



Be Courageous and Dig In: Tell A Connected Story

By Elke Giba

It's a common practice for A/E/C firms—no matter the size—to describe the services they deliver instead of what comes out of the services. Firms fall into the habit of rattling off a list of offerings and miss an important point: how their services solve problems or impact the client. This habit, unfortunately, can become a crutch.

You're unsure of the real reason you do what you do, so you resort to lists. But lists are not stories and lists don't compel potential clients to choose your firm for their next project.

It's a shame, because the body of work you are building could tell a phenomenal story if you look for and plan it. There's true value hidden in the tangible results of the technical services you provide, and that value carries great meaning.

Don't Tell How You Build It—Tell the Story About Why You Want To Build It

This problem shows up most often in a firm's project portfolio. Your portfolio may be all over the place without a strong story—except for the work from the one repeat client who keeps selecting you for similar work. With little continuity in projects, the expectation of expertise diminishes because your firm cannot demonstrate it.

Worse yet, members on your team become frustrated if they don't have a cohesive story to tell clients. I hear this complaint most often in my work with subject-matter experts. One engineer revealed his frustration with the diversity of work his team had been asked to complete. Sure, there were some high-profile projects in the firm's portfolio, but they lost their patina when shown next to more rudimentary projects. In a moment of

clarity, he said, "All our projects feel like chapters in different books." The plot line keeps changing and the technical team gets stuck trying to explain how they bring value to clients.

Find What Connects the Projects in Your Firm's Portfolio

What connects your firm to the completed work? Think about it this way: If each project represents a chapter, do the chapters read like they're all part of the same story? Are the projects related? How do they tie together? What threads of commonality connect one project to another? If you can claim that connection, your firm can tell a more cohesive story that opens up new opportunities.

If your firm is positioned as full-service and spread across multiple service and market lines, it may be challenging to find that singular story and communicate expertise. Saying you're a full-service firm holds no meaning and clients can easily dismiss you as unlikely to solve their problem. If you could have solved their problems, you would have mentioned it. It's time to be brave and make your mark. Figure out what your firm delivers to clients and take a stand.

It's your firm's responsibility to make sure clients can understand that your team is not merely one of the experts that can solve their problem—but the only one. And then tell that story so other potential clients pick you.

Here's an example of where A/E/C firms need some courage connecting to their real story: the #WeAre hashtag. This message shares only your firm's name. Prospective clients can get that from your business card. The hashtag may be a mantra for your team members—a rallying cry when there's a win. While



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creating a team environment is important, your outward, client-facing marketing isn't the best, or most effective, place for it. Spend the energy in that space to tell a more connected story instead.

Plant a flag in the ground and claim why you do what you do. A carefully curated story defines how your firm impacts the lives of your clients and customers.

What You Lose

Once firm leadership takes the courageous step of connecting project work to the story you want to tell, a few things may fall away.

Chasing Pursuits

Firms that haven't considered the story they really want to tell have no anchor and consequently chase any project that could fill the pipeline to generate revenue. That's one way to build a very diverse body of work. However, dramatic change occurs when project work connects in a larger, more cohesive story. The no-go decision becomes easier when a project doesn't align to your expertise, cutting short the hamster wheel of pursuits that may not be winnable. You'll spend more time on pursuits that advance your story with no more plot twists.

Project Variety

Expertise means you operate in a narrow field of practice where your firm performs best. The more diverse your projects, the more likely you do not possess expertise in any area and your firm loses continuity. If your firm is already known for designing elementary schools, think carefully before chasing an entertainment venue.

Commoditization

Without clarity on your expertise or how your firm shares a potential connection to a client project, there's not much of a compelling reason to select your firm. Then you're subjected to the lowest common denominator—price. That changes when clients see affiliation in your body of work, creating a value-add in choosing your firm. Then fees don't determine selection as often.



Manassas Park Elementary School, Manassas Park, VA. VMDO Architects, Hess Construction.
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What You Gain

For all the things you lose when you choose to tell a connected story about your firm, the gains are far more worthwhile and profitable.

Delighted Clients

There's a new freedom in moving beyond the simple satisfaction of a client's need (time, budget, reducing risk) into impacting how they feel about the solution. Clients can respond to your work on an emotional level because you've transformed a bullet list into a story that resonates with them. What's more, they want to share the story of what you created for them with others.

Expertise

Concentrating your work with connected projects offers your team the opportunity to become deeper experts within that specific market or project type. You solve increasingly more complex problems and

uncover new, innovative methods of work in the process. Because you've seen it all, clients seek out your team to fix their problem.

Reputation

A body of work that demonstrates connection to your core tenets communicates your firm's position with less effort to potential clients. Every new project adds another chapter and the story unfolds. You're no longer providing everything to everyone. Clients can see and easily recognize how you can solve their problem, too. You've built a solid reputation that's easier for seller-doers to promote and close new opportunities.

It's time to dig in and plant your flag. Stop trying to be everything to every client, chasing pursuits that just confuse the story. Pour the foundation, claim your space, and then pursue the projects that connect to your firm's reason for being in business. ■