

Meeting Architects' Needs

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SUMMARY

Tough economic times affect architects and AIA components. AIA Colorado found a way to continue to offer benefits to its members despite a reduced staff and budget. It distributed a survey to its members to find out how it could help and found that most firms needed to improve their marketing skills. The component wanted to host a communications symposium but was short-staffed and had no extra funding. It solved this dilemma through sponsorships and alliances with other organizations, enabling it to host a successful symposium that drew more attendees than any other first-time program and made \$10,000 in the process.

BACKGROUND

In January 2002, Colorado was in a recession. Dot-coms and telecommunications companies were shutting down, and jobs were lost by the thousands. The economic instability worsened for the state as it began affecting other industries and professions.

Local bids for architects became fewer and more competitive as once-loyal clients began seeking RFPs/RPQs outside the state. Firm principals found themselves reducing their staffs and scaling back their budgets.

AIA Colorado knew it had to refocus and realign itself to offset its members' challenges. It also needed to find different ways to communicate the value of AIA membership. Toward these ends, the component sent a survey to all AIA Colorado member firms, asking what it would take for them to support AIA Colorado programs and events during tough economic times.

THE BENEFITS OF SPECIALIZED MARKETING

Within a month of distributing the survey to its 634 member firms, the component received a 56 percent response rate. The survey feedback highlighted an entirely new targeted audience that the component had never before considered:

- Architecture/design firm marketing professionals, who were focused on marketing the firm, retaining clients, and attracting new clients
- Sole proprietors or small architecture/design firms operating without staff or resources but seeking ways to define their overall strategy to successfully compete with other well-established firms

It was understood that there were organizations that provided marketing programs to the overall A/E/C industry. However, the survey respondents no longer wanted to be thrown into one marketing pot. Instead, they wanted a specialized architecture/design focus and the ability to adjust for differences in a firm's operations size, overall business scope, and marketing and communications need and experience.

The survey data showed that a "communications symposium" would be helpful. The symposium would focus on the experiences from the architecture and design marketplace, emerging trends, and technologies. It would provide all marketing professionals, sole proprietors, and large-firm principals with a full array of communications tools to help them address the changing environment.

PUTTING TOGETHER A COMMUNICATIONS SYMPOSIUM

The communications symposium concept was presented to the AIA Colorado Board of Directors over a five-month period before obtaining final approval to move forward. The board consented, with the following contingencies:

- Due to its minimal budget, the component could not provide financial resources to support this new program
- With a staff downsized from eight to four over the past year, the component could not commit additional staff to the program
- There could be no financial risk for AIA Colorado

The following steps were critical to successfully implement the communications symposium program:

- Developing a marketing e-mail database to target all members
- Combining the annual design conference theme with the presentation/marketing plan for the symposium
- Designing the program for three specific audiences: firm marketing professionals with minimal marketing experience, firm marketing professionals with an expertise in marketing but seeking ways to increase their client base, and sole proprietors
- Soliciting support from allied organizations
- Seeking and confirming speakers specific to architecture and design
- Developing a conservative budget
- Seeking sponsors
- Gaining support from members

RESULTS

Three months following the decision to move forward with the communications symposium, the program was presented as a preconference event at AIA Colorado's annual conference. The unavailability of financial support from the organization meant that the program planners had to find a new way to secure resources.

The Society of Marketing Services Professionals (SMPS) teamed with AIA Colorado to successfully solicit appropriate speakers for the program without any financial obligations to either organization.

AIA Colorado successfully implemented a sponsorship program for the event, and the symposium generated more than \$10,000 in net revenue, with no financial risk.

In addition to the revenue, the 2002 Communications Symposium drew a higher attendance rate than any other first-time AIA Colorado event. The event will continue to be held every year preceding the state design conference.

For More Information

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RESOURCES

More Best Practices

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

- 21.03.09 Uniting Design and Construction Professionals for Effective Government Advocacy
- 21.04.01 Creating a Brochure that Attracts New Members
- 21.04.02 Tapping a Different Type of Member

Feedback

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Key Terms

- Leadership
- Associations
- Design associations
- The American Institute of Architects
- AIA state and local components