



Looking Back: SMPS at 40

BY NANCY EGAN, FSMPS



Society for Marketing
Professional Services

Decades before Seth Godin talked about finding your tribe, an intrepid group, united by their unlikely roles as marketers in professional services firms, came together in a series of meetings. At first, it was just to talk about what they were doing. Although as Janet Aubry, an early participant, recalls, “Nobody in our firms wanted us to be talking, especially since only a few firm partners thought marketing was a good idea at the time.”

But they kept talking, built momentum, and found other members of their tribe. It wasn't that long before the legendary meeting when the group decided to formalize their association and founded the Society for Marketing Professional Services, having flirted with calling themselves the Society of Birddogs or SOB's (as the apocryphal story goes.) Like most origin stories, in hindsight, it all seems to make logical sense. Like-minded people come together to share ideas, word gets out, and the organization takes off.

Except that, as [Marjanne Pearson](#) explains in “The Cusp of Change” chronicle (see page 13), the 1970s were no ordinary time for this kind of activity. The professions were changing, but not without a struggle. [Andy Zinsmeyer](#), the first executive director of SMPS, said in a 1979 interview in *SMPS News*, “The firms were *definitely experimenting*, and we were trying to prove the validity of having a non-technical employee responsible for a business development program.” This was a mild version of what early marketers were doing.

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Joan Capelin, Hon. AIA, FSMPS, a founding member of the New York Chapter, is more candid in describing what she and Lou Marines, who went on to become the chief executive officer of the American Institute of Architects (AIA), were doing at HLW International at that time. “The things we did—‘illegal’ ... ‘unethical’ ... ‘unprofessional’ by 1970 standards—are standard today. Actually, ‘unprofessional’ was a charge you could fling at a firm or person in the 70s, even into the 80s, and it would stop them cold in their tracks.”

While much of what the early marketers were doing was not technically unethical, even by the strict code of the AIA, it was unacceptable and unsettling. There were firms that had marketers or BD people, with Zinsmeyer citing Ballinger and Welton Becket, and of course, Vincent Kling hired Weld Coxe in the 60s. But these firms were the exception. Diane Creel, FSMPS, recalls that when she wrote her master’s thesis on marketing professional services in 1973, she surveyed more than 100 of *Engineering News-Record’s* Top 200 firms, and only six companies reported having full-time marketers on staff.

These outliers saw an opportunity. Bolstered by research like Creel’s, and with Coxe’s book, *Marketing Architectural and Engineering Services* in hand, they recognized the potential for a new, legitimate profession, and SMPS became their platform.

Clayton Christensen would see the founding of SMPS and the goals and actions of the early members as disruptive innovation: “Innovation that helps create a new market and value network, applying a different set of values, which ultimately, and unexpectedly, overtakes an existing market.” It’s a mindset that has served our Society well over the past 40 years, helping us to move beyond traditional boundaries and expectations, allowing the organization to grow and change over time. That disruptive instinct is also part of our DNA—what attracted so many new members in the 70s and 80s, the “Rebels with a Cause,” as Kay Lentz fondly refers to us. What exactly did SMPS do to instigate change?

Sharing Information

While it hardly seems radical today, sharing information with colleagues from other firms (aka “the competition”) was not the norm in the 1970s. The founding SMPS members did just that: They talked about what they were doing to secure projects, how they were organized, what was successful, and what didn’t work. From cold calling to public relations to proposal preparation



Architectural employee, Singing Telegram Performer—EHDD 1974. Courtesy EHDD.



Joan Capelin, Laurin McCracken, Jean Valence, and Julie Luers.

—small groups of marketers were gathering around the country to discuss ideas. Although firm leaders were wary of these conversations, they recognized that there had to be a better way to get work. “In the aftermath of the recession of the 70s, the most bruising of the prosperous post-WWII period, they were willing see what could be learned,” notes Bruce Lea.

Talk turned into teaching with more formal programs being sponsored by local groups that would become the first chapters.

Bill Viehman, AIA, LEED AP, both teacher and student in those days, observes, “There was an impressive willingness of members to ‘teach’ in the larger forum (chapter, regional, and national). We all shared knowledge and real-life, practical experiences to benefit our colleagues.” By the time I attended my first national convention in New Orleans in 1978, the educational program was organized with a range of programs and lively discussion sessions designed to address the issues of firms large and small.

Creating Careers

“When Tom Page was president, he helped us realize that SMPS had created the profession of ‘Professional Services Marketing,’” remembers Laurin McCracken, AIA, FSMPS. Importantly, the new profession was not a “one-size-fits-all” world. Members wrote the job descriptions for entirely new roles by doing and then teaching others what it took.

Janet Aubry, FSMPS, with Coxe as her mentor and a number of us as her sidekicks, trained dozens of newly minted marketing coordinators in the Coxe clinics and in SMPS forums. Not only did Aubry share knowledge of what the role entailed, she was a career inspiration, moving from marketing coordinator to director of marketing to partner in her firm.



Jeanne Murphy, Bruce Lea, and Tom Page.



On right: Karen Courtney and Pete Kienle.
Standing: Craig Holmes.



Back row, L-R: Eric Mott, Craig Park, Tim Barrick, Mike Reilly,
and Donna Corlew. Front row, L-R: Phyllis Boyea and Carol Adey.



Bill Morton, Nancy Egan, and Jeanne Murphy.

Others charted a new path for the old “bird dogs,” transforming the role into business development, which, in Lea’s words is “the art and science of finding leads, cultivating relationships and information, and maneuvering through a client’s process for selecting firms to design a project.” Some projects may still be awarded based on “old-boy” relationships or patronage, but far more decisions benefit from the sophisticated approach pioneered by early members.

A critical position shaped by SMPS members was the director of marketing. Although not everyone with the title performed the same function, the position and title had impact in firms, the profession, and the market. “It was a position to which members of the marketing staff could aspire. SMPS had created a career ladder,” McCracken adds.

Or, as Viehman says, “I think the emergence and acceptance of the CMO role can be traced back to the willingness of the senior peer group to share knowledge and ideas of a more progressive and accountable profession.” The move from the recognition of the importance of marketing to seats at the “C-Suite” table is far from over, but the ability of today’s marketers to play a strategic role in their firms derives directly from the bold career models of SMPS’s early leaders.

Certification

According to Zinsmeyer, SMPS envisioned a certification program, citing the importance of verified recognition—“being certified means something.” It took almost 15 years and some strife, but as Julie Luers, FSMPS, explains, SMPS leadership saw a cause. “The controversy surrounding the certification program kept many of us up at night,” Luers recalls. “I recall hours of debate in our national board meetings at that time. But we were committed to legitimizing our profession through a certification program, and to giving our members a shot at becoming shareholders in their firms; and we persevered. If you remember, some states did not allow stock ownership in an architectural or engineering firm unless you were registered or certified. Knowing that it would take time to build credibility for the designation, we jumped in anyway, and look at where we are today.” SMPS now boasts more than 800 Certified Professional Services Marketers (CPSMs).

Outreach

By the 1980s, SMPS had a strong foothold, chapters were being chartered, and local meetings were well-attended. Marketers knew what their audience and potential members wanted and needed. Cathy Edgerly

remembers, “The Los Angeles chapter meetings were one of the few places where people could hear marquee speakers from the client community—local leaders in development, education, healthcare—people our principals wanted to meet as much as we did.” There was a buzz building around the country. Smart programming, hard work, and tenacity helped raise the profile of SMPS and professional services marketing among a wide group, including the once doubtful.

“Marketing was rapidly becoming a 600-pound gorilla,” says Capelin. “In 1987–88, AIA took a hard, objective look at marketing in design firms through a survey with the catchy title of “The AIA Marketing Architectural Services Survey” that included commentary from Coxe, Marines, and me, and I gave the summary of the findings at the 1988 AIA national convention in New York. The results showed that 85 percent of the firms recognized that marketing was important to their success; they planned to increase their still-tentative marketing efforts in the future. And nine out of 10 firms had a principal involved in some way in marketing. That could be golf-club memberships, but it was a start.”

“What SMPS became was the ‘voice’ of professional services marketing,” says Viehman. “It filled the void left by the various professional organizations. It became the equivalent of the AIA Large/Mid-size/Small Firm Round Tables, only accessible to a far broader range of professionals. The AIA, for instance, provided a discussion group for management, operations, and human resources, but was mute regarding marketing.”

Organization

At the heart of this emerging profession—with its growing impact, new career paths, and increasing sophistication—was the Society for Marketing Professional Services. Like many start-ups, the Society had successes and setbacks. Formally constituted in 1974, it took several years to incorporate and several more to develop a formal structure. By the time that our first executive director, Zinsmeyer, resigned in 1979, SMPS was ready to step up its

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game as a national professional association. Lucky for us, Jeanne Murphy, an early member and marketing professional, was ready to step in.

The headquarters, such as they were, moved from St. Louis to Washington, DC, and Murphy took on the role she was made for. For those of us who worked closely with her in those early years, it's hard to overestimate her contribution. "Jeanne became the executive director at a critical moment in our development," says Creel. "We were learning to function like a serious, national organization, moving beyond the early fiefdoms, chartering chapters, and taking on new challenges. She not only shared our vision, she gave us the support we needed."

From Alexandria, VA, just outside of Washington, DC, Murphy identified the resources SMPS needed, including a professional association staff, a good lawyer, and a good accountant. She found training for the incoming presidents, who, like me, had little idea of how to run a board meeting, let alone a national organization. And she knew the importance of ceremony and celebration, setting a high bar for what makes a great convention.

Steady executive leadership is important, but our volunteer leaders are ultimately responsible for charting the future of the organization. With strong personalities and equally strong opinions, more than one board meeting over the years has provoked heated debate, but as **Kenny Diehl** recalls, SMPS emerged as a strong organization.

"When I joined SMPS in 1982, the Board was composed of the officers and directors from each of the nine SMPS regions," Diehl says. "The total number of Board members could be as many as 14. Elections were generally contested and sometimes a bit testy. To eliminate regional rivalries, control expenses, and provide continuity of leadership, during my tenure on the Board, SMPS adopted its current Board format where all seven members are selected and ratified by the membership. This concept has provided strength to the organization over the years, and the cost savings have been reallocated to bolster our national staff."

There are many more stories to tell than there is space in this edition of *Marketer*. It has been my great pleasure to hear from so many of the pioneering leaders of SMPS who generously shared their recollections. **Mike Reilly**, **FSMPS**, captures their value in his quote below.



Back row, L-R: Eric Mott, Mike Reilly, Ron Worth, and Craig Park
Front row, L-R: Donna Corlew, Sally Handley, Phyllis Boyea,
and Karen Courtney.

"Musicians in every genre cite those who influenced their artistry," Reilly says. "SMPS members practicing the marketing craft have a similar story of influencers and inspiration. What I love about our now 40-year tradition is the immense opportunity to learn from the best in our business. Since I started as a marketing coordinator in 1985, I've met hundreds of influencers: chapter, regional and national SMPS connections, clients, authors, and fellow consultants. They share their individual brand of artistry, and I use it every day. To me, this is the association's greatest achievement."

As SMPS marks its 40th anniversary, the organization enjoys many of the comforts of middle age: a robust membership; strong, elected leaders and a capable, dedicated professional staff; a full schedule of programs locally, nationally, and online; a rigorous certification program; a cadre of well-regarded Fellows; a healthy Foundation; and the respect of the A/E/C profession. It is also a perfect time to celebrate our members' willingness to be less-than-comfortable, to take chances, and make certain that SMPS continues to be a positive, disruptive force in our markets. ■

For more SMPS history, refer to "A Tribute to Weld Coxe" in the August 2011 issue of the Marketer and 1998 articles, "The Cycles of Change" and "Mapping the Evolution of the Marketing Model." Both are available on the Collaboration web site that I share with Marjanne Pearson: <http://nextmoon.com/smeps-coxe> and <http://nextmoon.com/smeps-1998>

About the Author



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