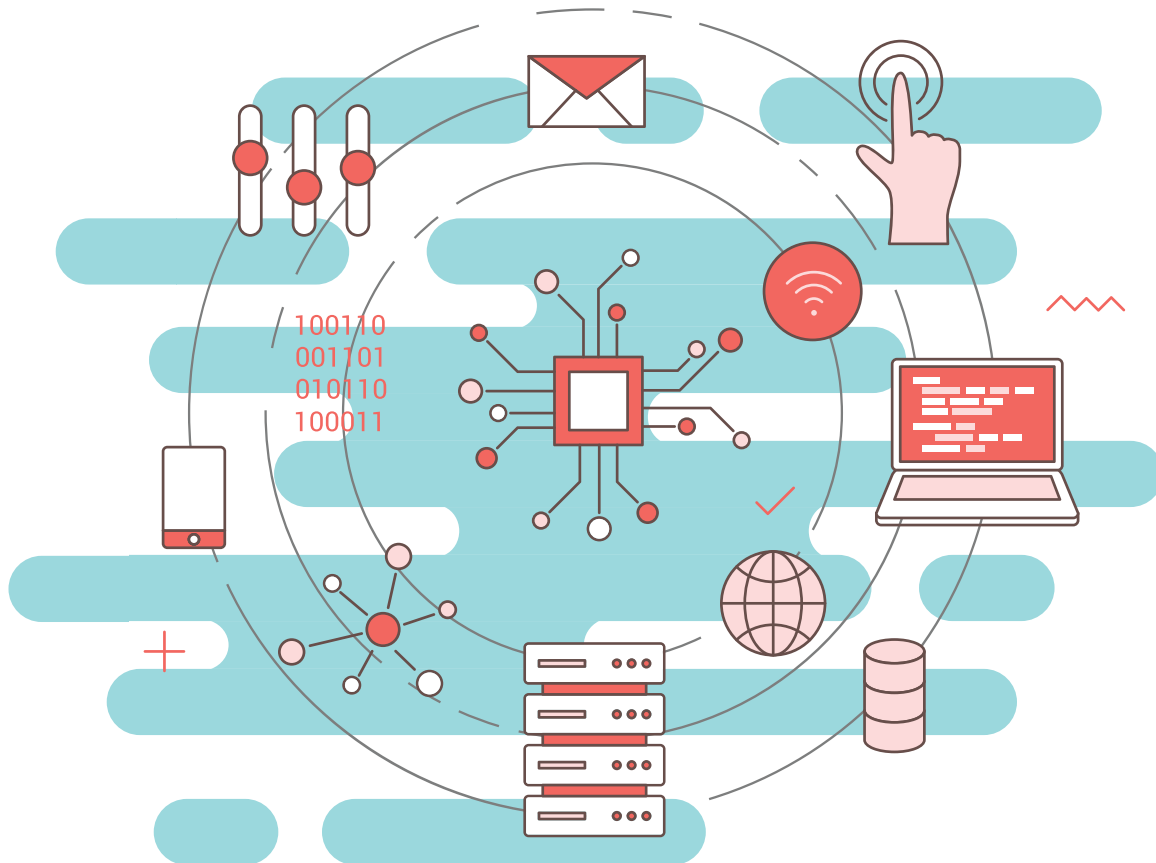


Best Next Practices in A/E/C Marketing

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As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, “Change is the only constant in life.” Often change is slow, gradually shifting the ways we work; other times a catalyst in the market causes rapid change that can be hard to keep up with. Such is the case with COVID-19.

The pandemic suddenly accelerated many unhurried workplace practice changes. Now, coming out of the last year, we’re looking back on what we used to do, what has changed, and what might change again. Based on what we’ve learned, what’s the best way of doing things? Beyond best practices—what’s the next practice?

Nearly everything we’ve done in the A/E/C community has been turned on its head, yet the underlying fundamentals haven’t changed. Our employees still need recognition, professional development, mentoring, and to be part of a workplace culture.

Marketers have often kept a pulse on and played a large role in developing this culture, but this has become much more difficult in a remote environment. In the past, we could host social or learning events to bring our staff and marketing teams together. Even as offices begin to reopen, a shift has occurred. In many cases, not everyone will be returning to the office. In fact, some offices have downsized such that the whole staff cannot be in the office at the same time anymore. As Microsoft calls it in a *USA Today* article,¹ employees will merely have “touchdown space.”

So, how do marketers play their part in the A/E/C version of air traffic control? It all comes down to communications, digital transformation, and virtual interactions. Here's what we see for best next steps.

Creative Communications

According to the Academy to Innovate HR (AIHR), marketers have a head start when it comes to communications. Good communications is always the crux of people management, and we tend to have these skills in spades.

It's critical to continuously improve communications in our post-COVID world. This means not only increasing its speed and frequency, but also making it a routine part of the day, since many of us no longer experience the casual side-of-the-desk chat. It's communications with intention.

Sharing essential information clearly and quickly, as well as giving and receiving feedback (positive and negative), will mean the difference between a supportive team and a rebellious one. Creativity is the new workplace corner stone—in the form of problem-solving, solution-finding, and project facilitation.

Further, in looking at team development and recognition, we see creativity playing a big role. Given the separation we've all experienced, we're craving the chance to help others and build connections. Many organizations are linking these concepts together, tying recognition to employee rewards. For example, the addition of donation options in reward catalogs (often used in large companies for employees passing milestone anniversaries to select a company gift) has allowed individuals to support causes they believe in, resulting in a meaningful bonus for many employees. This reinforces an employees' sense of purpose and helps address key needs on a professional level.

Digital Transformation and Automation

Although the pandemic didn't start digital transformation, it has accelerated it. Our reliance on digital—professionally and personally—has brought a high degree of innovation in many industry sectors.



For many A/E/C firms, the pivot to fully digital changed from a future goal to a must-have to survive today. Most have mastered the shift to employees working from home, virtual client meetings, and virtual events. They've adopted Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Slack; implemented a CRM; and set up a system for digital asset management.

However, many technology decisions simply replicate existing processes instead of strategically accelerating firms into the future. So, what will it take to propel firms forward? Among its many operational benefits, it eliminates tasks most humans don't want to do. This leads to increased innovation, productivity, and employee satisfaction. Amazon's "Hands off the Wheel"² program, for example, is designed to automate administrative tasks and refocus people on work that matters. This allows the company to innovate and grow at a higher rate, while increasing job satisfaction by taking the mundane out of a workday.

What would eliminating tedious tasks at your firm do for its ability to innovate

or focus on work that delivers value to clients? Let's look at digital-first marketing and then business development.

Digital-First Marketing

The professional services industry has always been quick to proclaim, "Our marketing is very different from B2C." As a result, the adoption of digital and social channels, investment in SEO and online lead generation strategies, and implementation of tactics such as personalization and omnichannel have lagged. Yet, today's fully digitized consumers of all generations (our clients and employees) expect a firm's digital channels and interactions to offer speed and convenience—and that includes A/E/C companies.

To meet the rising expectations of consumers, firms must think beyond traditional B2B marketing best practices and challenge the assumption that our firms and offerings can't be marketed using new approaches. What can your firm's marketing borrow from other industries to get ahead of its competition?



Providing self-directed online options for initial information intake, automating new client and employee onboarding processes, and adding chatbots and video messaging to the website align with how consumers like to connect and engage. Digital assistants like Siri and Alexa simplify our lives with voice commands. Deltek Vantagepoint's "Hey Deltek" uses the same technology to increase ease of use, efficiency, and productivity for its users by applying voice commands to simple tasks, such as adding or editing records and creating reminders.

Digital-First Business Development

Changing demographics, globalization, and far-reaching effects of the pandemic continue to accelerate the shift toward a predominantly digital buyer journey.

A 2020 McKinsey survey,³ found that 70%–80% of B2B decision-makers now prefer digital self-serve and remote engagement over face-to-face interactions and don't plan to change their habits post-pandemic. This trend diminishes one of the principal tools for how A/E/C firms build business and maintain client relationships—in-person interactions. But for smaller firms, this could create a level playing field in the long run.

It appears many A/E/C firms have waited for the return to normal, with very few continuing to invest in improving their digital buyer journey. A year ago, shifting in-person interactions to video conferencing was a big win. Today, simply interacting with prospects online is no longer enough.

As A/E/C customers demand more control over how, what, when, and from whom they want to buy, a hybrid sales process and digital commerce may not seem as far-fetched as even a year ago.

With sales experience as the No. 1 driver of customer loyalty, according to Challenger,⁴ firms need to get better at engaging prospects with information and insight that helps them do their jobs and make more informed decisions, meeting them where they are—online or off.

Other B2B industries are taking the lead in e-commerce. Another McKinsey survey⁵ uncovered that 70% of B2B decision-makers feel confident spending more than \$50,000 in new, fully self-serve, or remote purchases, and 27% would be open to more than \$500,000.

Does your firm have offerings or recurring services that can be turned into digital products

with self-serve transactions? How does this affect the role and execution of our business development professionals?

Just like people management, while the execution is changing, the fundamentals have not. The pandemic has forced much of the A/E/C workforce into a distributed, remote environment. Even as we start to break back out, the days of the elbow-to-elbow mixer will take a while to return. So, we must innovate and return to shaping the future as opposed to grinding through the present.

Certainly, there's a desire and pent-up demand to return to face-to-face. As soon as one company does it with intensity, you can bet others will, as that's the nature of the competitive business environment. Yet, those who've worked in the government space have dealt with the business development conundrum of faceless and contactless networking for ages. They know that the connection must come with the emotion around the message and intent, far more than the emotion around an individual.

What's Next in Networking?

Despite continuing digital transformations, real-time experience continues to be the preferred way to network for most of us. So, what now? We have virtual engagement, but what about virtual interaction—like we see on television and in the movies. If you've used a pair of virtual reality (VR) goggles to play a game, you know it's best to clear the room first, because it doesn't take long for the brain to believe that's where you are. Before you know it, you've hit your hand on the lamp, cracked a knee on the table, or run into the wall that's actually there.

Will virtual networking mean VR coffee shops—where we put on goggles and share papers and models side by side? Will we sip coffee as if we were sitting together seeing one another, not just our virtual representations? Perhaps the innovative marketer will have mailed capsules for the goggles that emit scents and ambient sounds to set the mood and stimulate the senses to provide the ideal sense of space for the meeting. It's hard to say.

We don't know what tomorrow will bring or if the change will be slow or rapid. But we do know that the creativity of the individual will always propel the success of our teams and firms in the market of tomorrow. ■

Resources

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