RESOURCING THE PROFESSION for prosperity.

I recently read and reposted an interesting paper from RIBA on Twitter about the future of our profession in 25 years, and one thing the article talked about was the need for architects to become client-savvy and financially literate... and the.... “architect must be able to see beyond building a building and offer a service that embraces the client’s broader aims - becoming a problem solver as well as a designer.” This really resonates with me as a small business owner, and as I have talked with our members across the country over the past several months, I keep hearing them say “help us be better at business” and “small businesses need help.”

One thing is clear: the business model of our profession is under pressure. Our clients, technology providers, building codes, jurisdictions, government and even our own association are creating additional complexity and risk without commensurate compensation. In political parlance that is known as “unfunded mandates.” At the same time, there is downward pressure on fees. Something has to give.

We can sit back and let the market decide for us, or we can decide to reshape the market together. As the RIBA paper suggests, think about how we could leverage our knowledge and the data we create to expand our reach deeper into the value stream of the process of delivering buildings and then throughout the entire life cycle of those same buildings.

How do we prepare architects? Financially literate and savvy professionals will be relevant in the new economy. Business-savvy architects understand what we do is not about us; it is about our clients and their needs, viewed through our unique lens of design thinking, social consciousness and business calculation. The AIA should put in place rigorous programs in business, all of which should be HSW. We need programs in data; case studies showing how data can be leveraged. We need a high priority research program in ways to capture and leverage data embedded in our designs and ways to reduce labor risk (more value plus less labor risk equals higher profits). Our messaging should celebrate innovation, collaboration, inclusion, research, entrepreneurship (business) and technology. Our imperative is to lift up our profession and prepare all of us to compete.

How do we prepare our emerging professionals? I believe the IDP and the Exam should emphasize business skills at a much higher level. Our messaging should encourage our young people to explore the outer edges of our profession and even invent whole new ways to bring value by celebrating innovation. We should have specific programs in collaboration, leadership and design thinking. High level skills in BIM, Coding and other tools should be the base level expectation going forward. Professional ethics is another area that needs focus.

New question: How do we prepare our students? I believe architecture education already prepares our young people to think critically, to identify and solve complex problems utilizing design thinking. It is an amazing education. Yet, I want to see our students exposed to entrepreneurship, ethics, strategy and business as embedded values. Our students need to graduate with an appreciation that BUSINESS IS A GOOD THING, is NECESSARY, and is one of those key elements of practice that ENABLE us to better serve ourselves, our employees, our families and society.
INFLUENCING our clients and our communities.

Let’s face it. While each and every one of us loves design and loves our profession, and strives to do great work, not every one of us is going to win the Gold Medal. The remaining 99% are open to finding additional ways to make a significant impact within the context of this grand profession. I believe there is way more opportunity than we could even imagine. Finding a way to build a sustainable and prosperous business model that will help us put our kids through college and build for our retirement could be a good thing.

Last question about regulatory framework. The question posits a regulatory framework that enables architects to be successful leaders. In my mind, the two operative words are successful and leaders. Thus, our efforts in advocacy should position AIA Architects as the preferred leaders of the process as well as participants and should articulate exactly why.

Our education offerings should prepare us to be those leaders.

The regulatory issues we seem to be dealing with all the time are primarily governmental (local, state and federal) procurement policies that encourage unfunded or underfunded design competitions and/or fee “bidding” involving some variation of design-build (led by General Contractors). Every state seems to be fighting similar battles. This is not just in the US; this is global. And I want to remind us all that since the average firm has only five people, that means there are somewhere around 10,000 firms, many of whom are our members, who can’t afford or aren’t allowed to participate. This is an EQUITY issue as well as procurement issue and we aren’t even talking about it.

The AIA’s Advocacy team has developed some great tools for us to use to fight these battles; there are resources available to help us. Our position is always: we believe in QBS, or qualifications based selection. Well, folks. This isn’t really working is it? What is it Edison said about insanity?

It doesn’t help that AIA Members are largely unwilling to get involved in the political process and/or contribute to our PAC’s both state and federal. This is a huge cultural problem, and I hope to see us change this.

We can fight these battles reactively as we generally have to, or we can fight these battles proactively, both in the marketplace and in the battleground of public opinion. After all, this is OUR government. Our government does not own us, we own them and as long as we are not engaged in and committed to the political process, then what happens to us is self-fulfilling prophesy. We have to come together and change this.

This is exactly why I talk about using our voice with purpose, and why I talk about celebrating innovation and entrepreneurism.
OUTREACH to our communities.

This is a very interesting question. I concur that we have made an impressive start with our public outreach. Beautiful ads. Great placement, better placement than ever. I particularly like the fact that we are expanding beyond PBS.

I would ask these questions:

What specific result are we hoping to achieve with our advertising spots? How will we know? What is the end game? What are the metrics? Where are we now?

I would ask perhaps a new question or two:

If we were to back away and identify three big hairy audacious goals we would want to achieve with our public relations efforts and messaging, what would they be and how would we know if we accomplished them?

Back to the question at hand. How can we leverage our public relations initiatives?

First, I would want all of our members to know where we are headed with it and what we hope to achieve. We want everyone on board and pulling the wagon together.

Second, I would like to see us develop regional, state and local toolkits, driven by a time and action-based strategy that integrates with our national public relations events and communications, that can be adapted and implemented at all three levels. Think of it this way: our national team can and should act as conductors but our voices are local; we are the instruments.

Third, I would like to see us develop metrics that can be accessed by EVERY component, every member that show how effective our efforts are; national, state and local.

Lastly, nothing ever works exactly the way we intend. That’s OK. The key is whether we learn anything from it and whether we are committed to our cause. So I would say that we want a culture of innovation, collaboration and learning with our messaging. Conceive, implement, measure, improve. As an association of architects, we tend to be pretty hard on ourselves and each other. This should be about continuous improvement and constancy of purpose. A little more transparency would help us here as well.
Enhancing **MEMBER VALUE**.

We had a question similar to this from the Small Firm Roundtable, having to do with attracting people who are either not members or not involved.

In my experience, involvement at the local level is where it all matters and where the biggest impact is made.

I was talking with one of our CACE Executives recently and she said that each chapter is basically a business, and as such has a responsibility to build and grow that business. There are basically three ways to do this: get customers (members); provide great customer service (build the brand and generate customer loyalty and buzz); and generate more income than you spend.

The concept is rather simple.

Under the premise that it is simple, our association, the AIA, should be focused on three things in support of our local components:

a. **Messaging.** Effectively communicating the value proposition of the AIA Brand broadly to members, potential members, former members, students and our affiliates. AIA’s role is to get out front, clear away the obstacles and communicate a compelling message to drive membership and commitment (and business). This is also where our influence can be used to position the AIA as inclusive and welcoming to under-represented populations.

b. **Provide outstanding customer (member) service.** This is one area where AIA can and should seek out, learn from and celebrate examples of great customer service, both within and outside our organization. If we want to get everyone excited about this we should celebrate accomplishment and share it liberally. Peer pressure, competition, recognition and success are all ingredients for innovation. I believe our CACE partners are critical to our success here and our investment in them and their skills and knowledge is key.

c. **Excellence.** Under the premise that each chapter is a business, taking in more money than we spend is always a baseline expectation. It may or may not be an indicator of excellence, but it is absolutely an indicator of solvency. Helping our Chapters develop relevant metrics relative to satisfaction would be helpful. Helping our CACE executives and volunteer leaders with common tools, training, case studies, education and recognition are key. The Core Member Services initiative is certainly a great starting point. I also believe the successful rollout and implementation of our new technology platform will play an important role.

Lastly, I would say that this all starts with our students and our emerging professionals. If we can engage them early, identify their interests and skills and get them involved in something that feeds their passion, then we won’t have to ask this question about member value. Our studies have shown that satisfaction increases the more we are involved. I am proof. I am VERY satisfied.