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What's on the Horizon for Your Firm?

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How to determine the right horizon line for your career was the topic of the cover story of *Marketer's* December 2008 issue. The short of it: The horizon is as close or far as you want it to be.

Let's recap a moment. Drawing exclusively from my SMPS Foundation White Paper research, the article reported that most states permit some level of design firm ownership by non-designers—or, in more legal language, *non-licensees*.

This fact surprises many firms where one design discipline or another tends to dominate and restrict ownership. Reasons for this exclusivity vary, but it comes down to habit, culture, ignorance of these possibilities or of the laws of the state where these firms operate, and/or the need on the part of ownership to keep tight control on the enterprise, for whatever reason, including xenophobia.

But there are many examples—some featured in the white paper—of successful design firms based on broader ownership, organizations where the “right people on the bus” include the firm's marketing leader and/or the others in its C-Suite: the chief financial, chief technology, chief operations, chief human resources officer—you get the idea.

What would it be like in the future if *your* company were to expand its leadership and ownership to “outsiders” with complementary interests, credentials, and degrees? There could, for instance, be MBAs and CPAs; former legislators, nurses and health administrators, and school administrators; attorneys; media industry executives (if you're really serious about your clients' branding); industrial designers; and so forth. Would the firm be better able to meet its mission? Serve its clients? Gain and retain talent? How would that work?

Wait, wait! In fact, many forward-thinking firms around the United States already have such people on staff or in close contractual relationships. As a team, they are busy advising their clients, creating the future America, and having a great

time doing that work. Further, they are making a respectable profit and enjoying their positions of responsibility, authority, and respect vis-à-vis their clients and community.

How well would the design firm of the future operate under this more diverse business profile? What options are possible and what breakthroughs available?

I've been addressing these questions in presentations around the country, on the wings of the white paper's results, along with my white paper legal advisor James Frankel of Arent Fox.

The more the economy has weakened, the more our projections seem realistic. On May 1 at the American Institute of Architects' 2009 conference in San Francisco, we'll be joined by management consultant Hugh Hochberg, principal of The Coxe Group, in a two-hour program that will definitely kick the predictions and discussion up a notch.

“How well would the design firm of the future operate under a more diverse business profile?”

Speaking of the horizon, here is some of what I see.

- Certainly, firms now recognize that their key people do not have to be design professionals—although these others must understand the business of a design enterprise and value what design professionals do. On that basis, look for much broader management, if not voting ownership.
- This new paradigm—we've been calling it a Stage Two Firm, Stage One being the traditional model—requires thinking about how designers and non-designers work together. Designing a building and designing an organization both require vision, tact, and decisiveness, in addition to talent.
- There are organizationally strong, creative firms that will never go this way. That's fine; there is room for all kinds.

