



Talking to Architects

[Su Butcher](#)

Council for Aluminium in Building
Mini-Conference

23 February 2012

www.justpractising.com

Synopsis: Architects are small or micro businesses and are time poor. Don't contribute the noise they have to filter out by always hoping to contact them at a good time. Listen, be helpful, free your data and use technology wisely so they can find you when they need you.



Introduction

David Meerman Scott¹, author of 'The New Marketing and PR²' often begins his talks with a question:

"In the last 1-2 months, privately or professionally, in order to research a product or service you might want to buy, raise your hand if you have:

- 1. Answered a direct mail advertisement?*
- 2. Consulted mainstream media - radio, television, magazines or newspapers?*
- 3. Looked in the print yellow pages?*
- 4. Gone on Google or another search engine*
- 5. Have you tapped your peer-to-peer network, (Friends colleagues family members) through some kind of electronic network - Facebook, email, Twitter, Linkedin, Instant Messaging, where the answer that came back from a friend colleague or family member was a URL to a website you visited?"*

David tells the story that it doesn't matter where he presents around the world, he gets the exact same ratios. It doesn't seem to matter what age, the job function of his audience, it doesn't matter who the people are; the responses he gets are the same, and every time I have asked this question the results are similar.

Medium for researching product or service:	Common results
Direct Mail	3%
Print Yellow Pages	3%
Mainstream Media (Radio/TV/Magazines/Newspapers)	22%
Google/Search Engine	100%
Peer to Peer network and internet	80%

David then says to his audience, "Oh my God! Why are we continuing to market using those same old traditional methods?"

In this short paper I'm going to set this question *in the context of the specifying architect*, and look at it in terms of three things.

1. What are Architects like?
2. When do they specify, and when is a good time to approach them?
3. What works and what you should do about it.

What are Architects Like?

The first thing to recognize about architects in practice is that they are small businesses. Very small. Each year the RIBA surveys its Chartered Practices³ through its membership programme, and the records I have from 2009 show that 79% had 10 staff or fewer, and 60% were five staff or fewer⁴. Many practices are very small firms and most will not grow any bigger.

These small firms, or micro businesses, are bound to have a relatively flat administrative structure, with traditionally little delegation. The owners (often one or two people) take all the responsibility or delegate one level only. Many tend to be poor time managers so are naturally time poor and profit poor, frequently not business strategists and often don't budget different parts of their work. They will aim for a very low capital expenditure and focus their spending (often 80% of costs or more) on salaries. That said Architects are not very well paid in comparison to Project Managers, Quantity Surveyors or even Structural Engineers. My thesis is that this is because they don't run their businesses very efficiently.⁵

These practices also have very low admin staff levels⁶ and much of the admin is done by professional staff. Such businesses have a tendency to be insular, isolated from business knowledge and suspicious of sales and marketing.

The Pressures

What are the pressures on architects today? The biggest pressure is the lack of work caused by the recession and a virtual flatlining of income in the sector.⁷

Like many businesses in construction, architects have had to trim down. Larger firms lost a layer of staff (often the more junior and very senior people). The remaining staff had to take more responsibility, but time and money are very tight. Those staff who have left during the last three years of falling work may have set up new practices, and more new micro businesses means more people needing new ways to do things and hungry for experience. Many of these new practitioners are going online to find mentors and advice.

Of course with more micro practices there is more competition between them, especially in certain areas. The residential refurbishment and extension market in UK Construction is doing relatively well as many homeowners find they cannot trade up their houses and that it is cheaper to improve their existing homes. Clients like this are ideal for new, small practices.

Increasing competition can lead to some practices adopting new working methods, working remotely and collaborating online. Though the adoption of BIM is often avoided in traditional, small practices due to the capital cost, in some sectors necessity has prevailed. In high-end residential projects in the Home Counties, I hear that the use of BIM is enabling practices to compete successfully as they are better able to deal with demanding clients who frequently want to change their minds.

The Good News

What a terrible picture! But all is not lost. There are reasons why architects stay in small business. Many tell me it is because they like to be hands on with the practical coalface of designing. Architects' long years of training make them good designers above all else, and it also makes them aspire to heights of creative success. Architects want to design great buildings; there is no doubt about it. Understanding what they want to achieve and why can help us learn to work with them better.

Whatever their circumstances, all practices need to use their design skills to deliver value to clients. Design is at the hub of what architects do well because they spend so many years of study with design as the be-all and end-all of their success. It is also essential to a good building.

I'm often asked to explain what architectural design is to lay people, and whilst architects all have different ways of talking about it, I prefer to describe architectural designing as being the creation of the boundary between inside and the outside space. Good design isn't solely (or majorly) about aesthetics. At its best it is a struggle between the conflicting constraints of internal space requirements and the external demands of the environment.

Let us look at the planning of a simple affordable housing scheme to illustrate this point. Over the last five years the design of housing has really been squeezed in a way that has put great demands on those working in the sector.

In the gap between the internal space standards, enhanced by the demands of lifetime homes, and the external constraints of ever more constrained and demanding sites (not to mention the challenges of the planning system itself), there is a gap where the building fabric goes. Over the last 5 years, pressure to make and change what goes in this gap has made it a place of huge challenge and to produce good buildings that work well, architects must make the gap work.

To me this is what good architects do, and they do it with flair, to budget, in the space (and time) available and to the required performance level. They need expert help to deliver on this challenge, help that is informed, understanding and keen to make the link between their struggles and their aspirations.

When to approach architects?

At the CIMCIG seminar on the changing face of specification and selection I was asked to talk about when would be the best time to approach architects. I chose to illustrate the challenge with a look at the general course of the a project through the RIBA Plan of Work.

New products might be brought in through a value engineering exercise, perhaps after tenders have been returned (Stage H), but really marketers want their products to be considered as early as possible. Public information about contracts firsts hits the radar after the registration of a planning application. This puts a specific project in the public domain, often for the first time.

When planning is entered, (Stage C for outline planning or D for a full application) architects get a flurry of calls, letters and emails from product manufacturers and suppliers. The publication of the project confirms that the practice has work and that specification is on the cards. Callers may want to find out when the application is expected to be determined so they can call again ready for an instruction to proceed with building regulation drawings. They may send some literature, fire off some emails, try and meet the named agent on the application (who may, or may not, be the Project Architect). Callers often try and find out when (and if) the project is going to tender, who is on the tender list, what submission dates will be and the likelihood of renegotiation, looking for crises where value engineering is needed.

But hold on, perhaps planning is too late to get involved in the project. You need to be involved earlier. Many external materials need to be chosen at least in principle before an application is made, many materials choices will form an essential part of the process of design itself. The choice of a construction method may determine whether a project will be viable.

As greater expectation on thermal performance falls on the building fabric, late changes can be extremely costly and knock on the size of the building to such a point where metres must be added to the required width of the site or internal spaces will have to be completely redesigned. Many local authorities now stipulate the Code for Sustainable Homes or BREEAM level of the building as a condition of planning consent, so this has to be considered before a design is entered. I haven't even mentioned the range of other types of contract which may lead to different specification patterns, or that much of the information callers use to decide when to contact us appears to be wrong or very out of date.

When is the best time to talk to an architect about your products? It is impossible to tell. In fact, you need to be talking to architects all the time. So you contact them. All the time.

Multiply up the number of times you will need to contact an architect in order to have a chance of being there at the right time, by the number of projects the practice may be dealing with. At any one time, we at Barefoot & Gilles have between 45 and 65 projects on our books. Many of these can take years to come to fruition; others will just take a few months to leave the office completed. Of those projects, there are normally 20 that are being worked on in a week.

Multiply up the number of projects by the number of product manufacturers and suppliers who want our attention and you can see that what appears to be a sensible, targeted approach turns out to be scattergun. Your scattergun produces Collateral Damage. Forget the 1 or 2% of your calls that result in success. Imagine the 98-99% of calls we take which are unhelpful. Of course we want to turn off the tap.

Turn off the Tap - what doesn't work

Today small practices have more tools to turn off the tap of unsolicited marketing approaches than ever before.

- **Unsolicited phone calls** can be stopped by a good gatekeeper and the telephone preference service. Training your staff to get past this person to someone who doesn't have time to meet you is a false economy and ultimately rude. The gatekeeper is there to help the architect get on with the job.
- **Offers to deliver product literature** are met with 'we don't have a librarian any more' or 'we don't keep a hard copy library'. Sometimes this is true, other times it is simply that we don't have time or space to keep all the stuff we get sent in case it might be useful. Much of the unrequested material which arrives will end up in the bin.
- **CPD offers** can end up in the bin or the spam email box. Many practices will organise CPD six months in advance on the basis of their staff's preferences, when research will be carried out on what subjects will be useful, not on a whim based on what comes through the door.
- **Unsolicited email messages** are rarely read. They get in the way of your work. More technically savvy staff learn how to adjust junk mail filters so that few of them get through to interrupt a vital communication channel.
- **Banner ads on websites** are not read as often any more because the readers use adblocking plugins to block out the distracting 'look at me' images, or get their news via ad-free RSS feeds. Lets face it - do you turn the TV over during the ad breaks? I do.

It is a war. A war against spam.

What a shame. Instead of feeling like you are giving a helping hand through your marketing messages, you can feel like a gatecrasher trying to break into an opening night, unable to get past the bouncer lurking in the shadows.

Frankly, I'd give up now trying to work out when to approach an architect like this, because you are just part of the noise, and today making noise is easier than ever.

The answer is to turn off the noise and think more intelligently about what architects are comfortable with.

What Works - A Culture of Referral

Pushing all this noise doesn't work. We need to use Pull Marketing instead.

*Push marketing is when the customer **doesn't** want your product or service.*

*Pull marketing is when the customer **does** want your product or service.*

Instead of pushing our stuff on people, we're going to use the culture that the prospect, the Architect, is most comfortable with; a culture of **referral**.

Architects are professional people who are resistant to anonymous sales messages, loyal to brands and personal contacts, and wary of strangers. I don't think they are very different to other people in this regard.

Think back to David Meerman Scott's example of how we all work. We naturally ask the people we know and trust when we have a problem. Everyone loves to be asked to help. Everyone hates being sold to.

We know that relationships are important. Those of us in business know that the hardest thing is to find people you can trust. Who better to go to for trust than the people you know? Relationships are especially important to B2B professional services, especially when the companies are small.

In 2009 in the US a couple of Professional Services marketers completed an 18-year study of why their contemporaries won contracts. They asked professional services firms about the last contract they won, and found that *89% of respondents had a relationship with the client before they were asked to quote.*⁸

We know relationships are important.

Creating a Referral Engine

Today there are more ways than ever to build on your existing relationships and create new relationships without pushing your stuff onto people. The internet plays a huge part in how we create new relationships. This technique is not confined to B2B services, it is the mainstay of how B2C business has succeeded online, and is built around the customer experience.

John Jantch's new book for B2B marketing is called "The Referral Engine"⁹ and I like the term as it illustrates that you have to fuel the process and keep it running. My Referral Engine for construction product manufacturers and suppliers has three parts, and they are all essential in contributing to a good customer experience. They are

1. Listen
2. Be Helpful
3. Be Found

I am the first to admit, Architects don't necessarily understand the concept of good customer service and apply it to their own businesses, but they do experience it. They are customers. Improving their experience is your ticket to a better relationship with them.

Here are some examples of listening.

Listen - Expect a Range of Channels

A few months ago I ran a project to monitor the online conversations about a particular building project for a large architect. I used a top of the market Social Media Monitoring tool called Radian6. The tool produces a range of data outputs, including a graph showing the trends in mention of key phrases about the project over time.

The building project we were monitoring made it into the mainstream media - including newspapers and their online sites, even TV. But the monitoring showed a range of other channels and how they all interacted. Bloggers picked up on the story and some attracted significant comments. There was a huge interest on Twitter, of course. A couple of niche forums were also identified turning up new audiences who had views on the project that needed to be reviewed.

Find out where people are talking about your brand and your areas of expertise. Drill down into data - who are they, who is influential, what are they saying? What can you learn from them? What do you need to respond to?

Monitoring Customer Satisfaction

Sometimes an unhappy specifier will broadcast a poor customer experience online, particularly if it was a particularly bad experience. Sometimes the post will cause other architects to reply with their experience of the company, or share the comment with others. This was extremely bad for your brand image, especially if you are not listening.

People are talking about your brand all the time, it is just that now they are doing it in a searchable, public, often permanent way, and other people can see it, including you.

In 2010 I blogged about [Tarmac's online social media presence](#). I commented that whilst their presence on social media sites was broad and brand consistent, it was purely broadcasting and without interaction¹⁰. In researching for this paper I have noticed that Tarmac have begun to respond publicly to enquiries and comments about their products. Once you start listening, as Tarmac has begun to do, you are in a position to respond constructively and significantly improve your brand image; indeed happy customers are your best advocates. They will generate referrals purely out of their good experience.

Of course keep your ears open to your customers, find ways of tracking them, but also listen to your prospects. It is the best starting point to make them more than prospects. With this in mind, rather than pushing our stuff on people, we're going to be there when we are needed.

Be Helpful - We need your help

Think about what architects need but don't like doing. Usually it is when they are in trouble, have a problem, and need to fix it fast. As we are aware, many of them will turn to their contacts, and others will look for product information online. If they can find your website, is it useful to them?

Websites that don't enable visitors with limited information or relatively vague problems to search in a meaningful way with broad terms and narrow down afterwards are infuriating. Your prospects end up with a list of meaningless part numbers that are almost impossible to compare online. Some product websites are impossible to use if you don't have the hard copy brochure. But if you don't have a brochure, are you not a valid prospect?

Free the data on your website

Take your helpfulness clues from the professionals, the B2C big guys. If you have a lot of product, free the data on your website.

RS Components, the world's largest distributor of electronics and maintenance products, took their cues for [their new website](#) from B2C companies like Tesco and ASOS, and they also talked to their customers. As a result their search is intuitive and comparison is easy and full of visual cues. Visitors can search as if they were using Google, then drill down using a huge range of filters. All the data they need to compare is made available to the customer.

If you don't have a lot of products, then make sure wherever your information is listed by suppliers or in directories, that they have this kind of level of usefulness. Help your specifiers find what they need. Depending on your products this may mean standard details, specification text to copy and paste, datasheets, BIM models, and other content they can download and use. It may also mean calculators and other tools which make the job of choosing your product easier and thereby, more likely.

When I was preparing for the seminar I asked my colleagues at work and followers on twitter what I should say to the audience of marketers for product manufacturers. The response was strongly in favour of helpful suppliers, ones who don't ring you and those who don't ask you for your email address or registration before information can be accessed. One of my colleagues commented, "Look. I'm already interested. Why don't you let me take a look?" Another told me that they liked to specify Sika Sarnafil because they published their [latest details](#) in DWG format on their website, and no form filling was required.

Being Helpful through Social Media

You don't have to be huge company to be helpful. [Design Conscious](#) is a small interiors products company based in Burnley, Lancashire. The proprietor Jacqueline Jones uses [Twitter](#) to engage with professionals and consumers looking to source modern lighting, furniture and accessories.

When I was looking for a particular type of ceiling mounted wall light recently I despaired at many of the directories and google searching which led me up so many blind alleys to unhelpful websites. I was in a hurry; the report had to be compiled that day, so I resorted to sharing a sketch of my requirements on Twitter. Jacqueline @[DesignConscious](#) responded within minutes with a series of suggestions, one of which was perfect and made its way into the client presentation.

Once you are listening it is possible to respond helpfully not to people who aren't looking, but to those who are. The scattergun becomes more focused on target.

Be Found Online

Of course you won't be able to see most of the people who are looking for your products or services because they won't be broadcasting the fact. Instead you need to find other ways to be found, because real people are looking for what you uniquely have. Make it possible for them to find you.

You don't need to be large to be found online; you just need to be specific. This is known as the Long Tail¹. Instead of having to be huge and offering a large range of products to a wide range of consumers, companies are now able to offer a smaller range to a niche market, especially via the internet. In construction this means that some careful online pull marketing on the part of the ideal supplier can satisfy the specific requirements of any specifier.

A Long Tail Niche Blogger

Indium Corporation make solder. It is not a small company, but it is selling to a very specific specialist market. The company [website](#) features [15 bloggers](#) demonstrating their expertise and creating long tail search engine results. This is how their strategy works:

1. Accomplished technologists are used to generate relevant content in a language appropriate to the audience;
2. The blog posts are short and naturally use terms the target audience will search for;
3. Content is specifically targeted around short opinion pieces which will attract specific questions in search;
4. The blog post itself contains useful information;
5. Opportunities to keep in touch and ask for more are easily accessible, as are rating and share buttons.

The amount of time and money required to generate new contacts using this technique is [much more efficient](#) than trade shows or hard copy marketing, or even cold calling.

The social web creates a footprint of trustworthiness and expertise for all its users, including you. This doesn't apply only online, but also in the real world. Some of our most useful contacts on the specification front are extremely experienced, incredibly trustworthy useful individuals like Richard Gay.

Before I researched this paper I didn't know that Richard worked for [one of the largest insulation suppliers in Europe](#), I just knew him as 'The Insulation Man'. If you have a problem about the buildup of a wall, for example, you email him your problem and he comes back with a range of solutions.

As we've mentioned before, the changing demands for the space around it puts pressure on the construction of a building's fabric. These demands also include cost and performance. Aware of the range of pressures and the range of solutions available, Richard is able to suggest alternative solutions which provide the level of environmental performance possible, in the space available, at a range of costs.

When I spoke to Richard that I was planning to talk to product manufacturers about architects he said that many product manufacturers do not realise:

"Architects don't care about your product. They want to solve their problem."

Richard's success results from his ability to understand what architects need, but don't want to struggle with. You can do this too.

I wanted to finish with an example from my student days, illustrating the importance of usefulness. When I was an architecture student, we all coveted our own Scale Ruler, and to get one free from a product company was a badge of honour. The reason we cared so much about them was really because we needed one. The cachet of a branded one was just the icing on the cake.

In answering my questions on Twitter when I was preparing my presentation, one structural engineer, David Sharpe, replied,

"I have enough scale rulers for now. I want to know what service + tech support lifts your product above that of a mere commodity."

But I disagree, in a way. If you can make something as useful as a scale ruler than I can find online via Google, you've cracked it.



Want to Know More?

To view the slide deck for this presentation [visit the blog post on the talk](#), where you can also download this White Paper. If you have any comments on the paper, or the slides, please do contribute them on the post, I'd love to hear from you.

If you'd like me to help you with your work, please [contact me via the website](#), tweet me [on twitter](#) or call 07815 935736.

I'm running workshops on how to use LinkedIn properly - you can find out more at <http://www.justpractising.com/linkedin>

About Su Butcher

Su Butcher trained in Architecture at the University of Liverpool and after a spell in academia where she taught architecture students, started managing practices of architects in 1997. She writes about architects on her website, [JustPractising.com](http://www.JustPractising.com) and offers a range of consultancy services to architects, construction companies and product manufacturers who want to learn how to interact better with architects, including how to integrate Social Media tools into conventional marketing and PR strategies.

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Notes

- ¹ Architects can learn from David Meerman Scott: [Just Practising](#) May 22nd 2011
- ² The new Marketing and PR by David Meerman Scott ([on Amazon.co.uk](#))
- ³ The RIBA charts approximately 3000 practices of architects a year, and these represent by their own estimate, 50% of architects practices operating in the UK. (Adrian Dobson, RIBA Director of Practice 2009) [What is an RIBA Chartered Practice?](#) (RIBA)
- ⁴ UK Architects Practices increase but sizes shift - [Just Practising](#) June 2010
- ⁵ [How to Pay Your Staff \(and Yourself\) Well](#), Su Butcher, WAN (World Architecture News) August 2010
- ⁶ The 2010/11 RIBA Benchmarking report showed fee earners averaged just 13% of staff.
- ⁷ The graph here from [a post by Brian Green's Brickonomics blog](#) shows the turnover of architects flatlining but he does point out the graph doesn't include the effects of inflation.
- ⁸ What it Takes to Win: the Cold Hard Truth SMPS Marketer Dec 09 Bruce Lea + J Rossi <http://www.smeps.org>
- ⁹ The Referral Engine, John Jantch ([on Amazon.co.uk](#))
- ¹⁰ [Tarmac: Being there isn't being Social](#). Just Professionals November 2010
- ¹¹ The Long Tail by Chris Anderson ([On Amazon.co.uk](#)) and [More information](#)