

Plus Ça Change: What's to Be Learned from the Recession of 1992?

BY JOAN CAPELIN, FSMPS, HON. AIA

When William Jefferson Clinton won our nation's highest office in 1992, things weren't looking so great, either. The recession of that decade already had removed many talented people from the A/E/C industry. Passionate about governing, filled with energy and vision for a better future, the President-Elect was determined to strengthen America's infrastructure.

Between the election and taking the oath of office, he convened many councils of experts. Apparently a very good listener and obviously a quick study, he seemed poised to provide just what we most hoped for: a resurgence of building.

Hallelujah, said the contractors. Hosanna, said the architects and engineers. Uh oh, we all said, when it became clear that this high-minded politician didn't mean our kind of infrastructure—that is, buildings, bridges, tunnels—but rather social infrastructure. That wasn't a bad thing; our hearts agree on that. But it wasn't the infrastructure we had in mind.

"What could our industry do about this to help itself?"

In short, no federal building program. No funding or stimulus. *Shovel-ready* wasn't yet an actionable descriptor.


Bill Clinton's lack of awareness of the multiplier effect of construction didn't make economic sense. What could our industry do about this to help itself? I was sure that our designers and builders—resilient, restless, well aware that our country's vitality depends on excellent facilities and transportation systems—would have some cogent ideas.

So I convened my own council of experts: the marketing masterminds normally expected to lead building and design firms into the future. I polled 100 of the top people in my Rolodex and SMPS' database to obtain "The Best Marketing Advice for the Clinton '90s." Everyone responded. I then convened an astute jury and, fueled with good wine, they chose the most compelling suggestions "to indicate that the building community will keep its faith in America's future" and to "prove it was prepared to move itself forward"—with or without Washington. We created and distributed broadly a poster from the selected "Best Marketing Advice" to bolster everybody's spirits and exhort them to action.

Fast forward 18 years. In clearing out our offices for our recent move, I found that poster. Guess what? From that recession to this, the advice is still pertinent, effective, strong.

Here is what the jury found so inspiring. I tried to locate the authors of the winning suggestions and hope that I have their correct current post. Some, alas, like the great Tom Page, have checked out.

- "When times are tough, and currently times are very tough, do not sell your soul for a piece of gold. If you want to be considered professional, you need to earn it through your actions. Failure to provide professional fees can destroy the reputation of your collective industry."
—Hugh J. Williamson (then HOK, now Hennessy & Williamson)
- "'Love the one you're with'—especially clients who pay promptly."
—Tom Brightman (then Pavarini Construction Co., now building and remodeling homes in Santa Fe)

- “It is clear how valuable a sound business plan can be to a design firm. And those who felt they did not have the time to work on one, now have nothing but...”
—Steve Waehler, AIA (then Swanke Hayden Connell Architects, now WG Project Management)
- “Call each client once a month and ask: How are we doing? What could we be doing better? This will result in a more dynamic professional relationship, a friendship, and repeat business.”
—Steven Einhorn, FAIA (then Einhorn Yaffee Prescott, now Stardog Consulting)
- “Market new clients with the changes of the seasons. Call on your existing client base with the cycles of the moon. Service your projects with the dependability of the tides. Anticipate the clouds. And soak up any sun you can grab hold of.”
—Lee Waldron (then Grenald Associates, now Grenald Waldron Associates)
- “In this, the ‘disaster decade,’ the requisites for survival are outstanding competence in three areas: technical, financial, and marketing. Those who have inner-driven dynamic focus in these three areas will survive. The others? Who knows?”
—Thomas Stokes Page (then Page Consultants, now deceased)
- “Today, survival means change. Step back a second. Stop looking at the trees and look at the forest. Find out what your clients really need—and respond. Their needs may not be what you think they are.”
—Roger Whitehouse (then Whitehouse & Company)
- “‘Good travels at a snail’s pace.’ The words of Mahatma Gandhi seem to fly in the face of our current ‘fit it now’ and ‘make it right’ mentality. In marketing we are always moving fast. My advice for ’93 is to focus on the good, take time, and do it right.”
—Cathy Edgerly (then Ellerbe Becket, now a consultant in Boston)
- “Don’t use voicemail or answering machines. Have a real person answer your phone. If you’re in the service business, what does it say about you if someone is not manning the phone, or if you think a machine can do your job?”
—Howard J. Wolff, FSMPS (then and now, Wimberley Allison Tong & Goo)
- “Professional attention is the best sales tool.”
—A. Eugene Kohn, FAIA (then and now Kohn Pederson Fox Associates)
- “How you do business is as important as *what* you do. Owners will pay more to work with people they trust. Integrity cannot be bought, it must be earned, and it isn’t negotiable.”
—Sheryl Maibach, FSMPS (then and now Barton Malow Company)
- “Understand your client’s business. Then determine how you can contribute to its success. Ascertain how your contribution differs from what your competition offers. Convey that difference, concisely and effectively, in the form of benefits and value.”
—J. Rossi (then J. Rossi Marketing and Public Relations, now Burt Hill)
- “In difficult times, the basic marketing technique of providing a quality product and selling through personal contacts consistently proves its worth. This commitment to quality and active participation in a vibrant network has proven very successful.”
—Valentine A. Lehr, P.E. (then Lehr Associates Consulting Engineers, now Lehr Consultants International) 

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. Joan is a recipient of the SMPS Marketing Achievement Award and can be reached at JCapelin@capelin.com.