawings in PDF format, a smart idea if you want to preserve your Internet bandwidth.

- **HTML Publishing** – You've done all you can do with Quark and PageMaker. It's time to gracefully put them aside, and start learning how to publish proposals as HTML files, which you can upload to a web server that your client can access anytime from anywhere. If you can't stomach the time and expense of learning HTML code, you can always outsource it, or you can purchase web-based applications such as Cosential's Marketing and Website Module system (www.cosential.com), that allows you to organize and publish text and images from a comprehensive online marketing database as password-encrypted HTML files using standard templates, your custom graphic templates and/or SF254/255 formats.

E-proposals (and e-presentations) will be a very big topic for all AEC firms going forward. Talk to industry gurus like Frank Stasiowski of PSMJ (www.psmj.com), who has been dealing with e-proposals for a couple years now, for some great tips on e-proposals. By the way, PSMJ has some great free tools on their homepage for calculating things like your overhead rate and multiplier – great ways to keep people coming back!

E-Marketing Systems

There are many good marketing information systems available today, most of which are designed to store lots of data and to produce paper-based reports such as proposals and printed materials. Most of these systems are client/server-based technologies, which are very expensive to setup, requiring a significant investment in hardware, software, training, customization and time to get up and running. Plus there are long-term costs of software upgrades and installations, extensive training required, and the burden on your IT staff to maintain the system environment (daily backups, etc.) If your firm is a multi-office practice, the investment in client/server technologies is compounded by issues of synchronization or WAN connection speeds.

For the fast pace of the AEC world, not to mention keeping up with your clients and competitors, web-based systems are much more flexible, easy-to-use and valuable for the e-marketing requirements of the future. There are very few comprehensive e-marketing systems (although they should be coming fast!), and almost none designed specifically for the AEC industry. As these technologies evolve, however, you should be looking for a system that will:

- Manage firm-wide project, personnel and other data, with integrated website content management capabilities to allow for instant publishing to your firm's website
- Manage contact data, integrated with blast e-mail and desktop faxing capability
- Track company-wide leads in a real-time system, providing all business developers with the latest information and keeping everyone on the same page
- Manage the company Website as a business portal, providing visitors, potential clients and potential employees with key public information about the firm, while also providing secure access for clients and project team members, employees and others to information specifically related to their business with your firm
- Conduct e-Communications activities, such as blast emails for press releases, website update notifications, e-newsletters, etc.
- Create and submit e-proposals
- Create and deliver online presentations
- Integrate easily with other company systems to share common data, thus eliminating double- and triple-entry nightmares, as well as additional user administration
- Manage firm-wide knowledge, which can also be tied into a company "intranet"
- Provide accessibility from anywhere
- Require no software or hardware investment
- Require no training, just simple "orientation" to get users up and running quickly
- Easy-to-run reports, lots and lots of report options, that don't require you to know database programming to construct queries!

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The Value of E-Marketing, In Dollars and Sense

Getting back to those nasty low fees mentioned in the opening paragraph, e-marketing realizes that every business must continue to increase efficiencies in order to keep overhead as low as possible in order to compete effectively. E-marketing done right can help save your firm an enormous amount of time and money in its marketing efforts by streamlining processes and reducing direct expenses.

An easy example is sending out company press releases. By the time you add the labor time for writing the release, the paper it's printed on, a set of images to support the story, postage to send it to your media list, plus fees for your web consultant to update your website, a small firm can easily spend $1,000 or more sending out a single press release to just a handful of media contacts.

With an effective e-marketing system, you can write your press release, save it to your firm's database, link it to a set of digital images, and instantly post it to your website while emailing it to your media contacts, all in a few clicks. The only costs borne in this scenario are the time to write the press release, retrieve the data and click the "submit" button in your browser – less than half of the cost of the traditional scenario.

So what should you budget for e-marketing? Well, while e-marketing offers some very exciting opportunities for cost-reduction, the world is not all ready just yet. There is still a lot of value to be gained by combining e-marketing with traditional marketing methods, such as sending a postcard mailer to announce a major update to your website. You can probably shave about 10-20% off your marketing expenses in your first year (not counting labor), with certain line items being drastically reduced or even eliminated. A good e-marketing information system, like the one described above, can cut your marketing expenses by more than 25% and your marketing IT costs by 50% or more.

Conclusion

Architecture, engineering, construction and consulting firms sell knowledge – knowledge implemented as project solutions and strategies by their clients. A priceless body of knowledge is being created in your firm every minute of every day, and unless it is captured in an integrated system that works in unison with your e-marketing program, that knowledge walks out the door at five o-clock. Only fast, easy-to-setup, -learn and -use systems that are globally accessible can truly keep up with the pace of knowledge creation, storage and utilization that AEC firms demand. Start developing your e-marketing plan now, or get out of the way!

About the Author

Richard Nelson, CPSM, is Senior Vice President, Business Development for Cosential, Inc., an application service provider (ASP) and custom web solution developer dedicated to the architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) industry. Richard is an AEC-marketing veteran of over 11 years, having previously led marketing and operations efforts for Davis Brody Bond and Perkins & Will, two of the country's most respected architectural practices, and Cama Incorporated, a specialized interior design practice. Richard is a member of the board of directors of the SMPS New York Area Chapter. His firm, Cosential, offers the first ASP developed to support the AEC firm's complete business cycle. Beginning with contact management and the creation of proposals, through to project management, post-project client relations, firm operations/administration, and finally to obtaining recognition for finished work, Cosential provides a single, integrated system for managing AEC firms.