BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

The primary theme of this chapter is business development, which is an "external" activity in that the design professional interacts with potential clients. Yet designers should start the business development process with some internal activity—market research. Before a member of the firm picks up the phone, gets in the car, or boards the airplane to get in front of a potential customer, it behooves the firm to do its homework.

MARKET RESEARCH

Market research involves determining what kind of work a design firm wants to do and finding where to get it. Design professionals might undertake market research for any number of reasons. They may want to explore a new client sector, such as health care or public work. They may want to explore a new project type within an existing sector, such as alternative officing within the corporate sector. They may want to explore a new office location. They may want to see if adding a new service would be attractive to clients and prospects. No matter what the motivation to do market research, designers should take four steps to do the research well. First, determine what the firm wants to know. Second, determine the ideal source of the information. Third, determine the method by which the firm will gather the information; and last, decide who will do it.

To determine what they want to know about a market, design professionals should write out their questions. These questions can deal with any number of issues: trends in the market; current projects; anticipated projects; desired services; performance criteria; competition; and even favorite periodicals (the firm's future PR focus). Next, the firm should develop a list of people who can provide this information. This list can contain three to 300 people, depending on the purpose of the research. Three savvy observations from well-placed observers can be just as valuable as the thoughts of the 5 to 20 percent who may respond to a larger survey.

Once the issues are identified and potential respondents identified, the firm must decide upon a methodology. It can do a literature search (a smart preparatory move, even if the firm plans to employ other methods). Literature, however, tends to look backward and is therefore in danger of being dated. In comparison, the Internet is a marvelous research tool. It gives design professionals access to corporations, hospitals, public entities, and associations—instantly. Using this current information, they can then prepare a questionnaire and mail it out with a prepaid return envelope. The questionnaire should be simple. If essays are required, people are likely to throw the questions away; if only yes/no answers are required, people are likely to respond. The design firm may also use the telephone, either by enlisting an employee or by hiring a market research firm. The in-house route uses valuable resources but puts the most knowledgeable person on the phone with the prospect. It affords the chance to start building a relationship, but it may stifle the prospect's candor. The consultant route provides anonymity, but designers need to be assured that a professional and knowledgeable person will conduct the interview.

When have the interviews produced enough information? When they have given the firm the input of enough decision makers to indicate a fact or a trend. Only when design professionals have identified a trend can they talk knowledgeably about the situation in the market and use their precious resources in the smartest fashion.

FINDING THE PROSPECT

To get work, designers must know that an opportunity exists, and the more they know about the opportunity (including the client and the potential project), the better their chances of being short-listed and of winning the project. Any useful information about a potential client or project can serve as a lead. Lead finding begins by talking to the right people. Two valid ways to obtain good leads are networking and cold calling.

Networking

To most savvy marketers, the most important element in their lead-finding efforts is an effective network. A network can provide information about