

READY, SET, PRACTICE: ELEMENTS OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

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Business Marketing

1. Marketing Is not Just for Companies Selling Soap.
2. What Is Marketing Supposed to Do?
3. The Unique Characteristics of the Design Services Industry
4. What Is Marketing for Landscape Architectural Services?
5. Projects Don't Fall Out of the Sky
6. Marketing Is Something Everyone in the Firm Should Do
7. In-Basket

1. MARKETING IS NOT JUST FOR COMPANIES SELLING SOAP

I'm a designer; designers don't do marketing.

Private practice landscape architects who want to stay in business must be comfortable with the activity of marketing. It is through the activity of marketing that firms acquire clients that result in contracts for projects and fees for services rendered. Even landscape architects in public practice—and to some degree landscape architectural educators—rely on marketing to maintain their programs. Landscape architects in all forms of practice are competing for customers, looking for employment, and seeking financial resources. Marketing is an activity that can mean the very survival of any landscape architect regardless of the nature of his or her practice. To think otherwise is to think oneself out of the business.

For today's practitioner, marketing is not a four-letter word. Nor is it unique to companies selling soap, cereal, mouthwash, or other consumer goods. Concepts for marketing have changed dramatically in recent years. To be truly successful, everyone in an office—from secretary to office manager—must contribute to the marketing efforts of the business. Marketing can no longer be viewed as simply a sales tool. Rather, marketing must be understood as a means of satisfying customer needs through the exchange of professional services for compensation.

Marketing plays a central and critical role in all forms of landscape architectural practice. It is an important aspect of private practice. Government agencies also must market their services and programs to other agencies, the public they wish to serve, and to legislators, particularly when seeking acceptance of a budget or capital improvements program.

To a large extent, marketing is also necessary to maintain the viability of university programs. Landscape architecture programs must continually seek good students. They do this by marketing the profession as a career choice for high school students, incoming freshman, and undecided undergraduates. Landscape architecture programs use marketing techniques to vie for students seeking a career change and perhaps considering a second bachelor's or master's degree.

To ignore the need for marketing is to flirt with extinction. While marketing alone will not produce success, it is a key factor when one considers the small number and size of landscape architectural firms in the United States as compared with other professions offering similar, if not competing design services.

Clients do not necessarily know which firm, or even which profession, is appropriate for their project. It may not be obvious to clients that landscape architects are the appropriate professionals to execute their type of projects. Part of the marketing effort of landscape architects is educating potential clients that certain types of projects and services require their expertise. For example, it would seem obvious that a client would hire a landscape architect to design the garden at his or her residence, but a client may not think to call a landscape architect to develop a piece of land for a subdivision. Marketing landscape architectural services is as much a client education effort as it is an activity for obtaining clients for specific projects in a competitive environment.

2. WHAT IS MARKETING SUPPOSED TO DO?

The core concept to understanding marketing is to understand the product one is marketing. That statement may seem to be no more than a play on words; but taken seriously, it is truly what marketing professional services is all about. Marketing professional services must be understood in terms of value, needs, and products. The services and products a landscape architect provides must be of value to potential clients. Landscape architectural services must meet the following client- and market-driven criteria:

- Satisfy client's needs and desires.
- Be of use to clients or their user groups.
- Add value to the client's project.
- Be perceived as superior to the competition.

3. THE UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DESIGN SERVICES INDUSTRY

There are several unique aspects of a design services industry that require equally unique approaches for marketing professional design services. As part of the professional design services industry, landscape architecture firms must be mindful of their uniqueness when developing marketing strategies.

Tangible and Intangible Characteristics of Landscape Services

Even though landscape architects produce tangible items (or deliverables as they are referred to in contracts), such as reports, drawings, and specifications, the business of landscape architecture is really that of performing services which are intangible. A landscape architect's services result in ideas, recommendations, professional opinions or evaluations, and prescriptive suggestions. Nevertheless, although a landscape architectural firm may have a signed contract to provide services, the client generally expects certain physical products as well.

When formulating a marketing plan, remember that the products are not easily valued by a customer until—in the case of design work—the projects are built. In addition, clients are

often unable to evaluate the quality of services to be performed. This places a burden on the marketing approach, requiring it to concentrate on explaining the often intangible benefits of hiring a particular firm. When marketing design services, it is important to stress the close relationship between the firm offering the services and the client contracting for the services.

The Perishable Nature of Landscape Services

Although landscape architects do not have a storage problem like a product manufacturer has, they do, however, have a limited capacity to perform services. To some extent their services are perishable. Landscape architects have a finite capacity for performing design services or meeting with a client to make certain suggestions and recommendations about a project. The usefulness of a landscape architect's services to a client is usually shortlived in that the services are site specific and valid for laws, client program, and market conditions at a particular time.

The services cannot be performed ahead of time, stored, and later sold according to the demand. Also unlike dry goods and appliances, landscape services cannot be purchased and resold or used by another client at another location. The services are site and program specific, with very few exceptions. They are also perishable in the sense that they are time specific. A project design, if not installed within a short time frame, may not be appropriate a year or two after the time the design was completed, perhaps because of changes in building codes and zoning regulations. Moreover, a limited availability of certain materials may not allow the design to be carried out at a later date.

The Performance of Services Is People Intensive

Landscape architectural services are performed by people, a fact that has become no less true with the advent of computer technology. The performance of landscape services is people intensive. As a result of this dependency, the services are subject to variations in quality of performance. But by instituting quality control measures consistently, a higher quality of service can be maintained. Landscape architectural firms are dependent on maintaining a reliable level of service quality in order to survive, in order to gain sufficient customer confidence to be considered for future work or to be given a positive recommendation through word of mouth to other potential clients.

4. WHAT IS MARKETING FOR LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURAL SERVICES?

Northwestern University marketing professor, Philip Kotler, offers a summary of what marketing is:

Companies cannot survive today by simply doing a good job. They must do an excellent job if they are to succeed in markets characterized by slow growth and fierce competition at home and abroad. Consumer and business buyers face an abundance of choices in seeking to satisfy their needs, and therefore look for excellence in quality or value or cost when they choose their suppliers. Recent studies have demonstrated that knowing and satisfying the customers with competitively superior offers is the key to profitable performance. And marketing is the company function charged with defining customer targets and the best way to satisfy their needs and wants competitively and profitably.¹

¹Kotler, *Marketing Management*, p. 30.

Let's look at an example of marketing, in light of this definition. Consider hamburger restaurants. What is the most popular hamburger restaurant in the world? If you said McDonald's you are correct but also consider that McDonald's doesn't just sell hamburgers. McDonald's success is not in serving the best hamburgers money can buy. If you were hungry for a really good hamburger, you would probably not go to a McDonald's. What McDonald's does sell is an acceptable hamburger, served quickly, at low cost, and in clean surroundings. Also, their stores are conveniently located and usually readily available to people who are thinking about stopping to eat.

What do customers consider when deciding which landscape architectural firms will satisfy their needs? To answer this question, suppose a city park department needs a master plan for a piece of undeveloped park property. They will, of course, consider the product itself, the master plan. But the board members realize there are probably many firms qualified to produce an acceptable quality plan. So the plan is really only one criterion of many that the park board will consider in making a final selection. They will assess the qualifications of the firms and their professional staff, and their past record of performance on similar projects with the board or with other cities in the area; they will consider how well the firms work with park staff and communities in arriving at master plan solutions. They will consider the interest the firms have in working on the project and will evaluate their degree of enthusiasm. Finally, they will determine how well firms understand and work under government policies and procedures as well as their willingness to satisfy the needs of the city. The timeliness of a firm's performance of the work, and its familiarity with costs that might impact project budgets, are also included in the final decision of whom to hire.

Often, a selection board will use a checklist for evaluating competing professional service firms. This checklist will include the evaluation criteria together with a point value system. Each member of the selection board will review the qualifications of the firms submitting proposals. They will assign a numerical value using a predetermined point scale to determine how well each firm meets the criteria. The firms will then be ranked according to the total point scores of each firm. The evaluation matrix in Table 10.1 is similar to a form that might be used for selecting a firm to prepare a park master plan.

5. PROJECTS DON'T FALL OUT OF THE SKY

Projects come into offices mostly through the marketing efforts of a firm's principals. In larger firms, a staff member with specific marketing skills is hired to function as a firm's marketing manager. This person is assigned to direct and in most instances conduct marketing activities of the firm.

Marketing is an activity consisting of a number of phases executed over time. Any one phase may vary in the length of time needed for its execution. Earlier phases are preparatory to and lay important ground for later phases. Devising a marketing strategy, developing marketing materials, and preparing for the launch of a marketing program could take as little as a few weeks or as long as six months or a year. Marketing programs involving new technologies could require a year or longer to develop and implement. Much of the work that goes into developing a marketing program is preparatory to the actual time when communication with the targeted clients begins. To illustrate a process for developing a successful marketing program a firm might follow these steps:

TABLE 10.1 Evaluation Matrix for Selecting Firms to Prepare Park Master Plan

Evaluation Criteria	Maximum Points	Firms Proposing			
		A	B	C	D
Past record of performance on similar projects	20				
Understanding of procedures and policies	15				
Interest and enthusiasm	15				
Firm qualifications	20				
Professional staff qualifications	15				
Cost estimating accuracy on previous projects	5				
Community facilitation skills	10				
Total Scores	100				

1. Define the clients and their need for services the firm wishes to provide. Develop a profile that translates these needs into specific services and products. Include the following:
 - potential clients, including private, public markets, and other consultant groups
 - where clients are not the user but are providing products for others (developers of subdivisions), identification of the needs of their user groups
 - financial resources of the private client company
 - funding sources of government agencies, including legislative appropriations, bonds, and general funds sources
 - one- and five-year capital improvement programs of local government agencies or long-range management plans of state and federal agencies
 - applicable government regulations, review procedures, and submittal requirements
 - description of the qualifications, expertise, and technological capabilities of firms currently doing work for targeted client groups (including consideration of geographic areas where these clients are located and locations where you wish to work.)
2. Systematically investigate in as precise detail as possible the nature of the targeted client's needs.
3. Describe the kinds of services and expertise the firm needs to serve the targeted clients.
4. Assess current expertise of the firm's professional staff to determine capability of servicing targeted client needs. Where deficiencies exist, obtain needed expertise through hiring of staff, training of existing staff, or a possible association with another firm having the expertise. Also consider acquiring specialized equipment that will enhance the firm's capabilities or that will meet client requirements better than competing firms.
5. As part of an overall marketing strategy, develop a cluster of communication actions for making known the capabilities and availability of the firm to targeted clients. The strategy should make clear to potential clients that the firm understands and has the

specific capabilities to satisfy the client's needs and requirements. Use language and terms familiar to the targeted clients.

6. MARKETING IS SOMETHING EVERYONE IN THE FIRM SHOULD DO

Marketing is something that each person in a firm should feel responsible to do on a continual basis. When the receptionist picks up the telephone receiver to answer or make a telephone call or greets a client coming into the office, the opportunity for marketing exists. The tone and energy in the voice should be positive and clear, communicating a "how can I help you" message. The person sent out on deliveries or to pick up plans should also be seen as complementing the marketing strategy of the firm. And, of course, the principals and professional staff should make sure they are communicating the marketing message of the firm. Once staff are associated with a firm by people in the community, all actions and conversations, whether in the course of business or during personal, off-hours, reflect on the firm.

Types of Marketing Activities for Private Firms

Firms get work through the marketing efforts of the people in the firm. Owners and staff with the responsibility for finding and getting contracts do so by several primary means: programmed activities, referrals, and solicited and unsolicited proposals. In the early days of establishing a firm, a great deal of time is spent in telling people of the firm's existence and communicating to potential clients the services and capabilities of the firm. Once a firm is known in the community or market area in which it has decided to work, less time is spent promoting the firm.

The marketing activities of a landscape architecture firm can take the full-time efforts of one or more professional staff hired for this purpose. One proposal can take as little as one week or as long as several weeks to prepare. The marketing activities of a firm whose owners are attempting to establish their business are discussed in the following sections.

Development and Distribution of Promotional Communications For those just starting out, there are limited materials available to promote their firm since the firm does not have a track record of completed projects—and satisfied customers—to use in selling services. In the absence of completed projects, there are three approaches the firm's owners can take:

- **Areas of service:**

They can indicate clearly and directly how the group of services they wish to provide will satisfy the needs of targeted customers.

- **Qualifications:**

They can promote the professional qualifications of firm members, including their academic preparation, work experience, and unique skills.

- **Philosophy of the firm:**

They can emphasize the unique aspects of the firm's approach to working with clients and their projects, stressing the attendant benefits to the client, and the goals of the

firm in terms of quality control and cost effectiveness. Benefits should be presented in language that would have meaning to the client.

Once the details of service, qualifications, and approach philosophy are spelled out, the firm owners must design promotional materials to be used in getting the word out. Certainly the location and design of the office should reinforce the image the firm wishes to project to target clients. As part of its marketing strategy, the firm might develop several promotional materials:

- **Brochure and firm identification materials:**

These materials include letterhead, business cards, brochures, and other types of promotional materials. They are used to help make known your existence, unique qualifications, and expertise, and also to project an image that will make you attractive in the eyes of targeted clients.

Next comes the hard work of making client contacts through a variety of approaches that could include:

- telephone calls
- letters of introduction
- follow-up interviews responding to potential client interest
- information-seeking interviews regarding short- and long-range client needs

Referrals and Name Recognition As a firm develops a good reputation, opportunities for contracted work will come through client referrals. A firm in business for five to ten years can also expect to realize the residual benefits of firm name recognition. A firm in business for some time can achieve a certain degree of fame through the visibility of its work or word-of-mouth accolades by satisfied clients. This recognition for certain services or expertise may result in new clients and contracts. Bad work has the opposite effect.

It is important to follow up in a timely manner on referrals or contacts made by potential clients familiar with your work. Once a client contact is made, it should be a matter of firm policy to execute at least two actions:

- thank-you letter with personal telephone call to the individual who made the referral
- telephone call with a follow-up letter to the potential client thanking them for the inquiry and letting them know of your interest to discuss their needs at their earliest convenience

Solicited Proposals A solicited proposal is a client-initiated process for selecting consultants. Federal codes and state and local government procurement laws dictate the process and manner of soliciting proposals and selecting firms to perform planning and design services for government agencies. Although there are variations from state to state and region to region, there is enough uniformity to provide an overview of the process.

Each year, agencies (federal, state, and local government) have money in their budgets allocated for specific projects. The source of the money may be the sale of bonds, through an appropriation bill, or as a budget item funded through the governing body's general budget. Each year agencies that hire landscape architecture firms to perform planning and design services schedule work to be done by private firms. As the year progresses, the agencies adver-

tise the proposed projects in local or regional newspapers and in local industry construction news services, post the advertisements in a planning or financing office bulletin board, or mail out announcements to firms who are on file with the agency. The advertisement is called a *Request for Proposals (RFP)*, or *Request for Services*. All the agencies in the federal government advertise in the *Commerce Business Daily*. All requests for landscape architectural services fall under the heading of A/E Services (Architectural-Engineering Services).

In most RFPs there is a closing date for submitting proposals. The items to be included in the proposals and the criteria for making a selection by the contracting agency are also included in the RFP announcement. Other information relevant to the project and special features of the proposed contract are also published in the announcement. Often, a preproposal meeting is held by the contracting agency to answer questions and provide clarification about the proposed project, its requirements, and any special details regarding the consultant selection procedures. In most instances, the agency will interview a small number of the firms (from three to as many as seven firms or teams of firms) who submitted the best proposals. A final selection is made, followed by contract negotiations (including fee negotiations) and the award of a contract by the body of the agency authorized to enter into contract agreements for professional services.

The process for selecting landscape architectural firms in the private sector is generally less involved and less formalized. A private company or individual is not obligated in any way to follow any particular selection process. A company can offer a contract to provide services on a sole source basis; that is, they can offer the contract to one firm without receiving proposals or discussing the project with any other firm. With larger projects involving government oversight (such as energy generation, as in the case of a nuclear generating facility or oil pipeline system) the private company may closely follow a federal or state procurement of professional services process, similar to the RFP process outlined above.

Unsolicited Proposals When a consultant approaches a potential client with a proposal to solve or deal with a particular problem or situation, it is considered an unsolicited proposal. The consultant defines the problem, outlines an approach to meet that problem, and describes the benefits to the client of the approach and services to be provided.

In the case where a private client is presented with an unsolicited proposal, the decision to accept, reject, or delay accepting the proposal is left up to the client. In the case of a government client, procurement rules under which the jurisdiction of the agency resides determine the manner and process by which they respond to an unsolicited proposal. If the agency staff sees merit in the proposal, most likely a formalized consultant selection process will be authorized.

Economic conditions and trends have become increasingly volatile as national economies and political institutions are influenced by global events. The needs and requirements of today's clients can be expected to be equally volatile. A company's past success does not guarantee they will continue to be successful. A company that wishes to stay competitive and profitable must make every effort to understand current and prospective client needs. Part of understanding client requirements is understanding the shifts in economic trends at the regional, national, and global levels.

7. IN-BASKET

You have been made principal of a new landscape architectural section of an established environmental sciences firm. One of your first responsibilities is to develop a brochure for this new section and develop a new strategy for marketing landscape architectural services.

1. Your target is twofold: to gain new contracts from the existing client base and to attract new clients. What type of information would you include in the brochure? Would your approach be the same for both sets of market targets? Explain.
2. One strategy to generate potential contracts with this client base is to send an unsolicited letter. Outline the main points of the letter with the intent of using it to stimulate interest in your new group's services. Assume you will include a copy of the new brochure and that you hope this effort will result in a meeting with the clients to present the firm's new capabilities.
3. Explain the direction your approach might take if the brochure is being developed for a newly formed firm offering services primarily in landscape architecture in which you are a partner.