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# ENR

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## Ten Trends in A/E/C Business Development

What are the hot trends for selling design and construction services?



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I was recently asked to share my thoughts about current trends related to the way architecture, engineering, and construction firms are approaching business development. Marketing trends, high levels of client sophistication, changing buying models, and technology have all impacted design and construction firm thinking about the sales process. Here's a macro view of some of the trends happening in the market space right now.

**Content** – Companies are pushing out informative, useful content that serves several purposes. On one hand, it is content that business developers can use to as “excuses to contact” their prospects or as an opportunity to curate the most relevant content for them. It allows sellers to demonstrate their firm’s thought leadership as a differentiation strategy. On the other hand, firms at the top of their game with content creation are generating leads from that content, so a company blog in effect becomes a virtual business developer, on the job 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

**Social Selling** – Sales professionals are increasingly using social platforms, particularly LinkedIn, to develop relationships. They are connecting virtually with prospects, sharing information of value, joining groups, responding to group discussions, and focusing on their social presence to drive new opportunities. Recent research found that 80% of buyers prefer that sellers contact them via email, so making social connections and sending direct messages is increasingly becoming a favored technique of professional business developers. (Learn more and download my free ebook, Social Selling in the A/E/C Market Space.)

**Seller-Doer** – Before there were dedicated business developers, seller-doer was the primary model of business development. This approach essentially refers to technical professionals – principals, vice presidents, project managers, project executives, lead designers, etc. – participating on the front lines of business development. Most commonly this approach is utilized for existing clients; however, it’s often for new prospects as well. Client expectations and increasing sophistication are driving this trend, further evidenced by the educational trend below. Clients and prospects want to meet with the key individuals who will be leading their projects.

**The BD Trainer** – A/E/C firms with dedicated business developers are using these professionals to serve as trainers and coaches to technical staff, creating seller-doers and making business development more cultural. Research from the Society for Marketing Professional Services / SMPS Foundation has found that fewer than half of firms provide business development training to seller-doers, and of those that do offer some level of training, dedicated business developers are often the trainers, creating a critical new job responsibility.

**CRM Software** – Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software is not new; however, A/E/C firms are realizing its importance and driving its integration beyond the sales and marketing departments. Software solutions like Deltek Vision, Cosential, Salesforce, Microsoft Dynamics, and even free plans like Hubspot, are increasingly being used by business developers, marketers, and seller-doers, creating databases rich with client intelligence available for the whole team to access.

**Client Experience** – Firms are finally paying attention to the Client Experience and understanding that it is a primary driver for 80% of their firm’s business. Client Experience entails listening to clients, understanding their true needs and drivers, and continually delivering a high level of value to elevate client loyalty. A/E/C firms don’t typically provide any customer service training to staff in general, or project managers in particular, so a focus on creating a Client Experience (aka CX) program is becoming a critical element for a successful business development strategy. There's now even a [Client Experience in Professional Services](#) conference, with a heavy emphasis on our industry.

**Referrals** – Referrals are as old as business development, but the referrers have changed drastically in recent years. It used to be that a referral was made by a satisfied client – someone who had direct experience working with your firm. And if there was no direct experience, there was at least a relationship, whereby someone in your network referred you or your firm to someone else in their network. Today the game has changed, and the majority of referrers are people who may not know you directly, but have interacted with your firm via blogs, white papers, ebooks, books, articles, presentations, and social media. They might not need your service, but if they are connected with you or following you online, they very well may recommend you to someone they know who does need the services your firm provides. This trend emphasizes both the importance and value of content creation.

**Education-Based BD** – According to [this research](#) by Rain Group, the top difference between sales winners and second-place finishers is that the client felt that the winners “Educated me with new ideas or perspectives.” Simply stated, business developers must not only understand the prospect’s needs, they must also understand their industry and be able to offer new concepts or insights, which is a key way to differentiate from the competition. Business developers are recommending alternative project delivery models, bringing in teaming partners, and even making design and construction recommendations from the earliest conversations with prospects. This continual provision of insight directly relates to the next trend.

**Collaboration** – It’s worth noting that the number two differentiator identified in the Rain Group research was that successful sellers collaborated with their prospects, demonstrating higher level of involvement than simply attending a meeting, giving a presentation, and submitting a proposal. Today’s buyers are extremely sophisticated, and they want to work with a business developer who will be there with them through every step of the process. This ongoing collaboration, coupled with a regular stream of education and insight, is a great way to differentiate your firm from the competition. The business development model is changing, and business developers – whether they are in dedicated BD roles or seller-doers – must be relationship managers and consultants.

**Empathy** – There’s a popular, although unattributed quote that states, “You can’t understand someone until you’ve walked a mile in their shoes.” This trend really relates to a number of the other business development trends previously identified, like client experience programs. If your clients are facilities managers, for instance, do you understand the pressures they face daily – well beyond design and construction projects? Do you know what it means to be a non-core function of a company or institution,

and the challenges they face getting their projects funded – or funded to the level required to do it right? Do you know that what seems like a simple change order to you can actually create an uncomfortable situation between them and their supervisors? Perhaps if you'd walk a mile in their shoes, you'd change your tune when it comes to business development and project delivery.

So there's a quick overview of ten trends happening now in the world of A/E/C business development. There are, of course, much broader trends impacting business development, from newer project delivery models like Public Private Partnerships (P3) and Integrated Project Delivery (IPD), as well as the prevalence of third-party facilities managers that are upending the decision-making process. Furthermore, these BD trends vary greatly depending upon whether your firm is a prime or subconsultant / subcontractor. But this is a high-level view of some of the hotter BD approaches and tools right now.

What are some of the other major sales trends that you've seen? Are there sales approaches from yesterday that are not as effective today?

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