

Green Marketing: It's Not All About LEED

BY JOAN CAPELIN, FSMPS, HON. AIA

The US Green Building Council (USGBC) has done a great job codifying the qualifications of a design and building industry professional who is prepared to design sustainably. USGBC also has clarified what constitutes an exemplary building that has been designed with sustainability in mind. We have all bought into its scorecards.

But many firms marketing green services have come to equate their commitment to sustainability, influence, skill, and innovation with how many people on staff are accredited after taking the USGBC's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) training courses and exams. Ditto, how many LEED-certified buildings are in the firm's portfolio. It's excellent training, and I have no quarrel with it; I'm going through it myself. But do you know what those firms are saying about themselves? They're saying, "We can follow a checklist. We know a specific rule book."

Yet if clients pick according to the numbers, then Perkins+Will, with its 1,050 LEED-accredited staff members, and Turner Construction with its 1,100, will get all the green projects.

If all that clients—because they are confused about what constitutes sustainability, or apathetic, or feeling pressured—have to consider are those numbers, then even the great pioneers and thinkers in the industry are toast.

Is anybody out there?

A second problem I have with the way green services are being marketed is this: Sustainable buildings, communities, and cities may be a big part of *our* world, but you have to ask if they are part of anyone else's, and that includes your clients.

Certainly, green building has become a worldwide movement. All indicators point to an explosion in the number of certified green projects worldwide in the next 10 years—goals that presage a huge A/E/C benefit.

Yet there is still general ignorance about sustainable building outside—and even inside—our world. Editor-in-chief Ned Cramer began an editorial in the October 2009 *Architect* with these words: "I've always assumed that a healthy majority of American architects believe in climate change, consider it a serious problem, and endorse sustainable design as a worthwhile response. I stand corrected." He laments that we don't lobby, we don't educate, and we certainly don't invest intellectually or financially in building science research.

Ready for a real shock? Sustainable buildings are *not* among your clients' top interests, even though sustainability is tangentially on their list. Three recent studies explored how companies manage sustainability. The McKinsey piece, published in April 2010, is entitled "How companies manage sustainability." *HBR*'s September 2009 article is "Why Sustainability Is Now the Key Driver of Innovation." Accenture's white paper is "A New Era of Sustainability."

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The McKinsey report is especially telling: "... companies are not taking a proactive approach to managing sustainability: only around 30% of executives say their companies actively seek opportunities to invest in sustainability or embed it in their business practices." They call it a "lack of weight in leadership's top agenda"—unless, that is, regulations require it.

At the top of the list in these studies—clearly *pro*-sustainability studies—is *saving money*. The second CEO interest is the importance of having a *reputation* for being a sustainable company. Last of the three CEO interests is *recruitment*. How, they conjecture, will you be able to attract younger workers if you aren't interested in the planet they will inherit?

Let's do our own litmus test: To be frank, do your clients really want to pay for LEED certification? Do they really care that you have achieved, say, 41% LEED staff penetration? Or that you have signed up for Ed Mazria's "2030 Challenge"? Or that you've achieved an ISO 14001 rating? (And do they even know what an accomplishment that is?) Have you been able to explain the beneficial effect of any of this to them?

Everybody is hopping into the certification pool

There is yet another roadblock to acceptance of the new green way of life, even for our own tribe: the proliferation of certifiers.

USGBC has tightened and expanded its LEED requirements, and the number of pertinent certification systems continues to yeast. But USGBC now has strong and serious challengers, such as Green Globes. And don't underestimate the popularity of Cascadia's Living Building Challenge or the rise in the number of proponents of net zero-energy buildings, where zero fossil fuel consumption trumps LEED standards.

The education world has its own benchmarks and alphabet soup of associations focused on sustainability. It's noteworthy that the American College & University Presidents' Climate Commitment just "unengaged" 15 of its signatories because they hadn't followed through on reporting requirements.

Watch what you claim

As this example shows, the focus may be on rewards and recognition for doing a good job on sustainable buildings, but punishment for not getting on board is also increasing. Municipalities and townships set standards, and some are prepared to enforce them. Several insurers have set up insurance policies against "green-washing"—that is, not reaching or being able to maintain LEED standards, which then causes a loss of value, reputation, revenue, or even cancellation of a project.

Of course, the lawyers are paying close attention to this. Bookmark Steve Del Percio's *Green Real Estate Law Journal* blog—and there are a few other "green attorneys" who have already positioned themselves for this work.

The race to the bottom

When there is no way or reason for your clients to differentiate between firms, when your hard-earned list of green services is understood to be your ability to put the right marks on a checklist, then the prices for those services inevitably will start to drop—the amount of training, cost of proprietary software, and value of the time involved in doing a good job notwithstanding.

You are, in short, at risk of becoming commoditized. Commoditization is when a market is characterized by declining prices and profit margins, increasing competition, and lowered barriers to entry. (*Slate* yields this solid definition.)

Commoditization of design services doesn't just come from outsourcing, the latest time its specter was raised. It comes from an inability to create value in the mind not just of the purchaser of

your green services but of anyone who needs to be convinced about the value of sustainability and, within that, sustainable design.

How do you set your firm apart? In the next "Compelling Communications" column, I'll explain the three ways to tighten up your position:

1. how to become truly prepared to stake a claim to sustainability
2. how to learn what your clients want to achieve, if they can be convinced to elevate their sustainability quotient
3. how broadly you need to communicate your proficiency, intentions, and level of engagement

Clearly there is some heavy lifting to do here. As Design Futures Council founder and publisher Jim Cramer said in the July 8, 2009, "Sound Advice with Joan Capelin" podcast, "We are not moving fast enough to achieve the needed, wanted 'green revolution.'"

The "Sound Advice" podcast series will shortly have a new focus: how people have been able to convince their colleagues, clients, prospects, building owners, and members of the larger community to build and run their properties sustainably.

But I need your help. I am looking for 25 articulate advocates to be the sole guest interviewed on a podcast. Very specifically, I am looking for architects, engineers, and builders—or, on the other side, owners and facility managers—who have become knowledgeable about sustainability. The focus of the program is on how these people have convinced decision-makers (clients, legislators, agencies, the public) to change their minds, and what happened as a result.

Each brief interview will spotlight obstacles overcome—for instance, obtaining legislation, securing a Board of Education vote, or launching a new green approach. That achievement could include convincing their own organization to raise its green profile.

If you have someone in mind—someone you work with, know, or just know of—send me that suggestion (name and some background information) as soon as you can. Together, we can celebrate inspired communication, boost an advocate, and help the planet in the process. ■

About the Author



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