



AIA Best Practices: Manifested core values

Using your core values as a marketing tool

Contributed by David W. Lecours

Summary

Firms are paying increased attention to firm culture as a differentiator in attracting new talent and clients. Developing a creative manifestation of your core values is a powerful marketing tool, providing a tangible artifact of your firm's culture.

Core values as a marketing tool

Architecture firms are paying increased attention to firm culture. Firms often cite office culture as a differentiator in attracting new talent.

Firm culture refers to the shared beliefs and behaviors that govern interactions amongst employees and their clients. How is firm culture shared with a prospective hire or client? Must firm culture be experienced before it can be understood?

Begin by codifying the shared behaviors and beliefs of your firm as written core values. Sadly, most firm leaders develop a set of banal core values at a weekend retreat, then send them out in an equally uninspired mass email to all employees. But, as you'll see in this article, core values can be so much more. A creative manifestation of your core values is a powerful marketing tool and an essential artifact of your culture.

Manifested core values attract the right talent and clients

Prospective hires and clients want to get a sense of what it's like to work with your firm. They imagine themselves on a typical day at your office and judge whether they'll fit in. At the same time, you want clients and talent that harmonize with your culture. For both parties, this requires a leap of faith, but you can minimize risk by sharing a creative manifestation of your core values. The goal isn't to produce a generic or safe output that resonates with everyone. You only want people who fit with your culture. Communicate your point of view. Then let clients and talent self-select.

Davy Architecture: typographic collage wall



When Davy Architecture in San Diego, CA moved into a new office, they designed a four-foot tall, 20-foot long s-curved pony wall to separate workstations from a common area. Knowing it would receive a lot of traffic from employees, consultants, and clients coming through the office, they covered the wall in a typographic collage of quotes to reflect the firm's core values. According to Kurt Hunker, FAIA, the purpose of the wall graphic is to "memorialize interesting thoughts about architecture often left unsaid." To reinforce their core value "teamwork," the firm's Principals made an open call to all employees and collaborators to recommend quotes for the wall.

Lake | Flato Architects: culture video

Within the Culture section of their website, Lake | Flato has a [4 minute video](#) to communicate the fun, culture, and values of the firm. The video features folksy music, upbeat office shots, and voice-over of employees talking about what makes the firm special. Lake | Flato declares, "traditions old and new have informed our process and design for the past 30 years." Many of these playful traditions are featured in the video.

Murraysmith: beer coasters



Murraysmith is a civil engineering firm in the Pacific Northwest, proud of their attention to detail, playful culture, and medium size (129 people). Sounds like a craft brewery, right? Collaborating with their branding consultant, Murraysmith designed a faux craft beer label for each of their seven core values—each manifested as a letterpressed beer coaster. The core value is on the front (e.g. Collaboration IPA) and on the back is a fun description of what that value means to the firm. To give each of the seven core values gravitas, a new coaster could be released one by one for seven weeks.

Manifested core values demonstrate how to behave

Most firms have a particular way they like things done--everything from binding a proposal, closing out a project, or even writing an email. Some firms, like Dewberry, a 2,000 person engineering firm call this “The Dewberry Way” to brand their culture.

You could create a 10-volume employee manual that imagines all scenarios employees will encounter. Or, you could manifest your core values as a guide to allow employees, who are adults, to use their best judgement. Starbucks manifests their core values in their Green Apron Book, pocket-sized to fit in a barista’s green apron. Perhaps the pocket position, over the heart, helps baristas take the expected behaviors to heart.

One of Seattle-based LMN Architects core values is “[Community Giving](#).” The firm believes in “giving back to the community that has supported [it] since [its] inception.” The firm raises money for The United Way through their popular holiday auction, in which “LMN staff offer homemade gifts, dinners, and adventures to each other, creating a moveable feast of social connections throughout the year.”

Array Architects: core values



THE ICONS FOR ARRAY ARCHITECT'S CORE VALUES, REPRESENTING (L-R) COLLABORATION, INNOVATION, DESIGN EXCELLENCE, EMPATHY, PASSION AND PROCESS EXCELLENCE.

[Array Architects](#) declare, “we are not architects who do healthcare, we are healthcare architects.” This tight positioning is complemented by equally focused core values. Each value is accompanied by a custom designed icon. The wording of the value is a single word or two, followed by a declarative sentence that reads like a positive affirmation. If ever in doubt, the core values are worded to encourage staff to live the value, not just know it intellectually. For example, “Empathy” is one of six core values. It reads, “Empathy: Valuing others points of view affords empathetic, well-informed responses.” Another reads “Passion: Thrive and flourish both personally and professionally.”

Manifested core values demonstrate quality

Schmidt Design Group: 20th anniversary book



Stated or not as an official core value, all firms embrace quality. So, whatever form your manifested core values take, make sure it's done well. Use quality materials, professional designers, writers and photographers to communicate the professionalism of your firm. Schmidt Design Group, a landscape architecture firm, used their 20th Anniversary book to communicate their values. There are 20 quotes or statements coupled with project photography to express their unique point of view. The firm received such positive feedback, they created similar books for their 25th and 30th anniversaries. To demonstrate quality, the books feature great photography, graphic design, paper, printing, and bindery. One client even told the owner of the firm, “I keep the book on my desk. If I’m having a bad day, I read through the book to find inspiration.”

LMN Architects: maker culture

Another core value for LMN Architects is their “[maker](#)” culture. Supported by their in-house R&D group, LMN Tech Studio, staff are encouraged to engage in local design competitions like the Seattle Design Festival. While experimental, the entries must be well-built to withstand the human-scale interaction of the general public. This often means collaborating with professional engineering and contracting colleagues. Through the years, these independent projects have been featured in prominent publications like Architect, ArchDaily, Design Boom, and Treehugger.

Conclusion

When you bring your core values to life, do so in a medium that reflects your culture. Many employees at Murraysmith go out after work to enjoy the burgeoning craft brewing culture of the Pacific Northwest. So, beer coasters are a great fit to communicate the firm’s core values. As Marshall McLuhan stated, “the medium is the message.” Choose a medium that fits your firm.

To effectively pass your firm’s culture on to the next generation, it must be manifested. You can’t rely solely on oral tradition. Stories get lost, skewed by the teller, and forgotten by the listener. Share your core values and culture through a tangible artifact.

When the right prospective client or employee experiences your manifested core values, you have the opportunity to develop fierce loyalty.

About the contributor

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This article corresponds to:

Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice, 15th edition Unit 1 - The Profession
Chapter 06 – Marketing and Business Development
Section 02 – Developing Marketing Strategy