

What can be done to more effectively promote sustainable design?

In responding to this question about more effective promotion, my 2003 survey respondents gave significant weight to independent cost information and less weight to case studies and more training. These survey respondents, perhaps confident of their own abilities to sell projects, wanted to see more of their own project experience and more successful local projects that could be shown to clients. BD&C's 2006 survey respondents mostly wanted better information on life cycle assessment (LCA) for product selection and better overall green building marketing materials. BD&C survey respondents especially want to see sustainability standards incorporated into state and local building codes, reflecting the experience of design professionals that many clients will just not pay for project elements that exceed code requirements.

Sales vs. marketing to get sustainable design into the mainstream.

At some point in the evolution of sustainable design, marketing considerations have to be supplemented with strong sales activities. Unfortunately, most design professionals are opposed to ever marketing their services. (The appropriate euphemism in the design and construction industry is “business development.”) A number of my 2003 survey respondents indicated that they would never sell professional services – their idea of selling is to do a good job and hope someone notices. They are not very good at sales, in my experience, so this lack of presentation and persuasive skills presents a real barrier to more widespread adoption of sustainable design. There is of course a major cadre of sales professionals for manufacturers who somewhat make up for this gap, by selling specific hardware solutions, but they seldom influence the decision for or against general green building approaches.

ONE FIRM'S APPROACH: BRUNER/COTT ARCHITECTS

Bruner/Cott Architects of Cambridge, Massachusetts, has just certified its first LEED Platinum project. Principal Leland Cott spoke about what his firm had done to establish a reputation as a green firm.

What has worked so far is that we have had results. Our first LEED Platinum project just received certification. It was the highest-scoring building renovation in the country. We had a wonderful client partner on that project who wanted to go all the way to Platinum, and as a result there is proof to other potential clients that we can provide effective service to anyone wanting to push the limits of sustainable design. Giving conference presentations on our Platinum project has been a big help, along with winning a sustainable design award this year and being featured in publications.

Each firm that achieves success in sustainable design knows it can't rest on its laurels, that dozens of local firms are actively building their own capabilities and project experience in sustainable design. So what does a firm do? Cott says,

We have to continue to push ourselves. We can't simply respond to LEED guidelines. That is what everyone is doing now. We have to go beyond what is currently on the market. Partnering with our clients to take sustainable design further has been and will continue to be the key to keeping our reputation as a cutting-edge design firm. Bringing sustainable design to projects not conventionally thought of as green has been and continues to be another way to distinguish ourselves. We did this on our Platinum project and on a smaller historic adaptive reuse project recently.⁵

CASE STUDY: SERA ARCHITECTS, INC.

John Echlin is design principal at SERA Architects in Portland, Oregon.⁶ Echlin joined the firm in 1997 as director of design, and brought with him a strong sustainability focus. He spoke of the firm's marketing transition as the push for sustainable design gets ready to enter its second decade:

We're really transitioning from short-term, turnaround speculative projects and clients to long-term owners. The majority of our clients have legacy ownership interest, whether public or private. There's a high-return value proposition [in sustainability that] just makes sense. The ones who have gone out to the bleeding edge and experimented with it have realized the value of these investments. They are investing for the future and the energy and operational paybacks are real. It's really about buildings that have lasting value – we're not building temporary structures, we're building buildings that last 50 to 100 years. When you do that you've really got to build in efficiency measures and all of the beneficial attributes in terms of materials and healthy indoor air quality.

With close to 90 employees, SERA is a fairly typical well-established architecture firm, with studios for public and private architectural projects, as well as a planning studio. Echlin comments, "Within the education sector, sustainability is now no longer a differentiator – it's really the baseline whether you're doing classroom buildings, residence halls or campus planning."

As to the marketing benefits, Echlin alluded to the 1980s movie, *Field of Dreams*, when he said,

Our focus on sustainability has helped our business. Because we've really made a strong effort to be at the leading edge, we've brought people on board with the knowledge, passion and interest to provide those services. Because this is a new business paradigm, as well as an ethical and aesthetic shift, you have to get people on board who are passionate about it and who also understand it. The clients are strongly interested as well. It's true that "if you build it they will come." The clients

we make connections with come to us because of the people we have on our team and the [green design] services that we provide.

What really made a difference at SERA Architects was to look internally first, to their own office practices, using the lens of an environmental assessment framework called The Natural Step.⁷ Echlin talks about how they got started. “We asked ourselves: ‘How do we become a more sustainable business practice?’ That attracted a lot of interest because it sent the message to our employees that we’re not just doing this for a niche market, but we’re really doing this because we’re serious about it and it’s a value that we share. We went through a two-year exercise of redesigning our office operations around a sustainable paradigm.” SERA then took its own experience and shared it with other design firms in Portland, thereby widening its circle of influence.

In addition, in 2002 the firm became an 100% employee-owned ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership) company and moved its offices to accommodate growth. In 2003 SERA Architects received a LEED-CI Gold certification for its office remodel in an older building, a former hotel in Portland’s Old Town district. In 2006, a remodel of a second floor of the same building was done to LEED-CI Platinum standards, and the firm expects certification in 2007.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MARKETERS AND PRACTITIONERS

The following recommendations for green building practitioners and those organizations marketing sustainable design, while not surprising, follow from both industry surveys and from the well-established theory of innovation diffusion (described further in subsequent chapters). The marketplace wants and needs:

- Case study data, with solid cost information, including initial cost increments.
- Comparative cost information within and across building types, as to the full costs of LEED certification, including documentation.
- Demonstrable information on the benefits of green buildings beyond well-documented operating cost savings from energy and water conservation.
- Anecdotal stories, by both practitioners and building owners, about the costs and barriers to completing LEED-certified projects.

Practitioners need to understand how their marketing must evolve in order to compete effectively in the rapidly growing sustainable design market:

- They must pick a strategy that incorporates either high levels of differentiation or low cost, with explicit focus on particular market segments (see Chapter 9).
- This strategy must be reinforced internally and externally so that it becomes recognizable as a brand identity of the firm. Internal reinforcement includes

training and certification of employees as LEED APs, for example. External reinforcement includes activities to increase the visibility of the firm and its key professionals, including speaking, lecturing, networking, publicity for successful projects and similar measures.

- Larger companies should consider developing their own proprietary tools for measuring the costs and benefits of sustainability for their clients, as part of a branding approach. Along with these tools, firms should develop methods to successfully execute LEED projects without additional design fees.
- Architects and engineers must form closer working alliances with contractors and other project professionals to ensure that their designs will actually get built within prevailing budget, time, technology options and resource constraints.

CASE STUDY: THOMAS HACKER ARCHITECTS, INC.⁸

Thomas Hacker Architects, Inc. of Portland, Oregon is widely recognized for the design of libraries, museums, theaters, higher education buildings, and urban design. Since the firm's founding in 1983, Thomas Hacker's designs have received 40 national, regional and local design awards. Jonah Cohen is the firm's President and says that "sustainability has been part of our core values for a long time. Even before there was LEED, we approached design by trying to make sure our projects were appropriate to their settings and oriented in ways to take advantage of natural forces at work on the site."

From a marketing standpoint, sustainability is a core value of the 40-person firm, and that's what gets communicated to clients. One way the firm demonstrates this commitment is that for most projects, Cohen claims, "we will do a sustainability charrette whether or not the project is aiming for LEED certification. We do it regardless of whether the owner wants to participate because we're interested in pushing the boundaries [of sustainable design with each project]."

Thomas Hacker was the first architectural firm to have its own office LEED Silver certified. This was a valuable learning experience, according to Cohen. "It was interesting because it really tested our values; we had to spend a little more money than we had anticipated. Sustainability is definitely part of values, and from a marketing standpoint it has been important to us."

Cohen says, "I often give tours of the building; during one particular tour there was someone who later became a client. He became very interested in our firm because he saw us talking about our own work environment." So a strong marketing recommendation to any design firm is to first take care to green your own workplace, using one of the LEED rating tools, then use your own experience as one of the marketing tools for clients. In other words, you have

to first “walk the talk,” before clients will accept your commitment to sustainability at face value.

Thomas Hacker often enters design competitions in many parts of the country. Cohen notes that, “Often one of the questions [in a RFQ is: What is your experience in sustainable design? So we are able to directly answer the question with our own experience,” offering some insights into how a client can manage a green project. “[For example], we just finished a LEED Gold project at Lewis and Clark College, and they specifically wanted the students to be actively involved with the sustainable aspects of the project. The building is designed as laboratory and has a lot of transparent walls and floors that show some of the measures that add to the sustainable design. For instance, some of the floor panels are glass without any carpet so you can see into the displacement ventilation system.” For Thomas Hacker, then, client education is an ongoing part of their green building marketing.

Marketing is more subtle at Thomas Hacker. Like most professional service firms, it prefers to let the work speak for itself. Cohen’s approach is to not to say, “You should hire us because we’re great sustainable architects.” Rather, the firm prefers to maintain that it is more “interested in a balance between everything that it takes to make great projects, with sustainability as just one component of how we present ourselves. While some firms really feature that aspect as their strongest point, we’re trying to do it in the context that we’re also doing buildings that are very well designed, very responsive to the programmatic needs and are on budget.” In other words, sustainability is a program element, but Cohen’s firm recognizes that all other program elements and budgetary constraints also need to be respected.

In terms of cost, Cohen says that “at a LEED Silver level, the [increased] construction costs used to be 5–6 percent, now it’s nearly a wash. It’s easy to get LEED Silver in Oregon without too much effort. The costs are definitely going down for institutional projects, city projects and government agencies – it seems like it’s becoming the norm.”

There is a trend underway called “LEED Lite,” something that “tastes great, but is less filling,” and that is the tendency of clients to take LEED for granted. Cohen observes that “a lot of institutional clients will go through a LEED-certification process once or maybe twice and they’ll prove that they can do it and beyond that they don’t feel the need to keep proving it over and over again. So they tell the designers that they’d like to use LEED guidelines and the LEED point system but not go through the formal certification process There’s so much budgetary pressure on these projects that it’s one more line item where they can reduce costs. It’s a slippery slope because you sort of get back to where we were before LEED in that you just have to trust us [to do the right thing].”