



Seven Things Your Clients Want You To Know

By Howard J. Wolff, FSMPS

In this changing COVID-19 world, clients want to know that you care about them and their businesses. And it's worth assessing how they view you and your business.

Checking in with clients—in good times and tough ones—builds personal relationships, especially when there's no ulterior motive. Marketing professionals who understand what clients are looking for from A/E/C firms—and those who have a realistic grip on how their practice is perceived by their clients—are in the best position to succeed in the new marketplace.

When asking for feedback, it can be a challenge to get clients to tell you the truth, especially if they have something negative to say about you or your firm. They don't want to hurt your feelings. But, when an objective third party asks for their perceptions, clients are less likely to hold back.

Having conducted dozens of brand audits for A/E/C firms, I offer some universal truths. These were gleaned from what many of your clients have shared with me that they really want you to know.

1. "Focus on helping, not selling."

Clients have their own issues and concerns. In today's world especially,

they have very little tolerance for self-congratulatory, self-promoting, and self-serving communication.

One client advises, "Listen harder. Communicate with a purpose. Let me know you have something worthy of my time and attention."

2. "I've got a pretty good BS detector."

At the marketing stage, clients don't want you to show them a lot of un-built work. They know that anyone can produce an impressive rendering; instead, they want to see built work and relevant projects.

Pretty pictures, however, aren't enough to sway your prospects. "Your reputation is as important as your portfolio," notes one client. "In doing our research, we first ask colleagues for recommendations; then we go to those firms' websites to look for relevant experience. After seeing a project we like, we double-check with that client to see how they felt about it."

Another says, "Just because you've done a lot of projects in my building type, don't think that will impress me. I want to know how you will approach my project. Show me two relevant projects instead of 22. And tell me why they are relevant to me."

Several clients mentioned that they've seen the same project in multiple presentations ... with credit

taken by the firm of record, the lead designer who worked on the job (and since started their own company), and the project manager (who now works for a competitor). Explain your role precisely and honestly.

The reputation of your firm's founder and/or design leader may have gotten you to the shortlist. But don't mislead clients into thinking that person is going to be intimately involved in the project when they're not.

3. "Don't suck up. Speak up."

Despite the adage that the customer is always right, clients want you to tell them when they're veering off course. "My advice to designers, when they don't agree with where we're headed, is to say, 'We'll do what you want us to do, but we think you're on the wrong track and here's why.' Then, document that conversation."

Another adds, "Don't try to hide bad news and don't let it fester. Bad news doesn't improve with age. Tell us if something is wrong and get it out on the table early; otherwise, it will only get worse."

Adherence to schedules is also a priority for your clients. Be honest and up front about what's possible. As one client who hires A/E/C firms for projects worldwide notes, "My concern is about meeting deadlines. If it's going to take longer, tell me. I'd rather get it right than have to go back and fix things later."

4. "Show me."

Demonstrate that you can think on your feet. Several clients lament that the ability to sketch by hand is becoming increasingly rare. How ironic is it when the client pulls out a pen in a meeting and sketches some ideas?

Another client's pet peeve, "Don't tell me you cannot do something. Find a way to do it. The art of problem-solving and design-thinking is getting lost."

Several clients commented on the diminished quality of construction documents. A more detailed set of drawings means fewer questions on how to build the job and fewer problems for the owner and operator once the project is built. With a good set of documents, you get a clear sense of what the building will look like, how it will be constructed, and how much it will cost.

5. "It's your job to know what I need."

It's not about building a monument or winning a design award. One client, whose title is vice president of design, puts it bluntly, "I dislike it when architects design to gratify their egos rather than create thoughtful buildings that accommodate users in functional yet inspiring spaces. I don't have much patience for design that values form over function. Beauty should be the goal, no question, but the user's comfort, well-being, and productivity should always be the starting point."

As A/E/C professionals, you also need to demonstrate how you can meet the client's financial and operational goals. Owners want to know that your team shares responsibility for meeting the budget. "We want to see increasing detail on scope and spend alignment. Validate budget conformance from the start and through all phases of a project."

And when it comes to value engineering, offer cost-containment alternatives that don't fundamentally alter the project. When there's a need

to cut, make sure the concept and design intent don't suffer.

6. "Your fee is not as important as you think it is."

"Fees don't vary that much from firm to firm; therefore, they're not that critical," says one client. Another offers, "We don't always select the firm with the lowest fee, but it's hard to justify selecting someone whose fee is two or three times higher than the others."

"Don't play the game of low-balling a fee to get the job and then hitting us with additional services over and over. If your fee becomes unreasonable, we won't work with you again."

"A fee that's too low can be as bad as one that's too high. It raises a concern about whether you really understand the scope."

Above and beyond price, clients are looking for value. At the same time, they're reasonable enough to appreciate that you should be able to make a profit.

7. "Don't take us for granted."

Your clients understand the shiny-object syndrome and the enticement of the next job. But they want to know that you value them.

One shares this story, "We had a good relationship with firm XYZ and gave them a lot of repeat business without having them compete for our work. By taking us for granted, they've lost over \$1 million in design fees so far this year that we've given to another firm; but they never came and talked to me. How crazy is that?"

Another client offers this cautionary tale to those who rest on their laurels, "Recently, an incumbent firm seemed rather robotic in their presentation. In contrast, a short-listed firm with whom we had never worked had their entire staff visit

our facility and interview our staff. Then they shared their observations and recommendations. That was impressive. It said a lot about their interest and enthusiasm."

While it's important to ensure strong communications with existing clients regarding current and prospective work, it's also up to you to stay top-of-mind and relevant between projects.

Here's some advice from one client, "You could do a better job marketing by staying in touch with us, providing updates on what you're doing (via LinkedIn and email) and offering content of value (new approaches, tips, ideas, advice)."

This will be especially true in our post-COVID-19 world. Let clients know that you value them as people. Find ways to exhibit empathy and share information that is timely, helpful, and relevant.

In Conclusion

Every bit of feedback presented here offers an opportunity to separate yourself from the pack.

Clients hire A/E/C professionals who understand the overarching project goals and deliver. They also expect you to listen on their frequency, think like an owner, and tell them the truth.

The message is clear. If you're not sure what your clients want, ask. Whether you ask for feedback directly or through an objective third party, your clients will appreciate that you did. ■



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