

professor, did just that. They postulated that most firms were driven by one of three values: ideas, service, or product. All were perfectly proper, and none was superior to the others. They also recommended operational and marketing approaches suited to these different values. The design profession has evolved significantly since then, but there is still much validity in their thesis.

In Coxe and Maister's model, a firm driven by ideas tends to do projects that are unique. This type of firm is hired to create a specific solution to a specific problem. There will be no other like it—one Hayden Planetarium, one Guggenheim Bilbao. Idea-driven firms get much of their work through the notoriety they gain through publication. A service-driven firm generally works on complicated projects for clients who need a lot of attention. These firms often work for large corporations, hospitals, universities, or government entities. Service firms sell most effectively through the person(s) who will do the work, often supported by business development representatives. A product-driven firm knows how to do a particular type of project extremely well. It has the systems and processes in place to pump out a perfect Wal-Mart or Bank One every couple of days. To sell this process, it relies on a sales staff that can bring in signed contracts. Every firm may not be described perfectly by any of these models, and most firms are hybrids of a sort. But it is still worthwhile to examine the firm's staff, projects, and style of service when fashioning a marketing approach, and thus Coxe and Maister's model remains a useful tool.

Identify the Firm's Degree of Specialization/Globalization

Besides a firm's values, there are other important areas of practice to examine. One of the most important is specialization. Although designers like to think of themselves as Renaissance men or women, that goal is hard to achieve in today's world. Things have gotten a bit more complicated; there's a lot to know about just one subject, let alone five or six. Clients are less apt to hire a generalist, with just two or three of a project type on his resumé, than they are a specialist, who can show a long history with a type of facility or client. There is a rationale for this. When designers are retained, clients put their trust in them. Clients want designers to understand their industry—its protocol, its processes, its language, its technology, and its competitive environment. They want to be assured that the designers know what they are doing. After all, their jobs, or businesses, are on the line.

It is wise and quite necessary to have a specialty, but it is a little scary—and perhaps foolish—to have all your eggs in one basket. Keeping a firm healthy and protected is always a balancing act, driven by the design professional's vision of its size and breadth of practice. What if a specialty area experiences a recession or even disappears? So does the practice, if it has only one specialty. The safest position is to have a limited number of specialties, and to have no more than 50 percent of the practice in any one area. That way, if the hospitality sector experiences a downturn, a firm still has corporate or health-care clients to feed the business.

Even though the world is getting more complex, it seems to be getting smaller. Today, a U.S.-based firm is as likely to be doing work in Barcelona or Beijing as it is in Baltimore. The normal course of practice is to develop a specialty that is first local, then regional, then national, and finally international. As the portfolio deepens and recognition as an expert is gained, the breadth of practice will expand. A firm may then export its knowledge in ever-broadening circles. Technological advances are making it easier for more and more firms to work on a global basis.

Differentiating the Firm from the Competition

Being a good—even a great—designer is not enough. A firm's potential client base needs to know it exists. More important, it needs to know why this particular firm is better than its competition. As clients evaluate design firms, they generally go from a long list of candidates to a short list. And whether designers like it or not, it is generally a fact that any of the finalists has the ability to do the job. So why should clients pick any one firm from among the competition? The successful firm will be the one that can articulate why it is better—what sets it apart. That is the differentiation message.

A design firm must develop a message that differentiates it from the competition for a marketing communications campaign or for a specific client pursuit. Without such a message, the campaign or presentation will lack direction and punch. A message may center on a distinctive process, a certain area of expertise, or an especially talented individual. To be most effective, it must be something no one else can claim. Because process is easiest to duplicate, messages built on process are harder to sell. Many firms talk about “the charette process,” or their “unique” programming methodology