



Marketers: Get Your Boots Dirty

By Bonnie Dunkel

In my spare time, I can often be found walking along streambeds and rivers on hiking trails that cut through the Blue Ridge Mountains near my home in Central Virginia.

In my professional life, I can often be found behind a computer screen designing content and crafting corporate communications at my full-time job as a marketing assistant in the A/E/C industries.

Until recently, I thought that these two worlds only existed separately. So how did I find myself with my hiking boots laced up, traversing a streambed while on the clock?

The answer is simple. I wanted to understand exactly what it is that I am marketing every day. Working for a civil engineering firm as the primary marketer for our stormwater and environmental groups, it's my job to let the world know about our services that help create a healthier and more sustainable environment. As a non-engineer, it can be challenging to take the technical and mathematical elements of civil engineering

and find a creative angle to turn them into something interesting, informative, and marketable. So, how does this happen?

As it turns out, seeing really is believing.

At a weekly progress meeting, I reached out to one of our project managers about joining a crew of engineers at a nearly completed urban stream restoration project. He agreed and handed over a hard hat and fashionable yellow vest. Prior to the visit, I knew only the on-paper basics of stream restoration: Take a badly eroded or damaged stream and design a solution that will improve the overall functionality to decrease pollution and increase biodiversity within the channel.

However, I still had a lot to learn. Walking along the stream, seeing the process in person, and being educated by the engineer that designed the channel, taught me more than any other resource. I soon discovered that most of the materials used during the restoration process are natural and biodegradable so that, long-term, you won't be able to tell that any work had been done on the stream. Such materials

include live staking (tree cuttings used to prevent soil loss and eventually grow into new trees), and coir rolls (coconut fiber mats that stabilize the shoreline, provide erosion control, and promote vegetation growth). I also saw how the hours our engineers spent behind a computer screen translated to a winding channel that is now decreasing harmful levels of nitrogen, phosphorous, and sediment by more than 32,000 pounds per year.

Taking the time to see these methods in person allowed me to better understand their importance and gave me the ability to educate others on what we do as a firm. I walked away from the experience with new ideas on how to demonstrate the value of this service. As a marketer, this is the valuable insight that we're all constantly in search of.

Understanding what we market enables us to truly communicate a differentiated message to our clients and potential clients. So, learn as much as you can, immerse yourself in the process, and don't be afraid to get your boots dirty. ■

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