



Mining Personal Networks— All-hands-on-deck approach in a fluctuating economy.

By Anne Scarlett, printed in *Modern Steel Construction*

As the economy ebbs and flows, so must our business development efforts. Over the years I have experienced occasions where firms that I worked for—or consulted to—struggled to win business due to lack of project funding; projects placed on hold; and dramatic decreases in market sector activity. To respond, firms must assess the situation and re-allocate their business development and marketing efforts for maximum effectiveness.

Some firms panic, slashing marketing budgets where—had they simply stayed on course—they may have eventually reaped results. These knee-jerk reactions are unfortunate, but I do sympathize. Regardless of what is decided from a budget and resources perspective, during stressful economic times, it is imperative to establish an all-hands-on-deck approach to get back on track and generate revenue.

Be clear: I am not proposing a complete deviation from your strategic marketing approach. Rather, I suggest applying a discriminating eye, to dial down time-consuming marketing activities requiring long gestation periods for results, in favor of dialing up efforts to locate 'lower hanging fruit' that may reside within networks of your own staff. So, what to do?

LAUNCH AN INITIATIVE:

Create an initiative and give it a name, perhaps: 'Mine our Networks Summer'08!' Foster a buzz within the firm, promoting the concept of exploring depths of personal networks to rejuvenate relationships and to spread your firm's message at a grass roots level. Working towards goals and deadlines will motivate your staff toward action, so this initiative should be finite and immediate. Of course, any qualified leads and valid relationships that transpire will then roll into the firm's ongoing lead tracking system. Here's the initiative—step-by-step:

Step Zero: Before starting a Mine our Networks initiative, fully define what constitutes a viable new business opportunity for your firm. To do this, conduct a Client Profiling session with the firm's leadership team. Facilitating group discussion, list your ideal clients' positive attributes, followed by negative attributes of difficult clients. Next, create assessment points to measure the relevancy of each lead that may arise during the initiative. Points may include:

- **Timing—and depth—of their need.** What is the prospect's sense of urgency (or not) towards receiving services from your firm? And, do they need to resolve a complex, new construction 'problem' or do they simply seek a fresh idea to resolve a minor construction issue? Make sure that their need matches what your firm can (profitably) deliver.
- **Their business type, and service expectations.** What if the opportunities uncovered involve market sectors (or services) where your firm has little or no experience? At what point might you find yourself senselessly pursuing work within a sector, or offering a new service, that you have no future intentions to grow within? Take care to remain somewhat focused, sticking with sectors where you offer the most expertise. Recognize that forging into new market territories will require accelerating the learning curve by committing extra resources and time for research and education—all in the spirit of providing the same quality of service and solutions that you already provide to existing clients.
- **Buying power: decision-maker, influencer, or informant.** No matter with whom you make initial contact, eventually you need to establish direct access with the person who has veto power on all expenditures: the decision-maker. While

informants should in no way be disregarded, they should be able to give insight, names, and in-the-know data that will help your team to ferret its way to the actual decision maker.

Step One: Ask each staff member to prepare a list of ten or more contacts with whom they have a relationship. There is a wealth of opportunity when they dig into their past lives: former clients; contractors/developers; industry-related vendors; former employers or professional colleagues; university and high school alumni associations; civic, social, and spiritual groups; etc. In an adjacent column, have them rank each relationship (hot, warm, cool) based upon: 1. comfort level in contacting the person; 2. likelihood that their outreach will be welcomed and returned.

During one-on-one meetings with every participant in the initiative, proceed with the remaining steps:

Step Two: Educate the employee on relevant opportunities for your firm. To prevent folks from foolishly pursuing any random lead, discuss the results from Step Zero: 1. your firm's ideal client profile; 2. assessment points for qualifying leads.

Step Three: Next, review their list of contacts, creating an additional ranking column (hot, warm, cool) based upon the likelihood that the individual will have—or be able and willing to refer—a relevant project opportunity as discussed in Step Two. Prioritizing becomes obvious: call the Hot-Hots first, and the Cool-Cools last.

Step Four: Determine a method and goal for each priority connection. Hopefully, the participant is willing to pick up the phone and directly call these contacts. Alternatives might include: someone from the marketing team placing the call and referencing the employee's name for credibility; employee sending an email, letter, or collateral piece followed by a call from marketing; etc. Then, establish a goal for each call. (Set an introductory meeting with a senior partner? Learn more information about the contact's firm and prospective opportunities? Reconnect with that person socially, sharing their respective company statuses in order to help one another?)

THE MINE OUR NETWORKS INITIATIVE WILL BE MOST EFFECTIVE WITH THESE ENHANCEMENTS:

Provide enthusiastic leadership: Depending upon your firm's size, this effort should be spearheaded by an enthusiastic person or group: Principal in Charge of Business Development, marketing department, human resources, even the president! The leader(s) must be visible, dedicated, and available motivate and monitor all steps through completion.

Build-in mechanisms for success: Consider hosting weekly brown-bag lunch sessions for the duration. Here, participants will share stories of reaching out to their networks. When facilitated by an upbeat individual, the collective energy will help to further motivate everyone to actively partaking in the initiative.

Communicate sense of pride: The leader of the initiative should coach the participants on messaging. Each caller must feel comfortable with briefly describing the firm's value proposition, supported by a memorable personal anecdote to underscore credibility. Client testimonials are also worthwhile to casually share during conversation.

Prepare ideas on what to say during outreach: Each outreach will vary, based upon multiple factors: the contact's professional role and needs; your firm's ideal client profile; the level of relationship with your employee. Callers must believe that inquiring about prospects' business challenges is not an imposition, nor is it 'hard selling'. Further, additional rapport can be built by asking about association involvement, trusted information resources, or perspectives on industry trends. Perhaps most important, callers must finish every outreach with an established next step (a meeting, another call date, sending information, providing advice/help/support, etc).

Technical staff will be most comfortable participating in this initiative if they are positioned as information conduits—even researchers—as opposed to sales people. To make this initiative succeed, it's important for all participants to view networking as a means to 'develop pathways to experts—navigating, connecting, and supporting others'. In these questionable economic times, AEC firms must explore hidden opportunities within reach. Mining networks of staff is one strategy to accomplish this.