

Article of Interest

BRANDING + BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

By Carolyn Bligh

Carolyn Bligh, Founding Principal of Bligh Graphics, LLC in Simsbury, Connecticut, is a nationally recognized branding and marketing expert. Specialized in the building industry for over 20 years, she is passionate about advancing AEC firms' business goals and marketing strategies.



Among the other Young Architects Forum (YAF) events, in May 2011 YAF organized the **Branding + Business Development: Using Modern Tools to Get More Work** workshop for the AIA Convention in New Orleans. With three marketing and business development leaders, Michael Ayles, AIA, NCARB, David Koren, Assoc. AIA, CPSM, and David Roccosalva, we set out to share our insights on tools and tactics to strengthen firms' efforts to get more work. This article is a summary of the portion of the workshop I presented on branding and tools.

"This workshop provided a comprehensive review for Architects to understand the process of developing a strong brand and the appropriate tools to promote that brand." - Matthew Dumich, AIA, Young Architects Forum Advisory Committee

Tools – How they fit in

When meeting a potential client, they always want a particular tool. "We need a brochure." We ask, "Why, what do you need it for? What do you want it to do?" Often, the answer is, "Our competitors have one, so we need one too." Or, "We need something to give out as a leave-behind." It is important for firms to understand that tools are only as good as the brand and strategy that is planned and implemented. What we would love to hear is, "We need to communicate our brand to position us to be the preferred choice for healthcare projects in the Northeast." The tool needs to be supported with a purpose and process that delivers your brand, and increases the value of your firm to your target audience.

Understanding your brand

Your "brand identity" is about your logo. Your "brand" (reputation) is about the clients' experience working with you, your relationships, and their perceptions. It's not what you do; it's how you do it. Your brand is not about your service offerings or how long you've been in business. Many firms offer the same services as their competitors and practice in the same market sectors. Focusing solely on services will not create value or differentiate your firm. What will make your firm stand out is your experience and reputation – your brand. Having a strong brand is about earning trust and keeping promises. You'll have return on investment (ROI) when

people know, like, and trust you. Building a strong brand doesn't happen over night or by using one tool. It happens over a long period of time, with consistent efforts, and demonstrating you care about the client /prospect and their business.

Why your brand is important

Once you define your brand, you can use it to differentiate your firm through your marketing strategy and tools. A differentiated brand makes you stand out in a crowded marketplace, and helps prospects prequalify you. It makes it easy for them to see you are the clear choice for their project. Another benefit, internal to the firm, is that it guides your employees and gets everyone understanding and living the brand. In turn, this helps build brand awareness externally, which further shapes perceptions.

FIVE STEPS TO DEFINE YOUR BRAND

1. Audit. Do a comprehensive review of your existing brand, involving looking at it from both internal and external perspectives. Start with listening and gathering employee, client and peer feedback. Many firms hire a third party to collect this feedback since it often provides more unfiltered, direct feedback. Design questions around what you would like to learn and keep them open ended. Publish a report of the results and share it with firm's leadership. Then review all your existing tools (for example: proposals, websites, brochures, ads, boards). Try this exercise - layout all the tools on a conference table and around the conference room, and do a visual scan. What do you see? Is there a clear style and message that stands out? Does it look like the tools were from the same firm? Then compare it to the collected feedback. Do they align? Is there a common thread? Go one step further and compare your findings with your competitors. Do you look and sound the same?

2. Define. This step distills the feedback and helps discover unique attributes and differentiators. The goal for this step would be to use this information to build a brand platform that is designed around the strongest values, perceptions, and attributes. Firms can develop vision, mission, and value statements that support this platform, and support desired brand perceptions. Firms can also use



a supporting tagline that connects to their brand identity. During the workshop, I asked the audience if they could own one word what that word would be. This one word should be spoken by the firm, on the website, and in all tools. It should also be a word your clients value.

3. Recommend. Now that we have a defined brand, it's time to map out a strategy and plan that supports it. Create your brand masterplan with budgets and timeframes. You should consider everything at first, and then boil down to what is critical and of most importance to your audience. Make a priority list with plenty of room for flexibility.

4. Implement. "Use it or loose it." One of the toughest steps, it's also one of the most rewarding. This is where the plan takes shape and the strategy and tools come to life. The brand becomes visual, a unique voice, and where people will engage and experience it. A brand should be managed to make sure it is fulfilling the promise. Make sure there are scheduled routine brand "check-ups" to keep it healthy and strong. If you are not consistently demonstrating and living your brand, your firm will become increasingly less noticeable.

5. Measure. "Seeing is believing." It's always desirable to see tangible results before investing more resources to strengthen strategy and create more tools. Today, with digital tools, we can capture a ton of data. Measuring this data and making sense of it all can be tricky, especially if you have not benchmarked your existing activities prior to implementing new strategies and tools. In measuring, you discover what is working and what is not. Be ready to fix, change, and evolve. Track over time. Stay a steady course, but be ready to switch things up if new opportunities arise. Experimenting with new trends and social technologies should also be part of the overall strategy. We often see clients discover much excitement and results by stepping out of their comfort zone and trying something new.

Traditional	Modern
Brochure	Website (2.0+)
Direct Mail	Email Marketing
Press Release	Social Media Release (SMR)
Article	Blog
Tradeshaw Booth	Virtual Tour
Presentation Boards	iPads
Presentation	Webinar, Video
Survey (mail or phone)	Online survey
Roladex	CRM system
Proposal & Qualification Books	Custom website with virtual tour
Books	Audio & digital books
Phone Call	Social Media Channels
Letters & Notecards	Email & texting
Events	Apps
CDs and DVD	FTP
Signage	Google Analytics, SEO
Business card	QR code
Advertisements	Ad words or banner ads
Sponsorship	Podcast
White Paper	Mobile website & marketing

So many tools, so little time

As this chart shows, there are many types of tools to consider for communicating your brand. Both traditional and modern tools should be integrated to support online and offline efforts. There is no single tool that can be a "silver bullet" to get more work. The tool is just the messenger, the reminder of your brand. The brand itself, strategically planned and consistently implemented, will be your key to get more work. The tools can help with: brand awareness, building trust, pre-qualification, education, promoting a cause, driving traffic to website and/or social channels, polling audiences, gaining competitive intelligence, and shaping perceptions. Think of your brand as the core, like the sun. The tools radiate and get their energy and life from the brand.

In closing the workshop, I told a story about an owner who was a speaker at a conference a few years back. He said, "I just want people to FUBB me." You can imagine he got everyone's attention, as I did when I mentioned it. FUBB stands for Follow Up Beyond Belief. It's a simple idea, but very hard to achieve. The owner asked, before signing the contract, that the selected firm agree to his terms of submitting meeting minutes within two days of the meeting. If he doesn't get them, he reminds them they are under contract to do so. He was shocked how firms are not able to keep this promise. This is a clear example of "It's not what you do. It's how you do it." Performance, service, and keeping a promise are paramount. A firm can have all the tools in the world, but a strong brand and strategy need to be in place first. ●

