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Marketing: Position and Identity

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In the beginning, interior designers, architects, and engineers would never have used the words “marketing” or “sales.” The words had an unsavory connotation, calling up images of used-car salesmen in checkered coats or encyclopedia peddlers in scuffed shoes rather than urbane design professionals. In fact, until the 1970s, the canon of ethics of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) expressly forbade blatant promotion, and the organizations that preceded the International Interior Design Association, the Institute of Business Designers (IBD) and the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID), were of similar mindsets. So how was work secured? Through connections and visibility—sometimes known as the “old boy network.” Talent and a striking portfolio were imperatives, but a design professional’s practice expanded based on whom he or she knew. A professional’s merits were extolled by friends and colleagues, and for a fortunate few, through news stories and magazine articles written by others. As a professional, your eyes were kept suitably downcast.

Today it’s a different story. Of course, the old boy network still plays an important part. Designers must still be both visible and connected. In a profession where commissions are granted based on trust, recommendations and references are forever the gold standard. Yet, over the past three decades, design professionals have accepted professional services marketing as an important part of their business. There is a thriving association, the Society of Marketing Professional Services (SMPS), that comprises individuals whose prime responsibility is marketing and sales. It was founded in 1973 and now has over 5,000 members, including principals and marketers from interior design firms, architectural firms, and other allied professions. Today, there are myriad methods for promoting designers and their firms to potential clients. Designers can choose from elective methods, such as advertising, exhibiting, sponsorship, publishing, speaking, and web page promotion. And they must respond to strict requirements from potential clients for formal qualification packages, proposals, presentations, and project tours.