

# Rethinking



# Business Development

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If 2020 has taught us anything, it's to expect the unexpected.

This pretty much applies to all the societal norms to which we've become accustomed, and certainly to business norms, as well.

In business development, we've used approaches that have been a part of our toolbox for decades: attend business mixers, exhibit at trade shows, schedule in-person meetings, present at conferences, or meet for lunch or coffee.

However, in recent years, we've witnessed a change in the landscape. Decision-makers have become more isolated. Clients and prospects have been less willing to meet with us. Sporting events and even meals have become prohibited activities.

In keeping with A/E/C tradition, we've been slow to transform our models, clinging to the tactics that worked yesterday. We've viewed each successive wall built in front of us as just an isolated incident.

Part of the problem, of course, is that business development is far often more tactical than strategic. Just recently, I spoke with a client who still embraces the "keep throwing things at the wall until something sticks" philosophy, whether it's spamming email or chasing every project under the sun.

Many A/E/C business developers have worked to embrace new approaches, while dealing with internal resistance at their firms. Change is hard, of course, but some firm leaders still insist on continuing to utilize the same approaches that helped them build the business.

And then 2020 happened—not with a tap on the shoulder or even a slap to the face. No, 2020 stealthily walked up behind us and thumped us over the head. And 2020 used one of those massive carnival sledgehammers to ring the bell. We're all still seeing stars.

## Expect the Unexpected

Today's unexpected changes create an opportunity for business developers, because 2020 taught us that the old way was no longer even an option.

If you take away meetings, events, conferences, trade shows, and mixers, do you still have business development?

You certainly do—but it's a different type of business development. It's a more strategic approach that requires integration of both business development and marketing functions.

We shouldn't embrace these newer approaches simply because we've been concussed by 2020. If the current scenario creates the opportunity to try new things, let's embrace it.

With this philosophy in mind, here's what your firm should be doing right now.

**Customer Relationship Management (CRM).**

CRM isn't a software program, but it can be enhanced through software. CRM is a data-driven approach to propel business through existing and prospective clients. CRM captures communications with clients and prospects, and the resulting data helps create business development and marketing messaging. Newer marketing approaches, like personalized marketing and account-based marketing, can't exist without a robust CRM process.

The Kenwood Collection, Cincinnati, OH. Reztark Design Studio. ©Josh Beeman Photography, joshbeemanphotography.com.



Note that if you don't have CRM software, you have many options. For industry-specific CRM, look to Deltek and Cosential. For broader packages that serve multiple industries, consider Salesforce and Microsoft Dynamics 365. And if you aren't ready to invest in a CRM program yet, look to HubSpot or Insightly for free options.

✔ **Do This:** Clean up your database. Review your CRM processes for capturing data, and update or create new ones. Teach other staff members how to use your CRM. Make CRM one of your top priorities for the year, because so many other marketing and business development tactics rely on it. Prioritize personalized communications with all of your existing and former clients. FaceTime, Skype, phone, email, or text message—utilize whichever approach makes the most sense for that person. Address your business continuity plan, how you will continue to serve them and their project. Or share how you're helping other firms right now. Ask them how they're doing, and if there's any way you can assist them. Don't send a cold, nonpersonalized email blast.

**Client Experience.** Eighty percent of your firm's work probably comes from existing clients. For some of the firms I'm working with, the figure is 90%. Are you taking care of those clients right now? Do you understand every touch point throughout the journey a client takes with your firm? What do you know about their clients and their industry? Have you established a continual feedback loop to evaluate your performance and their evolving needs? How do you capture and share that data?

✔ **Do This:** Map the journey a client takes with your firm, from initial awareness to post-project interaction. Define all the ways you can add value to each touch. Survey your clients to determine how you're doing (and not just at the end of a project) and how you can help them. Research every client to better

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understand their unique needs and clients. Explore their industry or market sector to gain a deeper knowledge base. Consider adjacent services you could provide your clients, either by establishing new service lines or pulling in corporate partners.

**Social Media.** A decade ago, most professionals in the A/E/C industries wondered if there was a role for social media in the marketing mix. Fast-forward a decade, and social media is a critical component of business development. Known as social selling, building and maintaining networks online—particularly on LinkedIn and proprietary systems (think MySMPS)—is the lifeblood of proactive business development right now. But it's not just about connecting with clients and prospects; it's about interacting, helping, and sharing information of value. You never want to come across as a salesperson going in for the kill.

✔ **Do This:** Update your LinkedIn profile until you reach "All Star" status. Work with your seller-doers and subject matter experts to enhance their LinkedIn profiles. Join groups related to associations you belong to. Find other affinity groups where clients congregate online. Research potential connections and learn more about them: What's their background? Do you have any mutual connections or groups? Determine what value you can offer them and reach out to connect. Then be active—share links of value, comment on others' posts, or ask/answer questions in group discussions or Listservs. Don't sell; be a resource.

**Content Marketing.** Make no mistake—content marketing is very much a business development tool. This is particularly true when considering thought leadership, which offers information of value to your audience. Social selling allows business developers to connect virtually with clients and prospects, but value needs to be part of the equation. Blogs, microblogs, articles, e-books, videos, FAQs, infographics, research reports, case studies, or webinars—these are all examples of content marketing. Thought leadership helps to differentiate your firm, enhance your brand in the marketplace, and even develop the personal brands of your staff members.

✔ **Do This:** Brainstorm content ideas for each of your target audiences. Engage your client-facing staff and subject matter experts. What knowledge can you share to address issues that your audiences are facing right now? What questions do you find clients asking regularly? What are some of the trends you're seeing in their industries? Once you've brainstormed topics, determine which content tactic is the ideal way to relay the information. Assign responsibilities and time frames but understand that the business development and marketing team will have to guide this process and assist every step of the way. For instance, you may need to interview a project manager to pull the content out of them, and then ghostwrite a blog. Start with the lowest-hanging fruit to get thought leadership out there immediately.

Now is not the time to panic, nor is it the time to refrain from conducting business development. However, now is also not the time for desperate pleas of, "Do you have any work for us?" Take a breath and bring strategy to your business development. Lay the groundwork, clean up your systems and processes, and make a concerted effort to provide value. The SMPS *Marketing 2022*<sup>1</sup> research found that within the next three years, 85% of A/E/C firms will devote at least half of their marketing activities to education-based marketing. Get a jump on this by elevating and sharing thought leadership.

If you do these things, you'll be better positioned for business development success right now, as well as once the more traditional approaches of networking, conferences, trade shows, and in-person meetings become common again. ■

<sup>1</sup>*Marketing 2022: A Survey Exploring the Future of A/E/C Marketing Practices.* Butcher, Scott D., FSMPS, CPSM. ©SMPS 2019. [smeps.org/marketing2022](https://www.smeps.org/marketing2022).



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