

Small Firm, Big Strategy

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At the core of most architects and design firms, is the desire to create beautiful and meaningful design. But in order to do those meaningful commissions and win the trust of your clients, you have to first **find** meaningful commissions. For the small firm, and especially for a start-up, this poses a unique design problem unto itself. Small firms (under 50) make up 75% of the market, and while many were started by designers with high levels of expertise and competence, it is still their task to convince prospective clients that their start-up has both the brains and brawn to crank out a meaningful design while meeting their anticipated schedule and budget.

Our start-up firm, DELV, started with 4 partners, all roaring towards the 'prime' of our careers. We had passion, a decade and a half of experience and a hunger, because we had mouths to feed (our own families' and those of our two employees). So how do start-ups and small firms win work? What does it take? Where are the best spots to spy out potential great commissions? How do we ensure that where we invest our valuable and limited time will pay off?

The Strategy

We quickly realized that DELV would need both a short and a long game and that the strategy would be different for each except for one, essential thing - a clear and authentic brand. This we knew we had to get right, and right away. It would be the cornerstone of attracting the type of work we had envisioned those early days with dry erase markers in front of the white board.

Articulate your brand

The beauty and danger of being a startup is you have carte blanche; your brand is a blank slate. It **IS** what you want it to be -- untouched and unmarred. It is also untested, unproven, and risky. Articulating our newborn brand was so essential to the overall success of DELV, the four of us got to work early on hashing out what persona best embodied the "collective us" and one that also would attract the type of people we thought would find value in our service. Subsequently, we also started designing the brand *experience*, all the touchpoints an outsider might have with our firm. Both will most definitely evolve as we grow, but knowing this from the beginning gave us our center. Externally, it helped others have a clear and consistent answer to the question, "Who's this new firm?" Internally, it became our litmus test for making choices during our first year.

Identify your targets. Be bold, and be specific.

Once we got a handle on what our brand wanted to be, we had to ask ourselves, "Who'd want to work with us?" We drafted a list of our ideal clients. Some of these clients were ideal because of the quality and quantity of projects they have available within our core competencies. Some were ideal because they share our values, culture and vision. And others, well, they just pay on time.

You can also look to re-define the term client. Clients can also be developers, contractors and brokers; who while they are not the end user, have the ability to engage architects in meaningful commissions for clients that might end up fitting into your ideal category. And for DELV, this ended up generating about 30% of our revenue and launched our name out into the marketplace without having to spend a ton of resources on marketing and hours on responding to RFPs.

Diversify

It's true of your portfolio holdings and it should be true of your service offerings, diversify. From the beginning, we decided to establish multiple service areas under the firm. We recognized early on the unique passions and competencies of DELV's four partners and were determined to leverage them for strategic advantage. For example, beyond the traditional menu of services that architects are typically known for, we included a market-driven service line that assists clients with the challenges of implementing and integrating BIM into their projects. We coupled this service with a platform of BIM content and direct access support for a wide network of other a/e/c firms and large institutions. Other items we added onto our service menu were brand development, visioning, and a co-working environment for design partners. Having this diversification hedges some protection against seasonal fluctuations, economic or political changes in market segments, and other outside factors that can influence the success of a small firm.

BD is like dating

Business development is a lot like dating. You're investing time, money and energy, meeting with a lot of people with the end goal of finding someone with whom you can have a relationship.

There's online dating, a broad approach where you digitally post information about how amazing you are and hope someone strolls by and is interested enough to call; and then there's blind dating, where someone you know thinks there might be a connection between you and someone else they know and they make an introduction. Business development for the start-up is less like online dating and more like blind dating. You are using your existing network of relationships to get you closer to a match.

If you are starting a firm and have been in the industry for a while, you will already have an existing network of relationship to which to look for potential 'matches'. At DELV, we started our first business development efforts by examining the unique web of connections and relationships each of us had built throughout our careers. These connections were not limited to inside our industry but outside as well. They include partners, vendors, consultants, accountants, fellow association members, personal acquaintances, neighbors, and the guy or gal next to you at the gym. We found that social media platforms like LinkedIn and Twitter were credible resources for both finding connections as well as sharing news about our firm to a highly targeted audience. By leveraging these connections we recognized the wealth of opportunity that could be found from simply starting within the relationships we currently had.

An authentic message

Then there's the message. Which jumps back to knowing your brand, its unique story and its relevant audience. This all-hands-on-deck approach to business development can feel intimidating if your brand message is unclear in any way. As you're meeting with people you're telling them what you're up to, the backstory of 'how', and more importantly, 'why' you began doing what you're doing. In this story, tell them the type of person or organization that is mostly likely to find value in what you're doing at your firm. Be authentic, be honest, and be confident. If you are great at one project type and only proficient in another, say that. It's a powerful and confident message to define what you will *not* do, and what types of projects are *not* a good fit for your firm. This helps them make "the match" for you. Be confident in not just who you are, and but where you're going. You can't sell what you don't believe in.

Combine a powerful map of overlaid personal and professional networks with a clear and authentic message; then infuse it with the proverbial entrepreneurial hustle, and this is the making of a sustainable and successful small firm with a robust business development base.

Summary

Here's the bad news though. Even the best strategy with business development at any level of a company's maturity still won't cut it. It takes hard work in execution. Scratch that. It takes laser-focused, hard work. You have to be brutally strategic in your efforts. Learn to say 'no', learn to say 'yes'. None of these ideas are earth shattering, but it's doing them with a discipline that makes the difference. If building your firm's business was like a crock-pot ("Set it and forget it"), everyone would be doing it. Instead your brand is a living thing and it lives in a changing environment with an assortment of influences at micro and macro levels, albeit technological, cultural, political, and others.

Remember, you are not an island, you are a myriad of relationships. So lean on those you know; don't just cast a wide net, but a purposeful net; and present an honest, value-driven message about who you are, why you got into this business and how that translates to amazing things for these potential clients. Oh yeah, and work hard at it

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