

Consider the Client's Point of View First

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SUMMARY

A few years ago the AIA looked to redefine the profession and to focus architecture practice around the client. The redefinition called for architects to think like their clients and become the client's trusted facilitator. Performa architecture firm has developed a strategy to help clients achieve their operational goals.

REDEFINING THE PROFESSION

Performa, a 60-person firm with offices in Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Washington, D.C., is redefining the profession, with considerable success. The firm has honed its skill at gathering and retaining the marketplace wisdom their clients seek to better prepare them to face new challenges.

Performa is an architecture/engineering firm that views itself primarily as a strategic business consulting firm that also offers design services.

Performa focuses on understanding its clients by understanding their businesses. Clients are increasingly focused on the strategic use of their capital assets to support their business objectives. A design team needs to understand a client's underlying business priorities and clearly convey how professional design services can support the expansion of a business segment and enhance a client's financial results year by year.

By learning what makes clients and their marketplaces tick, Performa enhances its own market position. The firm can foresee significant marketplace issues and changes; explore the most promising business leads; and find the best way to acquire prime office locations, new services and tools, and the in-house talent and independent consultants needed for future business. The firm also gains early awareness of research that may be needed to continually realign itself with its target market. Rather than simply trying to break into new markets, Performa can expand its value-added

services to meet changing or growing needs of its established business segments.

A HOLISTIC VIEW

Practice due diligence by studying the client's world through the client's eyes. Recruit staff directly from your target markets to gain firsthand knowledge of how the client works and to know how to calculate a client's return on investment. Simply looking at a client's physical facilities without considering the business implications of capital projects is insufficient. One needs to study a client's business holistically—including its people, places, and business processes—especially in the early phases of a project.

Performa's goal is to create high-performance environments that help clients achieve their operational goals. In higher education, that means helping schools attract and retain students. In manufacturing, it means helping clients better serve their own customers.

COMMUNICATION IS THE KEY

Considering your client's point of view first means becoming a vital part of the client's organization. That requires effective communication. Use the client's vocabulary, not architectural terminology. Consciously purge the verbal and nonverbal cues that say, "We are the architecture firm."

Individuals who join Performa from a specific market segment often serve as consulting liaisons between architecture staff and the client base. They establish a vital link between the client and the architecture firm's staff, which is augmented by an emphasis on training, education, and communication skills.

Effective and open communication is as important to the firm's internal operations as it is to client relations. There are no doors in the Performa office, from the CEO down. All work spaces are the same size. Hierarchy is downplayed to break the physical

and psychological barriers that tend to create divisions among management, middle management, and junior staff. Presidents and vice presidents roll up their sleeves to work on assignments alongside the most junior staff.

This close communication is in tune with the firm's core value—the betterment of its clients—and fosters an atmosphere of learning and fun. Performa promotes an entrepreneurial attitude to help younger staff members thrive and mature. They include them in everything and allow them to hear everything. Younger staff members learn and grow by sitting in on meetings with presidents of companies and colleges.

The firm holds regular staff meetings and shares nearly all financial information with all employees. A good deal of time is devoted to talking about where the firm is headed strategically and how the firm is doing vis-à-vis the strategic plan, both financially and operationally, in good times and bad. That helps build a trusting relationship among all staff members.

THE VALUE OF EARNING THE CLIENT'S TRUST

Once you've built a high level of trust with clients by bringing them a quantifiable measure of success, you can broaden the scope of your consulting services—including bringing to the client other service providers you know and trust.

A strategic planning session with a higher-education client may reveal that facility upgrades are not the real need. Instead, the school's admissions group needs shoring up. You may have no expertise in admissions, but you should certainly know who does. Because you have earned clients' trust by demonstrating a deep knowledge and understanding of their needs, they will view you increasingly as an operational consultant rather than as an architecture/engineering firm. By enhancing your clients' position, you enhance your own position as a valued consultant.

For example, as the client's improved admissions strategy becomes a leverage point for enrollment growth, new or refurbished facilities may be needed. Because your firm fortified the client's fundamental business, the client will probably turn to you for that work when the time comes. As a result, you will spend less time chasing requests for proposals (RFPs) and more time developing long-term collaborative client relationships.

Asking your clients for critiques is an invaluable tool for tailoring your services to their needs. Constantly considering the client's point of view is a dynamic process. After an assignment or project is complete, it is also useful to conduct an in-house "downloading session." Ask yourselves: Have we delivered true value to the client? Are the results measurable? The only way to evaluate your effectiveness is to get this client and team feedback.

CAPTURE KNOWLEDGE

Of course, at the base of the Performa strategy is the firm's collective knowledge. That is what clients pay for, and a design firm must be structured as a learning organization.

One of Performa's competitive advantages in the manufacturing marketplace is its ability to impart a culture of learning to its client organizations. The firm leverages its tools and techniques to help clients capitalize on change. By institutionalizing those tools inside Performa, newer staff members are exposed quickly to the firm's cumulative experience. They have the opportunity to live and breathe the methodology the firm uses to facilitate change in client organizations.

Regular introspection and self-examination is an important element of knowledge sharing. Performa's manufacturing group goes off-site four times each year to dissect the team's process, using specific client examples: What worked? What didn't work? What did the firm overdo? What did the firm fail to do? What were clients ecstatic about? How were they disappointed? By including all members of the team, staff at all levels learn what makes a business grow and thrive and what's important to their customers.

Performa's higher-education group documents—in a disciplined, step-by-step way—how its staff members work through certain types of analysis for a client. This client analysis helps Performa continue to use and refine successful strategies. The firm will continue to encounter unique situations with each project and must be prepared to continuously develop new methods.

Performa's intense cycle of iterative analysis has created a market for that process itself among Performa's clients. To meet the demand, the firm has recorded portions of the process on CD, complete with training materials, documentation, forms, and step-by-step instructions.

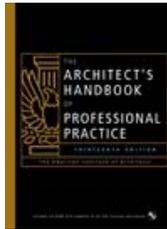
More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 01.02.01 Thinking Like a Client
- 01.02.02 The Art of Listening
- 05.01.01 Design Quality and Client Need:
Six Basic Questions to Consider

For More Information on This Topic

See also “How Client Values Affect Architect Selection,” by Kevin W.C. Green, *The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition, Chapter 3, page 29. The *Handbook* can be ordered from the AIA Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by sending e-mail to bookstore@aia.org.



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