



Do what you do best---build relationships and sell. Smart ways to delegate content development.

By Anne Scarlett, first printed in PSMJ's *AE Rainmaker*

Quality content. It's the darling of our marketing programs these days. Even the most stubborn of AEC firms cannot ignore the numbers indicating that new business opportunities---or at least strong enhancements of professional credibility---come from social media marketing channels. Solid, rich content ensures that our electronic marketing efforts draw attention, fans, and most of all---new projects.

But wait. Your job is business development. You spend the majority of your working hours calling on prospects and clients; networking; providing direction on presentation and proposal strategy; studying research and making wise moves with leadership towards securing business. In the past, you most certainly edited website content; wrote relevant, clever cover letters; and prepared the first draft for project understandings.

But now, on top of that, prospects and clients are demanding more than your firm's electronic visibility. They want extra information. And typically, they want it for free. They want to see blog posts regularly in their RSS feeds; tweets that are useful to the AEC industry; opportunities for online 'conversation'; data-rich white papers.

This is particularly a problem in mid-sized firms or smaller branch offices without the assistance of a big marketing team; public relations experts; or outsourced writing professionals. There's only so much time in our days, especially if we insist upon life balance to keep us sane. So what is a quality business development professional to do? Adjust our focus from making calls and visits to prospects? Skip more networking functions in order to write worthy content for these newer marketing channels? Ideally, the answer to both would be an emphatic no. Instead, we need to delegate the content development---while also remaining highly involved in its direction and final edits.

Since you are an important 'company face' interacting with the outside world, you most certainly cannot disengage completely from content development. That would be crazy, considering you know what people are talking about; you've heard their challenges. But direction/topic-setting aside, here's what you can do to get help rounding out your firm's marketing efforts.

SOURCE THE WRITER(S):

1. Overcome the notion that all technical professionals are crappy writers. This is a generalization, not a reality.
2. Open your eyes to other potentially talented writers in your firm, such as those in the administrative and support staff.
3. Recruit an intern from local university journalism and/or marketing communications departments. As well, don't overlook the idea of recruiting for a writing intern at the design or engineering schools in your area.
4. Outsource the work to a writing professional who knows and respects our industry. Sure, this will cost money. Weigh the cost against the opportunities lost for all the time you are writing rather than calling on prospects and networking.

You've found warm bodies that are willing to help. (By the way, in this economy, internal staff would far rather start writing and researching as opposed to sitting idle and potentially losing their job). Now what?

TRAIN THE WRITER(S):

1. First, review their writing samples first. If they do not have any, then ask them to create a project description from one of their recent projects. Encourage them to write in a story-telling format. Some elements of story-telling--- conversational; flowing; descriptive; sequential---will guide them to tell the stories of the clients' goals and challenges, and will motivate them to share hiccups (and resolutions) encountered along the way. Be prepared to help them unearth the kernels of most interest.
2. If their own writing voice is acceptable to you, then complement them and encourage their continued exploration of independent style. Alternatively,
3. Pick your favorite writing 'voices' (in or out of our industry) to show examples of what you're looking for. If you are truly a great writer, then obviously your own work serves as an example. Be mindful. If it's an internal writer rather than an intern or outsourced professional, then you may opt to let them use their own style regardless of whether it matches your preferences, unless it is so far off-the-mark that it would cause harm rather than good. It's often hard for writers at any level to change their style, though it certainly can be done with additional attention.

GIVE GUIDANCE AND CONTINUOUS INSPIRATION:

1. Don't make these people 'figure it out for themselves'. They are not mind-readers. They may need more direction than simply a general request: "Write about how our clients are incorporating sustainability into their capital building projects." Not focused enough.
2. In the beginning, create outlines for your writer(s) to fill out the content. This may require some research on their part. Remind them that it's ok to start with the end in mind.
3. Equip them with Strunk & White's The Elements of Style or similar resources. Make sure they have robust thesaurus and dictionary programs.

Offloading some content development responsibility may be the wisest move you make in 2010. Do it!