



Get the skinny from those who matter. Techniques to gain industry insights and feedback.

By Anne Scarlett, first printed in *Modern Steel Construction*

Remember the game Telephone, where you told someone, and they told someone, and so on? By the end of the line, the final version only slightly resembled the original story. This simple game illustrates a valuable life lesson for us all – if you want to be assured of the straight scoop, you better get it directly from the source.

When marketing in the A/E/C industry, research is an integral part of the strategic planning process. It helps to shape the direction of your efforts – what markets you will enter, expand within, or exit. It also assists in best reaching sub-sector groups within markets, because you learn the nuances that will most appeal to the decision makers. Two forms of research – primary and secondary - must be interwoven to get the highest and best answers to support your marketing strategy. Primary research involves customization to answer your company's specific questions, and it is typically gleaned from direct exposure to sources through focus groups, interviews, surveys, observation, and testing. Secondary research is essential, but less accurate, as it is often derived from general studies conducted by organizations and institutions. Their purpose is to provide data that will benefit a wide range of users; therefore the data will help inform - but not pointedly nail - your firm's specific agenda.

As technical leaders, you can play an integral role in facilitating primary research, especially within your existing markets. Why? Because you are the one that is regularly engaged with your clients. How many degrees of separation do you have between those that 'hold the answers'? I'd guess two, one, or even none! So working alongside your marketing/business development team, you can collaborate to collect research that will best guide your firm's future business decisions.

Naturally, each of you will likely have questions that are specific to your firm. Some industry insights might involve questions such as these:

- What trends do you anticipate over the next three years for your company {university; agency; etc}? How do you see things changing, and why?
- What imminent economic, social, or political issues may impact your company and why?
- What are the biggest challenges that your company/industry is facing currently?
- How might an engineering {architectural; construction; etc} firm help you to address those challenges? Are there additional services that you suggest we provide or coordinate?
- How do you see your personal role changing in the next three years?
- What are the top three decision-making criteria that your company uses when selecting an engineering firm?
- What forms of marketing does your firm consider most effective? What kind of information would you find most helpful, and in what form would you best like it communicated?

So, once you determine the data sought, how do you get people talking, sharing, and idea-izing? Here are four solid techniques to get valuable primary research:

Integrate it within a client perception discussion. You need to get client feedback anyway, so why not ask for industry insights at the same time that you are discussing their perception of your firm and its performance? When you

are dealing with clients with whom you hope to have an ongoing (even lifetime!) relationship, my suggestion is to hold a focus group upon the project's completion. Invite an array of people representing various factions of the project: your day-to-day client contact; owner; key user; contractor/construction manager; sub-consultant(s); real estate entity; etc. I have held these kinds of focus groups for between 4-10 people involved within a single project. Because I promise to keep the dialogue to a limited timeframe (around 60 to 90 minutes), the number of participants remains in proportion with the time allocated. The cool thing about multi-disciplined focus groups is that attendees will remind one another of what occurred during the project. (Note: this could backfire if you had some bloopers; it's a risk you should be willing to take and professionally manage). Once you've received feedback regarding the project - which will likely include some fantastic testimonials for future marketing - you can then move on to facilitate a dialogue around industry-insights. If you have ever participated in a well-run focus group, then you know that it's actually quite fun to hear one another's perspectives. It's likely that the group will depart feeling their time was well-spent, not just as an obligatory provider of feedback, but also in terms of learning something new.

Emphasize the value of their expertise by including their input in an article or white paper. Do you write articles for publications, craft white papers to entice prospects, and submit abstracts to speak at conferences? I hope your answer is yes, and if so, why not involve a client or prospect in any or all of these efforts? By letting them know your intentions for picking their 'expert' brains, such as writing an article to be submitted to a hot industry rag like Modern Steel Construction, they will be more than happy to grant you an interview and share their thoughts. Not only will you have new data to support or guide your firm's marketing strategy, but you'll also have information to add to your position within the article, white paper, or abstract, and you will be building a stronger rapport in the process! It's win-win-WIN.

Stress this point: helping you could very well help them. Even in business-to-business contexts, people love to talk about themselves. It may even be their favorite subject. So why not stress the fact that their willingness to spend some time sharing their perspectives and intelligence on their industry could quite possibly help you to help them in their professional role, even if you are dealing with those at the ownership level? In fact, especially so, because owners are (often) most vested in the growth of the company at large, and so by sharing challenges and trends with you, there is the potential that your firm could, in turn, evolve and innovate to better serve their business purpose in the future.

Host a private roundtable forum. Just as professional organizations hold private, by-invitation-only roundtables, so too, could your firm. There are many A/E/C firms that will organize special events for clients and prospects. It's not easy, to be sure, but it can be done - especially when you are bringing your own existing clients together. Let's say that once per year, you create a scenario where you invite representative, non-competing clients (just a few - that's all you need) to celebrate them. Perhaps your agenda involves a program where you discuss big-picture external issues that have varying impacts on the attendees. Then, you share case studies and lessons learned across the industries/attendees, relating to centralized themes (i.e. budget approvals; internal workflow/processes; technology; etc). Perhaps you wrap up the business portion of the program by pairing people up to brainstorm on one another's business challenges. You then conclude with time for socializing and networking over a meal (good food is a divine motivator)!

Primary research is like dough. Once you've collected and mixed all the ingredients, you can shape it into a myriad of forms for your consumption. Make sure that you put to good use all insights gained from those that really matter.