



Get 'em out of the dark and into the light! Imploring all A/E leaders to be inclusive with their business development and marketing professionals.

By Anne Scarlett, first printed in the *AE Rainmaker - PSMJ*

As a consultant, I sometimes encounter this odd situation: AEC leaders excluding their marketing and business development staff from strategic decisions and financial performance information. (That statement in itself seems strange, as I'd like to think that marketing/business development is such an integral function that those professionals are considered a vital part of leadership/ownership).

While this industry has finally evolved to recognize that marketing/BD is essential rather than a 'necessary evil', some leaders are still keeping important information from marketing/BD. I am guessing at their 'reasoning' behind this counterproductive approach:

- Preserve morale:** If the financials are in bad shape, leadership does not want the marketing/BD team to get discouraged.
- Ensure focus:** If strategic decisions are under consideration (i.e. a merge with another firm, or a high profile strategic hire), then marketing/BD does not need to get distracted from their core focus.
- Protect confidential information:** If information is shared with marketing/BD, then it may eventually leak out to people that should not be privy to the data.
- What else?** I seriously cannot think of any other reasons why strategic information would be withheld from marketing/BD.

After serving in the role of Director of Business Development for the first 13 years of my career, I may be biased. I believe that it's imperative for marketing professionals to be privy to firm strategy and performance—in good times and in bad. So let's look at how these so-called reasons might actually backfire:

- Withholding information as a means to 'preserve morale' may instead lower morale of marketing professionals. I know a marketing director that is charged with developing the 2008 marketing budget. Leadership has requested that she provide a wish-list budget. Then, they will figure out which elements stay or go. She is not aware of the firm's revenue/sales goals for 2008, so she is unable to use industry averages as a guideline. Instead, she will blindly create this budget, without the opportunity to apply her own knowledge to prioritize items that would work best together. This marketing director, incidentally, is a senior associate. In this case, leadership undermines the presumed definition of 'senior associate'. And they forget that there is a direct relationship between morale and an individual's ability to contribute.
- Knowing about potential strategic decisions in advance actually helps one to remain on-track, rather than off-focus. I once represented the interiors practice for a large firm that decided to 'right-size' its engineering department. This decision had been under consideration for at least one month before it was announced. Had I known in advance, I would have covertly laid some groundwork with my prospects in terms of re-shaping our value propositions. Further, I would have begun to pursue strategic relationships with outside engineering consultants so that we would be well-positioned to assemble teams for imminent project opportunities. Since leadership opted to withhold this important decision from our senior business development team, I was caught off-guard and it required extra work (including damage control with existing clients and prospects). Their lack of inclusiveness took me off-course. To set marketing/BD up for success, they must be given the proper tools, support, and information to make responsible marketing decisions.

- Trust is an essential ingredient to create a productive marketing program. When marketing/BD professionals are not entrusted to behave as mature contributors for the greater good of the firm, and when they are simultaneously expected to perform miracles regarding new business generation and retention, then something is amiss. Leadership's expectations must be aligned with the way they treat marketing/BD. Withholding information can create doubt, resentment, confusion, and eventually, apathy. And once the apathetic stage has been reached, it's tough to get back the 'loving feeling'.

If you are a leader that retains information from marketing/BD professional(s), then:

1. Why are you withholding information? As a result, are you achieving your desired outcome?
2. How does the risk-reward analysis play out in terms of being more inclusive with marketing/BD?
3. If you were walking in the shoes of your marketing/BD professional(s), would you be able to perform at your topmost potential sans the information?

A true marketer has the marketing knowledge, skills, and training to bring forth intelligence to grow the firm. Perhaps you will discover that you simply do not have the right person(s) in the role of a trusted marketing/BD professional. More likely, though, I hope you will decide to bring your firm's existing marketing/BD professionals out of the dark, and into the light!