



Go Team Marketing!

Three steps to achieve the best results from your firm's marketing team.

By Anne Scarlett, printed in *The Zweig Letter*, *CE News*, and *Structural Engineer*

While you were earning your technical degree at university, how many classes did you have on the subjects of marketing, communications or sales? Conversely, how many classes do you think members from the marketing department had with a focus on geotechnology or hydrology? Both questions likely received the same response: few to none.

With two unrelated paths of education and experience, it's no wonder that the relationship between technical and marketing folks requires tender loving care in order to be more productive. Speaking as one of 'them' — a former business development director with 'only' an interior design degree — over the years, I recognized that a positive relationship between the two types is imperative for desirable results. It also increases the retention of your marketing staff — a group historically known for high attrition, especially at the junior level. As a future or current leader of your engineering firm, here are three action items to solidify the bond and create an effective, multi-disciplined marketing team:

EMPATHIZE:

A few years ago, I worked with an international construction company. This firm had an impressive commitment to cross-disciplined training for new technical hires. New did not mean new to their careers — new meant new to the firm, at any level. Before the technical professional actually launched into his 'official' job, he was rotated from department to department for short periods in order to get hands-on experience throughout the company. From accounting to human resources to marketing, this staff member immersed himself in the day-to-day world of his colleagues. There's nothing like total immersion to truly walk into another's shoes. While a total immersion may not be practical in every work environment, there is validity to the logic, as well as scaled down ways to achieve a similar empathetic result between departments — especially between technical and non-technical staff.

Technical or not, our careers require us to deal with unique pressures, processes, ways of thinking, deadlines, deliverables, goals, intentions, life balance, and being human. Boiled down, we all share different versions of the same issues. These issues impact our performance and work style. Once this is recognized, a realistic level of cross-understanding, mutual respect and empathy can be reached through the **total immersion** (systematic exposure to other departments) mentioned earlier. Two scaled back ideas include:

Lunch-and-learns: Many firms have established lunch-and-learn programs, where on a regular basis the staff is invited to hear about a current project. Make certain that these programs would also incorporate presentations from the marketing department about their initiatives.

Mutual Mentorship: On an even more micro level, pair key technical staff member with marketing staff members. Create a job-shadowing or mutual mentorship sort of arrangement.

Action Item I: *Put into practice an official mechanism(s) for creating empathy between the technical and marketing professionals.*

BE AN EXEMPLARY (INTERNAL) CLIENT:

Your marketing department recognizes that you, the technical professionals, are their internal clients. Clearly, your firm is in business because of its core technical competencies. Marketing and other administrative functions exist to both support and lead the firm to increased success. It's a symbiotic relationship; in truth, one cannot survive without the other. Think of it like this: as a service provider, you expect to be treated a certain way by your own clients. You seek to create a long-term partnership with them. To do this well requires trust, clarity, and shared risk.

An internal client relationship is no different. Expectations range, but may look like something this:

You expect your marketing/business development department to:

- Produce quality proposals, presentations, brochures, articles, press releases, and all other marketing related materials
- Manage the process of each marketing initiative/project through its completion
- Maintain databases: clients/prospects; projects
- Provide deadlines and followup
- Remain up-to-date on the best practices for marketing and branding
- Communicate all activity regarding external activity and the sales processes
- Design strategic plans for winning new business
- Introduce creative initiatives for positioning, increasing market share, lead generation, et al
- And more....

From the perspective of the marketing department, the technical staff should — in no particular order:

- Respond when asked for information
- Give thorough information with minimal 'holes'
- Provide data in a timely manner; remaining deadline conscious
- Write or edit technical content within proposals and all other marketing pieces
- Work on the fee in advance so there is ample time for 'approval'
- Share project 'stories' to use for collateral pieces
- Communicate the firm's strategic vision
- Be forthcoming about the logic behind corporate decisions
- Offer ongoing feedback
- Be available for external sales visits
- Cooperate when preparing presentations and rehearsing for project interviews

Be clear. What do you need from each other? And how do these things reflect and support the company's goals? Remember, you are in this together; achieving a common goal should **not** be a battle.

Action Item II: *Twice a year, hold a "How are we doing?" discussion forum between your marketing department and any technical staff that frequently contribute to the marketing effort. Make the forum 360-degrees in nature — a safe environment to encourage senior and junior staff alike to share their expectations and suggestions for improvement. Set a positive tone by commencing the forum with direct, specific appreciation for demonstrated progress and jobs well done.*

CREATE A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND BUILD A COMMITTED TEAM:

A learning environment is one in which individuals seek to complement one another's specialties in order to be more effective in cumulative. This requires a shared vision without the loss of self-interest— in other words, accepting the company vision as an extension of one's personal vision. To make this happen, leaders of the marketing team must facilitate opportunities for 1. brainstorming creative exploration of complex issues, and 2. debate— presentation of differing viewpoints with supporting arguments in order to reach a decision. The goal is to create safe environments for both scenarios, where individual talents are leveraged, regardless of experience or role. Further, marketing leadership must determine appropriate contexts in which to move from one (brainstorming) to another (debate resulting in decisions).

Cross-team communication is another way to build create a learning environment. Whether you are 25-, 100-, or 500-people strong, your firm likely has various special teams or task forces, teams, or groups that serve a particular purpose. Why not increase the effectiveness of the marketing team by ensuring that one member sits in the weekly project manager meetings to get a pulse on project status and to book the time of billable staff for imminent marketing activity? Why not include the Director of Professional Development in key marketing meetings to identify opportunities where technical staff could receive marketing-related training? Why not include a business development professional in an occasional quality control review board in order to share the quality expectations expressed 'on the street'? Identifying liaisons between these various teams is not just a cost-conscious and time-sensitive collaboration technique; it is also a way to share best practices from one team to another.

Finally, just as your marketing department is committed to you, you too, must be committed to them. Increase the accountability and participation of your technical staff through their wallets. Add 'marketing contributions' as a line item on their performance review with the understanding that at some level they must contribute to marketing team, and will be measured (and compensated) as such.

Action Item III: *Set the parameters for a committed team learning environment, including: 1. a communication structure that fosters productive learning and follow-through; 2. effective collaboration and communication via cross-team liaisons; and 3. increased accountability and participation through direct personal reward.*

The relationship between your marketing and technical staff cannot be converted over night. Yet, productive exchanges between these professionals will have a cumulative effect, elevating your firm to new heights of success!
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