

Green Marketing 2.0

BY JOAN CAPELIN, FSMPS, HON. AIA

“What are most people thinking as they market their now-essential green services?” I asked in the October 2010 *Marketer*. I argued that they were equating LEED Accreditation and LEED Building Certification with the more critical knowledge of the impact and importance to the planet of green-building design, construction, and maintenance. There’s a lot more to “green” than knowing how to work a checklist, however well-intentioned and galvanic the Green Building Certification Institution setup may be.

I worried that the members of our industry, not just clients, are confused and fatigued by pertinent but conflicting claims, standards, and procedures. I fussed that sustainable buildings are not among your clients’ top interests, even though they would like to have a pro-sustainability reputation.

I nagged that the way firms are marketing their green services, commoditization could undermine all efforts to develop awareness about sustainability and to create broad appreciation of the growing proficiency in green design and construction.

In this second article of three, I show that adroit green marketing is a martial art whose goal is to deflect these blows and win the match. I’ll show ways that firms market their green services compellingly, and profile a few of the industry’s star green communicators.

Green audit

Before you consider your green strategy, audit your preparedness internally and externally. For example, how interested and involved in the green movement is your organization, really? What is your percentage of LEED-prepared professionals? How deeply are they committed to making buildings and spaces sustainable? Are your younger professionals truly into sustainability—or would they rather put off their LEED preparation for “when they have time”? How aggressively does the sustainability leader direct the firm’s green preparation? Mancini-Duffy created a version of *Jeopardy* to engage and train its staff. Another office requires that any new hire become LEED-accredited within six months or they’re out.

A Midwestern firm proclaimed emphatically that all its principals had gone through the U.S. Green Building Council’s training, including the head of interiors. Part of our assignment for them was to sharpen the green profile of her department. But while preparing a case study, she ducked most of our questions, deferring to an outside green consultant. Turns out that the interiors principal was not LEED accredited and in need of serious prompting—to the surprise of the marketing group, I might add. The strategy came to a halt while they regrouped.

For your external audit, consider how much your clients and their own industry really want to achieve sustainability—and to what level? Many organizations stop at recycling, using green cleaning materials, and/or operating a plastic-free cafeteria that buys locally-grown produce. Some companies equate sustainability with social equity and stability, part of the triple bottom-line imperatives that I explained in the December 2010 *Marketer* cover story on corporate social responsibility.

“How do you define sustainability?”

It’s easy enough to probe your client’s intentions. Read pertinent CEO comments readily available on the Internet or in releases posted on the organization’s Web site. Ask the public affairs department straight out, or just ask the client representative directly: How do *you* define sustainability? How does that match your organization’s policy? How important is it to you that *we* operate at a high level of sustainability?

You may need to be wary about their answers. At one university, we found that the sustainability office and the facilities office don’t share much information. Although both are working toward a sustainable campus, facilities wanted the savings that would accrue from a green building and the LEED plaques that would accrue to their credit. The proficient and engaged sustainability office most wanted to burnish the school’s reputation, which helped greatly when we approached them with some pertinent promotional ideas based on our client’s project. (Note: *Princeton Review* publishes a free, downloadable *Guide to 286 Green Colleges*.)

Light green to dark green

Today, most firms are green—certainly as green as their clients expect them to be. But is it enough just to be comfortably known within the community where you get work? To have access to more projects and to have impact beyond your work, you need to become more broadly known, become influential and thus more interesting and competitive in the marketplace.

In fact, a few have risen from our industry to have worldwide effect and the reputation that goes with it: pioneers **Bill McDonough** of William McDonough & Partners; **Rick Fedrizzi**, who heads up USGBC; Architecture 2030 founder **Edward Mazria**; and BNIM's **Bob Berkebile**, affectionately dubbed “the godfather of green.” All started at the proverbial “somewhere” to imagine, research, mobilize, and preach about green; today, they are giants.

There are other exemplars who point the way and establish credibility for their firms. One is **Mike Davis, FAIA, LEED AP**, who isn't so much a green designer as an architect who believes in the power of the architect as advocate. VP/principal at Bergmeyer Associates in Boston, Mike has been co-chair of the Legislative Affairs Committee for the Boston Society of Architects and especially visible in advocacy for public policy initiatives that support sustainable design. He also has been a board member of the Boston Green Roundtable and member of both Mayor Michael Menino's Green Building Task Force and Governor Deval Patrick's Net Zero Energy Building Task Force, about which he periodically issued a very coherent blog on NZB's importance.

Elizabeth J. Heider, AIA, LEED AP, is Skanska USA Building's SVP for pre-construction management of large-scale construction projects. Her first major assignment involving sustainability was a 1998 job for the federal government to explore the cost commitment necessary for public buildings to become green, and then in 2004 to achieve LEED certification. Beth also started and heads Skanska USA's Green Council. Now in line to become USGBC's 2012 chairman, Beth has worked with the USGBC Research Committee and AIA Committee on the Environment to develop a national green building research agenda. She's gotten Skanska to provide the cost analysis for the Living Building Challenge, the beyond-LEED Platinum metric developed by the USGBC's Cascadia Chapter.

Change comes from the bottom

Perkins + Will dominates the field of sustainable design not just in numbers but also in terms of generosity. (Certainly, it's a useful pre-emptive marketing strike.) **Doug Pierce, AIA, LEED AP**, is identified with noteworthy green-agenda-advancing projects. While Doug was testifying to the Energy Committee of the Minnesota State Legislature a few years ago about a climate bill that required utilities to reduce demand, he wanted to demonstrate the attributes of a sustainable building and calculate the savings. So he developed the program that became 2030e2.

“I'm not an IT person,” Doug told me. “I'm an architect who knows how to use Excel spreadsheet formulas.” Yet P+W didn't hold onto this proprietary software. Instead, it put it on its Web site for everyone to use and promoted its availability broadly: <http://2030e2.perkinswill.com>

Wait, there's more: Doug comes from a family in the Ozarks that sold lumber and hardware. To establish a sane forestry certification benchmark, he created FSC Equal [or] Better (www.perkinswill.com/files/sdi/FSC-Equal-Better.pdf). The software advocates as a benchmark at least the high standards of the Forestry Stewardship Council. He created this stance with knowledgeable forestry people, and it applies internationally. “I feel responsible for cleaning up the mess,” Doug says, who clearly believes that “change comes from the bottom, not the top.”

“Redesign your people, your firm, your industry, your government, around your interest in sustainability.”

My point is that sustainability is driving innovation—and the ability and zest to innovate are the upside of commoditization. Redesign your people, your firm, your industry, your government around your interest in sustainability. That's what this community is all about—not just getting more work but *consequential* work.

Although I once thought it would be impossible for green marketing to be boring, many firms have achieved this disappointing standard. To rise above that norm requires commitment and engagement at all levels and all departments in a firm.

There are many ways to become known for green leadership. I've touched on some: research, writing, speaking, advocating, and leading—in fact, creating—organizations. In the final article of this suite of three on green marketing, I'll provide a long list of effective, achievable ways that firms or individuals have distinguished themselves as green experts. Some of those ideas might adapt perfectly to your organization's green marketing plans and budget. ■

About the Author



Contributing Editor Joan Capelin, FSMPS, Hon. AIA—strategist, public relations consultant, popular speaker, and SMPS Fellow—is the founder of Capelin Communications (www.capelin.com), which specializes in professional services firms in the design and building industry. In the December 2010 issue she wrote the cover story on “Corporate Social Responsibility as the New Business Model.”

The recipient of the 1990 SMPS Marketing Achievement Award, Joan can be reached at jcapelin@capelin.com.