CASE STUDY

Living Your Best Business Development Practices

By Emily SH Brandesky

Kicking the day off in a coffee shop, dining on fresh food from our own waters, or attending happy hours—this was Seattle pre-pandemic networking at Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc. (WJE). Despite last year's challenges, our business developers maintained focus on nurturing relationships and found that embracing change opened our opportunities.

The changes and renewed efforts presented herein are driven by our unit manager's passion and enthusiasm for learning, implementing, and living best business development practices. Simply put, John Crase, P.E., walks the walk and values team efforts. He jumped into the fray of SMPS a few years ago, snagged himself a mentor, and is currently working towards his CPSM. While some staff members were hesitant to embrace business development, a few intrepid souls took him at his word that it was everybody's responsibility. Those employees have reaped amazing benefits, thereby encouraging others.

The WJE business development team is carving a bright future with a few tools from MARKENDIUM, the SMPS Body of Knowledge. Our main efforts include cultivating relationships within select market sectors and clearly discerning the viability of bids through consistent use of the go/no-go process and SWOT analysis.

Market sector. We're grateful to have project staff with diverse practice interests and experience who support each other's successes. To help organize their efforts, we charted out market sectors and identified champions for each. The champions take the lead in engaging in client-facing professional organizations, researching market sector trends and bid opportunities, cultivating clients and partnerships, and reporting back twice monthly to the team at large. This helps us stay ahead of the game by internally qualifying advance bids and partners to best position our staff for long-term personal and professional growth.

Specific to client/partner outreach, our approach is simple. We start with the basics, "Hi, I'm John, with WJE. We're doctors for buildings. How can we help you?" Whether reaching out via phone or email, we make a point of meeting with lots of people, either in person or virtually. We exchange service overviews, generally find where we fit, and engage in friendly icebreaker exercises over Grubhub.

We then engage in more formal presentations, stemming from an experience from a few years ago, when a client asked us to provide an in-house presentation to their senior project managers. Two of our engineers teamed up for the presentation, which included three case studies relevant to the client's practice areas, as well as a general overview of all that our firm has to offer. Although well received, we left the presentation on the shelf in the rush of new work and didn't stay engaged with the client.

This past year, we dusted off that presentation and reworked it to showcase our associate staff. Teamed with complementary practice areas and personalities, a pair of associates representing our A/E practices met a prospective client cultivated over a few months and quickly earned a repeat invitation to offer a more in-depth presentation to firm leadership.

Two elements cemented the strength of the presentations: We offered a cross-market approach by highlighting both engineering and architecture

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services, and we genuinely listened as much as we shared. We all came away with a deeper understanding of how our firms could mutually benefit one another, and today, we're partnering on new projects together.

The go/no-go process. In the excitement of reading through cool scopes of work, our engineers and architects have been known to get carried away without thinking through proposal efforts. But gone are days of throwing noodles at the wall. And by noodles, I mean endless blind responses to on-call rosters and RFPs without appropriate discernment of the bid opportunity, not to mention cultivation of the client and potential partners.

Today, we focus on advance notices and team attendance at pre-bid meetings, followed by a thorough go/no-go evaluation by the team. Do we know the client, and if so, what kind of relationship do we have? Can we differentiate ourselves? Is the budget scope the level we want to focus our efforts on?

Getting our project managers and team members to thoroughly vet the proposal, attend and review the audience at pre-bid meetings, and thoughtfully complete go/no-go analysis immediately following the meetings has transformed our effort from one of unbridled excitement to focus and determination. We now value quality over quantity.

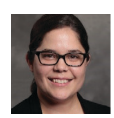
SWOT analyses. As a result of efforts engaging clients and partners, and committing to the go/no-go process, we had two notable wins in the last few months: an associate architect leading a multi-branch team of WJE experts on a large recladding of a GSA-managed campus, and a historic preservation (HP) associate spearheading an exterior masonry restoration project for a local school district. Both staff members used SWOT analysis, one informally, one more formally, to strengthen their pursuits.

These projects started with each assigned project manager and their team working the ropes—they researched the client and bid opportunity in advance, secured the right personnel for their teams, and had everyone enthusiastically involved in all stages of the bid. Both proposal teams went through intensive bid processes, including competitive interviews. As a sub, we leveraged our architect's specialties that fit a niche valued by our prime.

As a prime with an HP lead, we leveraged enthusiasm for and expertise in preservation work that our competitors just couldn't match. And again, in each case, we genuinely listened to the clients and their needs. Our HP win is of particular note, as it involved a very thorough SWOT analysis. Two teams from our office passed to the interview stage for this multi-project bid opportunity. Each team bid on separate projects, and of the two, only the HP team conducted the SWOT analysis. I don't think it's a coincidence that this team went into the interview better prepared, ultimately winning their bid.

The team understood their individual and collective strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and could engagingly speak to all fronts with conviction. As one associate shared, "Our project manager trusted not only their gut, but their research and focus on the team as a whole. They instilled confidence in everyone … We were all there to shine."

Business development may look different today than before the pandemic. By focusing on client relationships and consistently using MARKENDIUM tools, WJE has adapted to unforeseen challenges. Our efforts over the past year resulted in strengthened staff bonds and newly cultivated relationships that led to partnering on exciting projects. ■



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