

SMPS FOUNDATION ARTICLE

Pull Marketing in Action:

How A/E/C Clients Use Websites to Find and Vet Service Providers

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COVERING DOMAINS OF PRACTICE



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the need to sell professional services continues to grow, it is important to look at how various marketing tools and strategies work most effectively to help potential consumers find professional service providers. This particular study focuses on one subset of the professional and business services supersector, the architecture, engineering and construction (A/E/C) industries, and on one particular marketing tool—the firm’s website.

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How do marketing tools and strategies work most effectively to help potential consumers find professional service providers?

Since the dawn of the digital age in the 1970s and the rise of Generation X and the millennials, marketing wisdom has transitioned from focusing on “push” strategies (aimed at broadcasting information toward potential consumers) to “pull” strategies (aimed at inviting potential customers to find you). As this change in marketing strategy has occurred, the size of the professional services economy has grown. The World Bank reports that 68 percent of the world’s gross domestic product is derived from professional servicesⁱ, and the U.S. Department of Labor reports the professional and business services “supersector” currently employs over 20 million Americansⁱⁱ. Statistics Canada reports professional services employs more than 475,000.

As the need to sell professional services continues to grow, it is important to look at how various marketing tools and strategies work most effectively to help potential consumers find professional service providers. This particular study focuses on one subset of the professional and business services supersector, the architecture, engineering and construction (A/E/C) industries, and on one particular marketing tool—the firm’s website.

RESEARCH

Secondary research confirms that websites are an important vehicle used by A/E/C firms to represent themselves to prospective clients and by prospective clients to find firms with which they want to work. A study of 200 buyers of professional services conducted by the online marketing resource, Rain Today, indicates that: “While B2B buyers use a variety of sources to identify and learn more about professional services providers, three of the top 10 ways are online—on your website (58 percent), through an Internet search (55 percent) or through an industry website article or story (53 percent)”ⁱⁱⁱ. Similarly, a survey of over 1,000 buyers of professional services led to a research report distributed by Hinge, a professional services marketing agency, called [“Beyond Referrals: How Today’s Buyers Check You Out.”](#) The study confirms that, “as savvy marketers know, the web is increasingly a cornerstone for professional services buyers.”^{iv}

Understanding how buyers of professional services use websites and other online tools will help A/E/C marketers ensure their investment in online resources is strategically planned and represents money well spent. To dive deeper into this topic, a survey by the SMPS Foundation was conducted in April 2016.

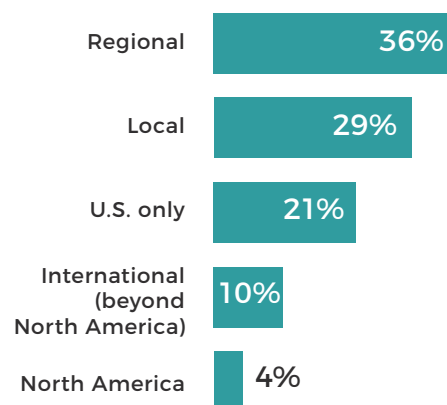
SURVEY STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

The survey included five questions focused on investigating how end users of professional A/E/C services use websites to find providers and six questions that gathered demographic information about respondents. The survey was distributed to SMPS members to extend to their clients. Charts demonstrating questions asked and aggregate answers to questions are provided below.

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

A total of 72 participants responded to the survey. Thirty-six percent of respondents stated that their firm’s geographic scope was regional, and 29 percent stated local.

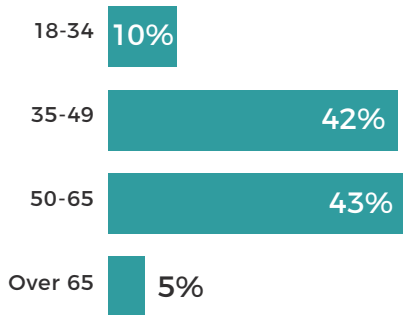
Location of Respondents



Annual gross revenue of the companies of all respondents plots on a standard bell curve as does the distribution of gross revenue in most metropolitan areas. The majority of companies represented (77 percent) are in the \$1 million to \$500 million range of annual gross revenue.

The age range of respondents suggests the majority fall into the Generation X and baby boomer generations, although there were some millennials and some mature/silent generation respondents.

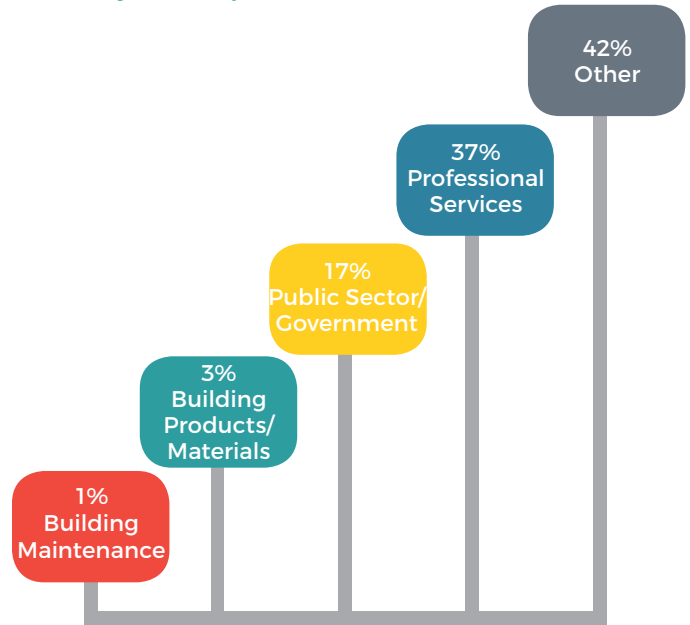
Age Range of Respondents



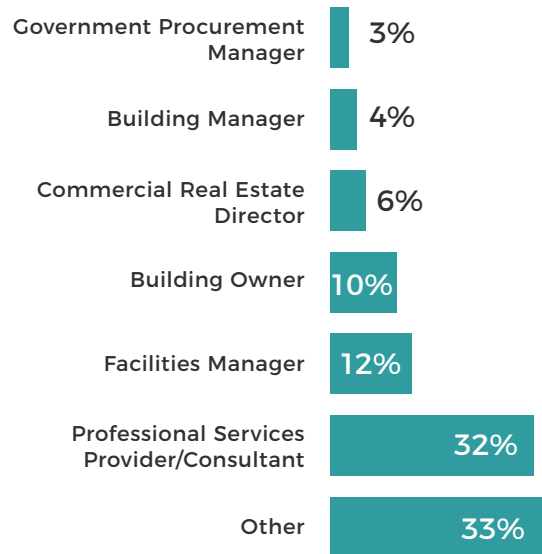
Of 72 respondents, 67 percent (48 respondents) self-identified as potential buyers of A/E/C services or facility end users, while 33 percent (24 respondents) self-identified as professional services

professionals. The majority of respondents that this survey classified as end users of A/E/C services identified themselves as building owners, building managers, facilities manager or commercial real estate professionals. Those who self-identified as serving "Other Roles in Client Organization" included those in executive leadership or others who are stationed within the facilities of client organizations.

Industry of Respondents



Role of Respondents



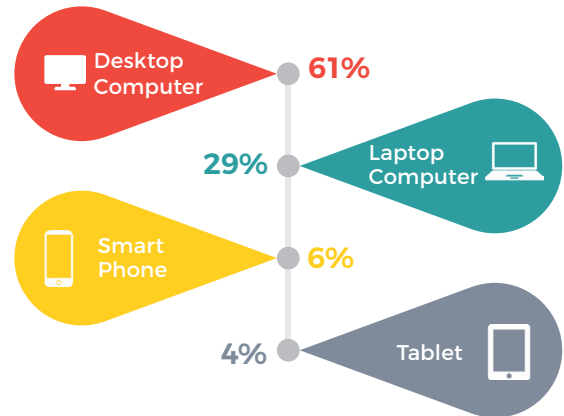
Understanding which parts of a firm’s website end users are most likely to visit when they’re looking for a new service provider can provide competitive advantage to A/E/C firms.

USAGE DATA

The results of the survey line up with what secondary research suggests. Ninety-six percent of respondents cited looking at a firm’s website as a way to vet service providers. Of that 96 percent, 22 percent of respondents consider looking at a firm’s website “very important” (the highest available ranking for importance this survey gave to respondents) while 74 percent ranked a firm’s website as “useful but not essential,” (the second highest available ranking for importance this survey gave to respondents).

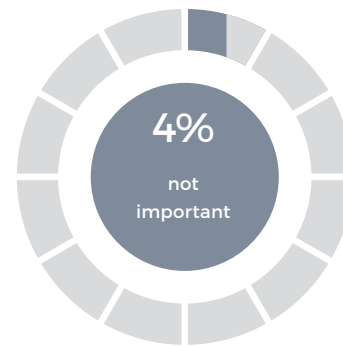
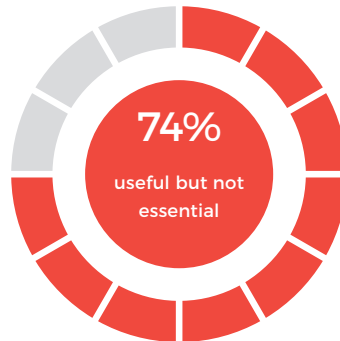
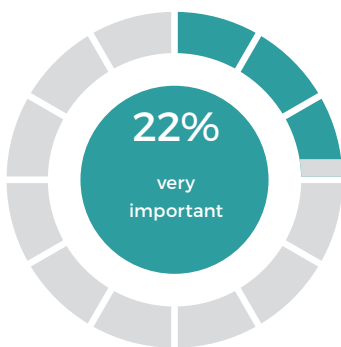
Understanding which parts of a firm’s website end users are most likely to visit when they’re looking for a new service provider can provide competitive advantage to A/E/C firms. Sections of a website that operate along the lines of what Warren Wittreich cites in his Harvard Business Review article about “How to Buy/Sell Professional Services, as extrinsic methods of persuasion.” In his article, Wittreich defines extrinsic methods as strategies in which the “primary emphasis is on extolling its own problem-solving abilities via such devices as: describing a generalized approach to most problems (“persuasion by method”); describing the abilities, experience,

How respondents look at websites

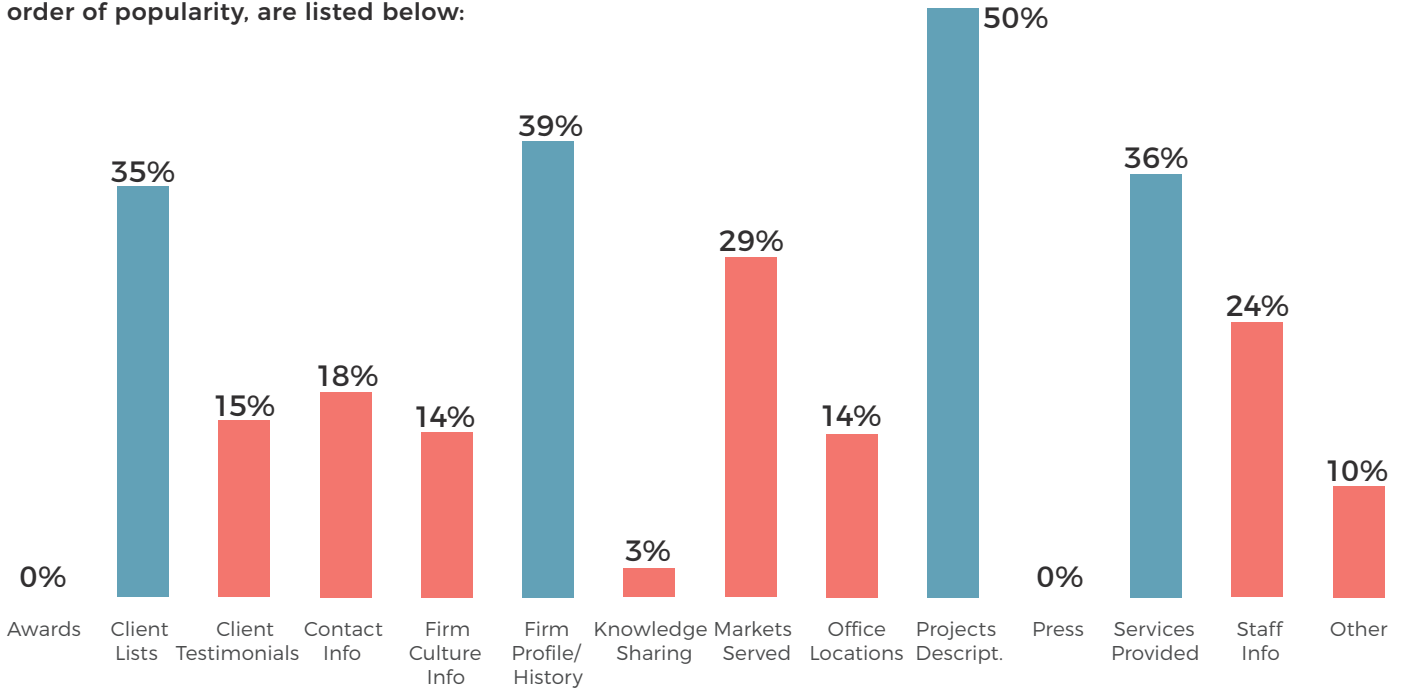


etc., of key personnel in the firm (“persuasion by personnel”); or describing specific problems solved for other clients (“persuasion by success story”).^v These are the methods used when the professional service firm does not yet have clear understanding of the client’s problem, which is substantially true when a prospective client is initially looking to determine which service providers to call to discuss their business challenge.

Usefulness in reviewing an A/E/C firm’s website to make purchase decisions



The sections of a firm’s website most often visited by those looking for professional service providers, in order of popularity, are listed below:



ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

For this report, we’re focusing on the top four website sections our respondents mentioned because they were cited often enough to represent clearly reliable data. We’ll start with the most mentioned category and work our way down the list.

“Project descriptions” is the leading section of a firm’s website to review when looking for a new provider. Clients want to know if the firm has experience on a project that is like the one they want to execute. As one respondent said, “My projects are pretty specialized, so it’s good to know whether my project is going to be the first attempt.” Another respondent shared the following, “If the service provider does not have experience in the specific project type to be design(ed) then we will not hire the firm.”

“Firm profile/history” is the second most popular area visited. Again, open-ended responses provide insight as to why this might be. It appears that a firm profile or history sheds light on a firm’s true size, longevity, and priorities. For some respondents, viewing a firm profile has had negative impact as the following comment suggests.

“For instance, when a firm is pursuing renovation work and all they talk about on their website are new buildings, I question their true interest in renovation work. Information about areas of special focus or expertise is helpful as long as it includes substantive information and is not just marketing speak.”

Another respondent cited a firm profile/history as having a surprisingly positive effect on their decision-making because it showed that the firm in

consideration had a “wider service list than I expected; more offices or larger firm than I expected.”

The third most visited area is “services provided.” Prospective clients can verify that a firm can provide the type of service their next project demands and see those services tied to project examples. As one open-ended response said, “not finding adequate project information of similar services that I am seeking has had a negative impact.”

The fourth most visited area is “client lists.” One respondent shared that “Previous client lists have allowed me to find out how satisfied customers were with the work done by the firm.” In other words, it gives a prospective client confidence to know that a firm has worked for other clients in the same industry, and it gives them a way to independently narrow their search. Most people know their competitors well, so it stands to reason that a client’s peers can be relied on to have useful intelligence about service providers. Referrals matter, and providing client lists can help generate positive testimonials that serve as referrals after the fact.

OTHER RESULTS TO CONSIDER

Though the following sections were not among the top four cited, they were noted often enough to bear mention. The subject of staff information seemed the most complex to understand clearly because the types of staff information requested are varied and sometimes contradictory.

Only 24 percent of respondents cited “staff info” as one of the most important areas they review on service provider websites. However, when asked about things respondents did not find on firm

websites, several respondents cited staff information of various types as something they would like to see on firm websites but do not often find there.

This discrepancy is brought to light when comparing the type of staff information that is presented on most websites with the type of staff information prospective clients seek. In answering an open-ended question about staff information, one respondent talked about being “turned off” by “high turnover of professional staff.” Another talked about wanting to see biographies of all the firm’s staff rather than just some. Still others wanted to know the number of personnel assigned to each division, market sector or office in a given firm. A few cited the difficulty in finding contact information for a specific person with whom they wanted to discuss their project. One respondent talked both about wanting to know the current workload of the firm and the most qualified individuals for their project. However, the same respondent who talked about wanting to find this information on the website acknowledged the difficulty of having it there due to how frequently it changes. Thus, it seems important to not simply provide staff information on a website, but to provide the right kind of staff information.

When asked about things that might positively or negatively influence a decision to hire a firm, several respondents shared that the quality of the site itself reflects on the quality of the firm. Typos, difficulty of navigation, lack of pertinent information, outdated site design or information, and a low-budget look were all cited as qualities that reflected negatively on a firm.

Contact information was another issue cited as something that can negatively affect the decision to hire a firm. One respondent said, “The most annoying occurrence: when we submit an inquiry on the Contact Us section, it is rare for us to receive an answer of any kind.” Others talked about wanting contact information for specific staff when only a general number was provided.

Though only 14 percent of respondents talked about looking at corporate culture information, one respondent said that, “The inability to convey the corporate culture is troubling.” Another cited the difficulty in finding a firm that had “the ability to demonstrate budget-based design.”

Thus, what kinds of information did respondents say had or could positively influence their decision-making when hiring a firm? Respondents cited the importance of posting certifications, such as minority business status, ACASS ratings (a rating the U.S. federal government gives to architecture and engineering service providers), and participation in various professional societies. Also mentioned was the ability to talk about a firm’s process for getting work done in a way that offered a differentiator. As one respondent put it, they wanted to know “what makes them stand apart from others besides normal services, areas it provides—without giving out the ‘secret recipe’ on there—if possible.”

Conclusion

The survey confirms that websites are a viable tool used by prospective clients to find service providers. The results also indicate that the key questions clients are trying to answer when reviewing a firm’s website are:

- 1) Has the A/E/C provider already done projects like the one I want to do?
- 2) Does the firm have the breadth and depth of experience I need?
- 3) Does the firm offer the services my project requires?
- 4) Has the company worked for other clients like me?
- 5) What are the firm’s differentiators?

The survey also suggests that clients look for specific kinds of staff information, so A/E/C firms should focus on providing information about staff that clients are seeking. In general this is information that demonstrates individual experience and capabilities and makes key staff easy to contact. It is important that, if your firm’s website provides a contact form, someone should respond to requests in a timely manner.

To build a buyer-friendly website that converts website visitors into clients, it is important that A/E/C marketers, business developers, and firm leaders understand what information prospective clients are actively seeking, and then present this information in a way that resonates with them.

Applying the findings of this SMPS Foundation research can be a great start to developing your firm’s site to attract prospective clients, delivering value, and making a maximum impact on website visitors.

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