

Case Study Series: What's Working in Marketing & Selling Professional Services

Architecture Firm Taps Social Media to Promote Earth Day, Generate Leads

By M. Sharon Baker

OVERVIEW

As the East Coast's oldest architecture firm, Baskervill has grown by expanding into new industry segments and by acquiring several firms offering complimentary services and expertise. By 2008, the full-service Richmond, VA firm, which offers architecture, engineering and design services, had grown to 130 people in two offices and revenues of \$20 million.

But when the recession hit and credit crunch ensued, commercial construction—which made up about 85% of Baskervill's revenues—halted. Overnight, projects were shelved, scrapped or scaled down, throwing Baskervill, its competitors, and the construction industry into a tail spin.

"We immediately saw increased competition," said Tracey Gould, marketing director. "Where we once would see maybe five to eight competitors at a pre-proposal meeting, we were suddenly seeing 30 to 40 to 50 or more. We also saw very large out-of-town firms bidding on small local projects as those firms scrambled to get any work they could. Meanwhile, the fees became extremely competitive and we saw firms bidding at cost or even at a loss just to get work."

To remain competitive in an over-saturated market, without becoming a commodity, it kept its fees in line rather than cutting them. The firm decided to stand on its reputation and for the quality of its work, and ramp up—rather than eliminate—its marketing efforts

SITUATION

Like many architecture firms, Baskervill relied largely on word of mouth and traditional marketing methods to generate leads and new business. But Gould knew in an increasingly competitive marketplace she needed to step up those efforts. In the last year and a half she ramped up the firm's public relations efforts, launched a monthly newsletter, placed articles and advertising in trade publications and dipped the firm's toe into social media by joining LinkedIn. She also started a company blog.

One of Gould's biggest challenges was broadening awareness of the firm's sustainable practices and its breadth of expertise in various industries. Potential customers knew that Baskervill excelled in designing commercial buildings, but many did not know the firm offered engineering, interior design and sustainable design services. They also didn't know the firm was "green" before it became fashionable, or the firm designed hospitals, hotels, and sporting facilities, including racetracks, among other facility types.

“Clients really knew us for just one facility type,” Gould said. “There was a real lack of awareness about our diverse portfolio.”

Like many in the architecture industry, Baskervill’s executive team was wary of adding social media to the marketing mix. Several couldn’t see the direct benefits of promoting the firm through Twitter, Facebook, and other social media avenues. But Gould knew social media could be a good tool to help Baskervill build awareness of the firm.

With Earth Day approaching in 2010, Gould saw an opportunity to establish the firm’s green reputation, which wasn’t very well known to the public or clients. That’s partly because much of the work Baskervill performed was in the commercial sector where many still perceived it too costly to add green features or pursue green certifications like Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, commonly known as LEED certification.

Much of the high profile sustainable design work was being done in the public sector where governments mandated new buildings be energy efficient and comply with green standards. But Baskervill didn’t actively pursue federal government until early 2009.

Approach

Position the Firm as an Industry Leader

Gould knew Earth Day would be a good choice for a green campaign, but she didn’t want to send the message that Baskervill was green only one day of the year. “I really wanted to inform our clients and community that we are green all year long and have been for a long time with our in-house recycling program and efforts to modify our internal operations, lighting fixtures and other programs,” she said. “I wanted to drive home that we weren’t celebrating one day but all month long, and we are a leader in sustainable design within the community.”

Gould teamed up with the firm’s BEEP team, which stands for Baskervill Environmental and Energy Practices, and they created a campaign they called “Every Day is Earth Day @Baskervill.” The month-long awareness campaign culminated with an electronics recycling drive on Earth Day.

They partnered with nonprofit Computer Recycling of Virginia (CRVA) to create the recycling drive, and the plan was to encourage businesses and individuals to donate their unused electronics for recycling or re-use in area schools.

Create Valuable, Shareable Content

In addition to creating online buzz about the event, Gould’s campaign included sharing recycling and energy-saving tips with businesses and the general public and finding volunteers to help with the event.

Every day of the week they posted tips and strategies on how to incorporate earth-friendly strategies at home or at their offices on Twitter and a new Baskervill Facebook Fan page. The goal was to send one quick tip a day, such as how much you could save over the course of a year if you changed out all the light bulbs in your space.

“We really didn’t want to make it promotional about Baskervill but to bring value and encourage people to make small changes on their own and see the big impact they could have,” she said.

Stay Top of Mind

Once a week, they sent out an email blast to 3,200 clients, vendors, consultants, and potential clients who already signed up for their monthly newsletter. Gould alerted them to the upcoming campaign and allowed subscribers to opt out if they wanted.

The weekly email highlighted a Baskervill project showcasing different sustainable strategies and included a "Save the Date" invitation to the Earth Day recycling event. Gould kept the email brief, and Michelle Mikita, an interior designer for Baskervill, designed it like a two-sided post card. The e-blast included a full project image on one page, using an interior image with a few bulleted points or a strategy layered on the image on the other.

"We wanted to keep it simple, visually interesting and very brief so it wouldn't burden the reader," she said. One week they highlighted a project outlining the different strategies they took to help a commercial kitchen named the Community Kitchen become LEED certified.

"We wanted to tell our audience, 'We're doing cool projects' or to [have them] say, 'I didn't know Baskervill could do such projects,' and to keep us in mind for future work," Gould said. "In the case of Community Kitchen, we wanted to bring them some recognition because it's practically unheard of for a commercial kitchen to be LEED certified, and our staff and client is proud of it."

The Baskervill team also highlighted different ways it "walks the walk" of being earth-friendly every day using Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, and their blog.

RESULTS

The Earth Day event was a huge success. Seven truck loads of electronics were recycled through Computer Recycling of Virginia. Several companies from across the city drove in with four or more vehicles filled with electronics.

Baskervill's social media campaign attracted the attention of the local newspaper, The Richmond Times Dispatch, which not only promoted the event the day before the recycling drive, but it also featured Baskervill and the drive on their front page with a story that jumped inside the paper. The social media blasts also attracted the attention of the CBS television affiliate in Richmond, which mentioned the recycling event on their 5 p.m. news, Gould said, estimating the total media value of the coverage at about \$14,000 based upon ad rates. Baskervill far exceeded its goal of increasing its social media presence by 25%. In comparing its figures from March to May, Baskervill increased its Facebook fans and traffic by 400%, Gould said. They added 50 Twitter followers and increased their blog awareness and traffic by 40%.

The number of new leads is harder to calculate given that the sales cycle in architecture is very long, often stretching out a year or more. Nonetheless, Baskervill did increase its awareness in the industry. For every email blast the firm sent out, Gould received four to five emails back with messages congratulating the team on the project or praising the project. In addition, the firm's principals received phone calls from industry players.

Although she can't pinpoint it to the Earth Day campaign, Gould said on May 5, the firm's phone started ringing again, and the firm received calls from clients wanting to restart projects that were previously on hold. Today the firm is fiscally healthy, working in new markets and production schedules are tight.

“We plan to make Every Day is Earth Day an annual event,” Gould said. “This year it will be even bigger, and we’re planning to have a month-long series of events and seminars.”

Additional Insights From Tracey Gould of Baskervill:

- **Don’t just make your marketing or business development about business.** Find a way to add value to your clients and the community.
- **Don’t be afraid of social media.** Many in the architectural and even general business community are nervous about social media and don’t see its value often saying potential clients don’t base their decisions on Twitter conversations. Gould says Baskervill’s goal isn’t to foster one-on-one conversations but to reach other avenues that can “broadcast” the firm’s message, image and reputation. “We’re targeting publications, editors, writers, bloggers and people who are picking up on our message and using it in their newsletters, magazines and blogs—vehicles that do reach our audience,” she said.
- **Try to think of creative ways to position your company,** including acting more like a business-to-consumer company in terms of your marketing and how you look. “Why can’t architectural firms take a page from professional services providers like Progressive Insurance or Geico, she asks. Progressive, for instance, has really positioned themselves like a retailer, even though they sell professional insurance services. Doing so may help a firm stand out, she added, using Geico’s gecko as an example.

Resources

Baskervill Web Site: www.baskervill.com

Blog: <http://baskervill.wordpress.com>

Twitter: twitter.com/baskervill

Facebook Fan Page: Baskervill