The Really Useful Guide to Construction Marketing

For senior managers of main & specialist contractors

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Introduction

Welcome to the Really Useful Guide to Construction Marketing. In the pages that follow I will be sharing highly practical lessons learned in the challenging but rewarding world of construction marketing.

You can expect down to earth advice on how to improve your sales, win the work you want and build your business. If you already consider yourself a seasoned marketer in the construction industry, I hope you'll still pick up some helpful hints and tips to develop your skills.

If you don't consider yourself a marketer, I hope to change your mind! As you will see, marketing is not just about glossy brochures and advertising. It's about strategic thinking, highly targeted sales, and building long term relationships that will bring you a continuing stream of tenders and profitable contracts.

I'm aiming this guide at small to medium size contractors and subcontractors, which is the area where I have the most experience. It's also where I enjoy working the most, because you can make a big difference for a client in a short amount of time. Six to nine months of active marketing can turn a company around, or see a step change in its fortunes.

Seeing that kind of change is very rewarding as a marketer, and I enjoy what I do. I'm good at it too, and I wouldn't presume to write this guide otherwise. (Modesty isn't something you find much in my line of work!) I've been in construction marketing for over 30 years, and much of my working week is spent in the offices of various clients, helping them build for the future. I recently calculated that one of my clients was getting a 1,000% return on what they paid me to do!

If you'd like that kind of support for your business, I'm always glad to talk to new clients about what my company can do for you. As we shall soon explore, helping people succeed is what good marketers do.

About the author

David Crick is the Managing Director of Contractors Marketing Services. A Chartered Marketer, David has over 30 years' experience and has worked on contracts worth up to £20 million.

His work with UK market intelligence firms, such as Barbour ABI, has seen David advise a diverse range of clients on strategic development and training.

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Marketing is a service

Before we go any further, let's get one thing clear about marketing. You are there to help your customers succeed.

It's one of the most important things to understand about sales. If you start from the other side and believe that you're here to sell your services, you've lost before you started. Successful marketing is all about anticipating the needs of the client. What's in it for them?

You're a problem solver. You're the one who can help deliver what your customer needs.

Construction is a complex and competitive industry, and the best approach to successful marketing is one of service: 'how can I help you?'

Of course, some people might think that's disingenuous, and it would be if you weren't serious about helping your customers! You'd just be there with your own agenda. If that's the case, customers will see through you and there will be no repeat custom.

In other words, your whole ethos has to be about service. Not just words, but from the heart. You're here to solve people's problems, to help them achieve their objectives successfully and cost effectively. Help them do that, and you succeed as well. You succeed together.

It's human. It's honest. It's collaborative. It works.

The consultative side to marketing

If construction marketing is basically a service to help your client, then it should include an element of consultation. You are using your personal skills, and the skills of your company, to help your customer deliver a profitable end-product.

As a construction expert, you'd be opening a conversation with your client. 'What are your real concerns and constraints? What really matters to you on this particular project?'

It might seem that, if you're a marketer rather than a builder, you might not have much to offer by way of consultation. That might be the case sometimes, but you may have more to contribute than you think. Does the client need advice on procurement and lead times? On cost reductions, or on budgets and pricing? How can you help deliver cost effective solutions? These sorts of questions demonstrate an interest in your client's success, and the approach will win you respect.

There are big advantages to a consultative, service-based approach to marketing – both for you the marketer and for your client. It creates rapid rapport. It answers the question, 'What's in it for me?' It makes a space for open and trusting communication. It takes the pressure off you to 'sell', and lays the foundation for a potentially long-term relationship.

Long-term commitment

That consultative approach shouldn't be seen as a way to get a foot in the door. In the construction industry, you must see sales and marketing as a dedicated, permanent discipline. You never stop marketing.

Some success comes quickly, and relatively easily. But some of the most productive relationships are slow to develop. They may take two years, four years even. Some projects, as we all know, just seem to drag on for months or years before getting off the ground. You have to be patient and committed. The best marketers are almost ruthlessly clear-minded in their persistence. If you know a potential new project or client is going to lead to long-term potential, then commit and stick to it.

Sales and marketing

You'll notice that I talk about both sales and marketing, sometimes interchangeably. What's the difference, you may be wondering.

In simple terms, marketing is the major discipline covering all aspects of product, pricing, people and profit maximisation. Sales is the pro-active 'get out there and sell' element of the wider marketing discipline.

It's vital that construction management recognises the long-term nature of marketing. Instead of wasting time chasing less effective leads and secondary contacts, you need to identify key contacts, chosen because of their strategic potential for new business. Then devote serious, patient, long-term investment in developing those relationships. That's good marketing, and good business.

They say that a large sale requires an average of seven different types of contact. And productive, settled relationships take at least 12 hours of face-to-face time before you have a solid working partnership.

Be patient. Be committed. You are in it for the long haul.

Clarifying your business focus

Why strategy matters

In the previous section we looked at laying the basics of marketing, understanding what it is and the time it takes. Another vital foundation to successful marketing is developing a clear business focus.

Being clear about the kind of business you want helps you to shape an effective marketing and communications strategy. If you have a distinct idea of the kind of jobs you want to win, you'll get a much better idea of who you need to talk to, and what you want to say.

This clarity and effectiveness will feed into all your communications: brochures, website, letters and conversations, magazine articles etc. This kind of coherence really helps to get your message across.

Having a clearly focused business model and marketing strategy gives you confidence as you approach new prospects. Your colleagues will feel confident and assertive as they deal with clients, because they all understand what direction you are going in.

Clarity and confidence in your communications means you will be heard more clearly and better understood. With time, you'll develop an increasingly obvious track record of success. That, in turn, will set you apart from your competition. You'll be taken more seriously, remembered more readily, and treated with greater respect.

Know your strengths

With over a quarter of a million firms, construction is a crowded industry. So your best route to success is to specialise.

Aim to become a bigger fish in a smaller pond, rather than a small fish in a large and crowded pond.

Developing a clear business focus means working out where you're at your best. A few simple questions will get you started:

- What are you good at?
- What are your proven strengths?
- What are your 'perceived' strengths (i.e. what do other people think you are good at?)

You're now refining your business around its biggest strengths, but don't forget to look into what you want as well. Make sure you're specialising around work you like doing and that turns a decent profit.

- What kind of work do you like doing?
- What kind of work has the best margins?

A good strategy – and a major part of the differentiation that we'll come to later – is to grow to be recognised as an expert in a chosen field.

Once you have worked out what and where your best business is, then work out where that business is going to come from. This is essential to the work of marketing. A clear business focus – knowing what kind of business you really want – will make it easier to develop a cost-effective marketing strategy. It will point to the right markets for your skills, and highlight the marketing tools that you need to break into that market.

Focusing your business

Let's think a little more about refining your business focus. Look at the work your business has done over the past few years.

- First, which were the most profitable kinds of work? Which kinds of jobs went really well, from your perspective and from the perspective of your clients? Which returned the best margins?

- Now look at the strengths and experience of your managers, staff and trades.

Add those two sets of findings together. What kinds of business are these pointing to?

With this in mind, you can start to research your own local market. There are two kinds of work you may want to look out for in your chosen field.

- Lower margin quick wins to generate cash and business continuity.
- Higher-margin longer-term business, to provide maximum return - the real prize.

You then have to decide your priorities, based on your cash-flow needs, your work availability, and the actual work available in your area.

Developing a clear business focus helps get better value out of your time and energy. It means you consolidate your strengths and save time through not competing in areas of relative weakness. It also saves money in estimating costs. You may choose to bring in fewer teders, but you will have a greater chance of success and higher conversion rate.

How to stand out from the crowd

Competitive differentiation

So you know what you're good at and you've focused accordingly. That's great, but we're only halfway to a solid marketing platform. Imagine you've followed up a great lead and you've got a foot in the door with the prospective client. Then in the course of discussions they ask an awkward question: 'I already use six other contractors: why should I consider you?' What is your quick, effective answer to make sure they add you to their list of regular tenderers?

This is a crucial part of the marketing process. We call it 'competitive differentiation'. What makes you stand out from the crowd? How do you make yourself different from your competitors and so become attractive to your prospective clients?

Every contractor has a role in the construction marketplace, but you don't want to be in the 'me too' herd. If all you've got going for you is that you're no worse than everybody else, then there's no reason for anyone to choose you. Clients will always prefer a contractor who stands out from the others, who has something special to offer – specific experience, an ability to move fast or a team that's located close to their site.

It's crucial to develop your business to become something special, with qualities that distinguish you from everyone else in the crowd.

Research your distinctives

The first key to market differentiation is simply this: find out what is unique about your business right now. Why do your past and present clients use your services? Why do they keep coming back? What do they see in you that they like?

You can do this in two ways.

Internal research - Run a brainstorming session with your staff: what do you do that is noticeably different to your competitors? Remember that it's often the small points about a company that make a real difference. Assemble the results to develop an initial list of ideas about your existing competitive differences.

External research - Ask your past and present clients what they think of you. Why did they choose you for their work? Is there anything special about you apart from the competitive price element? Add this feedback into your differentiation study.

Check yourselves against your competition: how do you differ? That's the first step.

15 ways to stand out

After researching your distinctives, the second step to market differentiation is to make yourself different! Be proactive in creating space between yourselves and the competition. Here are some ways you can stand out in the crowded market place:

1. You! What is truly unique about your business is of course is you. What do your clients like about you, and how can this be leveraged in your favour? Your positive attitude and friendliness is going to be one of the most important factors in a client's decision.

2. Your colleagues! Think about the quality of customer relationships throughout your business. Are you easy to work with?

3. Your focus and persistence in development of sales projects.

4. Appreciation and saying 'thank you' for business placed with you Do clients feel valued?

Dangerous questions

Hopefully the feedback about you will be positive and affirming. But what if it's not?

External research can be painful if people really speak their minds. Don't let it set you back. It's far better to get a bitter dose of reality than to depend on fantasies and then go bust a few months down the line!

You may uncover some weaknesses that you hadn't spotted. Use the criticism to build a stronger, more attractive business.

5. Your corporate attitude to claims, and non-adversarial relationships on site.

6. Your corporate identity – a sharp logo; literature that makes an impact.

7. The quality of your website.

8. The added value you bring to a project or a relationship.

9. Your ability to provide early budget pricing.

10. Your ability to actively add engineering and cost reduction at the tender stage, offering good advice on keeping costs down.

11. Input into early stage site programme development.

12. Comment on procurement and lead-in times for materials.

13. Clear communication. Are you easy to get hold of, and is everyone on the same page.

14. Great listening skills. How can you show your clients that you understand their needs and concerns?

15. Willingness to learn from client feedback. What would your clients find helpful? And do you invite their comments?

In which of these ways can you realistically differentiate yourselves from the competition? Make your list, develop an implementation strategy, and build it into your marketing plan – starting with your corporate image.

Developing your corporate image

How are you perceived?

Your corporate image is crucial to your success. And don't for a moment think that you don't have one! Your business already has an image. If it's not one that you've crafted and deliberately communicated, it's one that you've accidentally communicated. Either way, people already have an opinion about you.

They may think you are special, or just part of the crowd. You may be perceived as reliable, or perhaps people think you're best avoided. Their view of you may be accurate or inaccurate. It may be based on experience, or on hearsay and gossip. It may even be based on mistaken identity! But they have an opinion. They already have a mental image of your business.

The important thing for you, in marketing your business, is to take control of your business image and shape it the way you want it.

So the first thing may be for you to find out what your corporate image already is. As we've already discussed, you can do this internally and externally. Ask your staff what people think about your business. Then ask your clients what they think: why did they choose you over the competition? What has their experience of your firm been?

Now get to work on shaping your corporate image positively in your favour.

The tangible elements of a good corporate image

There are two aspects to your corporate image: the tangible and intangible. Both of them are important.

The tangible elements of your corporate image are the things people can touch or see: your logo, brochures, website, letterheads, vehicle signwriting and hoardings on site. You cannot overestimate the importance of getting these well designed. The subliminal communication from a good logo, a well written brochure, a coherent website, and a well set-out letter is immense.

Don't underestimate the negative impact of an off-the-shelf logo, a badly written letter or brochure, or a website that is hard to use. These may lose you the business before the potential client has read a single word.

Some might dismiss expenditure on design as an indulgence, something that can be easily cut to improve the bottom line. But just think about your own role as a client: how many of your purchases are influenced by good or bad design and packaging? How often are you put off by something that is poorly presented? Which would you

The debrief

It's always good to run a short informal interview with your client when a job has completed on site. You can do this yourself, or it's often better to get a third party to run the interview for you, either on the phone or in person.

It's really helpful to get feedback fast. If the client would hesitate to work with you again, you will want to know why and make it right. If feedback is good, pass it on to motivate your staff.

The debrief conversation is good business in itself. It shows you take yourself seriously, that you value your client's opinion, and want to do a good job. It will inspire confidence in your company.

trust more, a generic 'no-name' product or a branded one?

Good design does not happen by accident. It is usually the end of a long process, but it is worth investing in. It doesn't have to be flashy, but get it done professionally. Good design makes you more memorable, and it communicates reliability and helps to build trust.

The intangible elements of your image

Your corporate image is the sum total of how people think about you. It is partly shaped by your logo and brochures, website and so on. It is also shaped by people's experiences of dealing with you, and by the gossip of others who have worked with you.

This is why it's so vital to get everyone in your firm on board with your marketing strategy, as we'll come to later. Your receptionist is on the front line of marketing. First impressions are essential and how they answer the phone and deal with visitors powerfully impacts their impression of your firm, for good or ill.

It's not just the receptionist. Every member of your staff affects your corporate image every day. Do they answer the phone politely? How promptly do they deal with queries? Are they true to their word? What kind of impression do they make on site visits? Do they manage the contracts well? Do they know what they are talking about?

A good experience for clients leads to a good corporate image. A good image will help clients to be willing to trust you with their business, and that in turn will lead to repeat business.

Who would you like to be?

As you work on developing your corporate image, you need to be looking ahead. Don't just focus on developing an image that reflects the business as it is now. Think ahead to where you want to be in three or four years' time. Make that the target of your image development. Start to project the image of the firm that you want to become, and then grow into it.

Of course, the image you project has to be honest! Don't pretend to be something that you're not. You will be rumbled, and you may never recover the ground. But equally, don't stand still. Be ambitious. Develop a clear idea about your business direction, what kind of business you are seeking to become – and then use your corporate image development as a tool to help you become that kind of firm.

Remember to work for consistency across all your different forms of communication: vehicles and site-hoardings as well as logo and brochures. Match up your office décor and your website, so that visitors know who they're dealing with. Make sure any press coverage and customer events, invoices and letterheads are all working together to communicate who you are.

Marketing materials

Speaking of brochures, it's worth mentioning marketing materials. It can be tempting to throw money at glossy brochures and flyers, and larger companies may want to go down that route. Smaller companies should focus first and foremost on a great website.

Get professional help for your website. Make it easy to navigate and clearly branded. Provide examples of your work, and longer case studies that can be downloaded – these can also be emailed after personal telephone conversations.

When you do produce a brochure, pay for a good designer and print it on good stock, so it makes an impression when it arrives. Since people get too many emails, a well targeted mail shot may get some attention, especially if it follows an introductory phone call.

One other thing: well-presented tender documentation, spiral bound and with an acetate front cover, is an easy way to convey professionalism and build trust.

We've covered a lot of ground already. We've looked at the basics of marketing, and the need to focus on service and consultation - you're there to help your customers succeed. From that foundation, we've thought about how to clarify your focus, and how to make your company stand out from the competition.

If you've got this far, you'll have a strong marketing platform to work from. Now it's time to get proactive and start chasing down the work you want to grow your business.

2. Getting started in sales

Developing a sales strategy

Everything we've looked at so far is foundational. It's all been about working out who you are and communicating it to others. Without these basics, you're going to struggle in a crowded marketplace. If you've got those foundations in place, you can really start to build your business more proactively. That leads us from broader marketing principles into the more specialist world of construction industry sales.

If you're aiming for long term growth and profit, you'll need all the basics in place. Then it's time to start developing an intelligent, effective strategy that will target the best tenders.

What a good sales strategy can do for you

Developing an effective sales strategy for a small or medium-size building contractor is not difficult - and implementing it does not have to be expensive.

To give you an idea of what it involves from a tactical perspective, one of our CMS sales hunters would be able to deliver results for your business through one concentrated sales day per week. From this day of sales hunting we'd expect to generate one or two appointments for the directors with targeted potential work providers. We'd be looking to secure three to five tenders a month.

Sounds good, doesn't it? A small company can achieve serious growth from just two to four dedicated sales days a month, and by the end of this guide you'll know how to do just that.

To get those kinds of results, you're going to need the right tools for the job. Your marketing toolbox will need to include:

- A serious, long-term commitment from the directors and managers to the active sales strategy. Growth doesn't happen overnight.

- A strong, attractive and effective corporate identity, as we've already discussed.

- Clear thinking about the company's market focus, so that your salesperson can prioritise and target the best and most appropriate business.

- Effective marketing resources for introducing the company and following up contacts – i.e. a brochure, website, email material, case studies, etc.

- Great market intelligence – that means among other things a well selected set of project sales leads to work from – and we'll come to these next.

Using market intelligence

We are amazingly well provided with market intelligence in the UK construction industry. The trick is knowing how to use it.

Thanks to the UK planning system, we know in advance about almost every construction project of any value. Out of this mass of information, the two leading market intelligence providers – Barbour ABI and Emap Glenigan – pick out and detail over 250,000 projects a year. They focus on the ones over £100k, with smaller projects listed in summary. Planning Pipe is another similar service.

In addition, over 5,000 major projects each year are researched through the tendering to planning stages by ABI and Glenigan again, but also by the Builders' Conference. The potential value of these sales leads for your sales strategy is enormous. Properly used, they allow you to:

- Identify specific projects that are of interest to you.

- Get information early enough to chase opportunities.

- Identify key work providers so you can build long-term relationships.

- Easily identify new companies in your area.

- Use intelligently targeted direct mail and email shots.

Using market intelligence to target your sales

Using market intelligence is a key to targeted marketing. It allows you to seize immediate opportunities to help with cash flow. At the same time it enables you to work on long-term relationship building that will lead to repeat business, stability and growth. Good sales people deliver immediate work, and keep an eye on the future too, looking for upcoming projects and potential work providers.

Barbour ABI, Planning Pipe and Glenigan leads are excellent ways for you to identify all the possible building projects that may be of interest to you. That means you can focus on the kind of work that you like doing and that you are good at – or the kind of work you would like to move into.

It also means you can focus on the geographical areas that are most convenient for you. In addition, it means you identify the projects that promise the best margins, or that will fit the gaps in your schedule.

Market intelligence will also give you the details of key people you need to talk to: the main contacts and decision-makers in the firms. These are the people you'll want to invest in and develop a good working relationship with, building trust and giving a great impression of your company.

The information is there to be used, and if you're not using it, your competitors will! So let's get into the detail of sales leads.

Help!

Construction Marketing Services are experts at handling sales leads and gathering market intelligence. We could be doing it for you! Give us a call if you would like some advice or support: 01256 475880

The five types of sales lead

The market intelligence from the planning system is an exceptionally powerful tool. At the heart of almost every successful construction firm is a marketing team that knows how to use it well. At first glance though, it can appear that there is actually too much information! You're going to need to narrow it down to find the projects most relevant to you.

There are five different stages of lead, and not all of them will be useful to your company's skills and specialities. Once you've understood the five types of sales leads and where your business comes into the process, that mass of projects will look much less daunting.

1. Pre-Planning Leads

These are very early leads (usually to more major developments) that come up in the press – a company relocation, for example.

Pre-planning leads are most useful to property companies or major contractors with longer-term key account development interests. A company move would also be of interest to office furniture or fit-out companies. Sometimes architects, surveyors or other professional firms will want to get in right at the inception of a scheme.

Subcontractors at the planning stage

Generally speaking these leads are too early for subcontractors. However, if the application is by a builder, developer or housebuilder, it may be moving forward quickly after securing planning permission.

2. Outline application and approvals

Still early, but now you have a definite project to lock onto. People don't submit these lightly given the increasing cost of planning applications.

This stage is most interesting to local property firms and developers with an interest in site acquisitions. Builders who offer design and build services or other specialties will want to get in early, but this stage is usually too soon for most building firms. Consulting engineers and surveyors may not have been appointed yet, so some professionals may find these leads useful.

3. Detailed planning applications and approvals

The first two stages are more niche, but once you get into the detailed planning application stages, you are now into the key area for almost every mainstream builder.

This stage is where building contractors will want to get involved. Builders should get in touch at planning application stage, as some jobs will proceed fairly quickly once planning officers have given an informal nod and a wink to the scheme. If you haven't made contact, another contractor is likely to be already in and talking.

We always suggest that builders select the projects they chase carefully. It's better to do a really good sales job on a few well selected leads than attempt to chase too many. Develop a simple scoring system on key criteria if you need to. You need to make a gentle and courteous contact at an early stage; keep talking at the times they suggest. It's imperative to build the beginnings of relationship quickly and effectively with well-judged personal contacts. Secure your 'foothold' in the project early on and track it through tenaciously.

As a builder, you'll naturally be tracking the project through to client instructions, working drawings, building regulations and then to the tender list assembly. Don't lose contact through the process. If you go quiet for too long, it's very easy for the architect to get the impression that you may not be too interested after all – and for your competition to make the running instead.

Besides builders, the other group who will want to look out for these planning leads are building material suppliers. This is where they should make their approach. The project will soon be moving on to building control and working drawings, making this the ideal time to get your products specified by the architect or user.

4. Tender stage

The client will be looking at main contractors now, and those contractors will be pricing up the work and making their bids.

The tender stage is where the subcontractors can start to pick up the trail. It's almost always too late for main contractors, but a good time for specialists to make sure they're in the running for subcontracts – especially those first on site, such as groundwork or demolition companies. If you're a subcontractor who gets their business from contractors, you need to be in right away. The tender stage last only three to four weeks in most cases, so don't wait around!

Building material suppliers are still in with a shot here too, whether they've secured specification from the architect or not.

Remember that the main contractor may only have a one in three or one in four chance of winning the work, depending on how long

When to make your move

Since up to 25% of schemes are refused, some builders save time by waiting for planning to be granted before they get in touch. There are big downsides to this. As sales professionals we always prefer to make contact at the actual application stage.

Most projects do get through first time, even if they take ages. If you waited and the client was keen to proceed, you've missed your chance. Better to get in early – have a quick chat with the architect and then hold back for two or three months if required.

Secondly, if permission is refused, it may be resubmitted. By being early, we can stay with the project even if it goes to appeal, while competitors will fall away. The success rate in getting a tender with jobs that are delayed is usually much higher than with those which move quickly!

the shortlist is. That means there's no certainty of getting the job and some subcontractors prefer to hold off until the contract is awarded. However, long experience shows that it's well worth engaging with builders at the tender stage.

Builders know that subcontractors would prefer to discuss actual jobs won, but they still need competitive subcontract prices at tender stage. They will frequently want new subcontractors to prove their interest and stickability by pricing enquiries at tender stage. Don't see this as a waste of time, see it as a way to build relationships and prove your good faith.

That's actually no inconvenience, if you are a subcontractor who has access to good tendering information. It can actually be a very effective way to generate more new contractor contacts and relationships very quickly. One tenderer you price for can easily lead to two or three others within days. They'll be happy for you to copy your price across.

The real prize is to track it right through to the contract award and make sure your price is under consideration. And of course, your courteous and friendly tracking of the job through numbers of contacts over perhaps six to seven weeks does you a huge amount of good in terms of the relationships you're building all the time.

What if there isn't time to quote?

Even the best researched leads from Emap Glenigan or Barbour ABI can come in a little late. Quite often there is not enough time to quote for your particular trade.

Don't be deterred – these leads are still good intros and a lot better than 'cold-calling'. Every estimator you talk to will have a stream of tenders coming though. There is almost always upcoming interest for you.

5. Contract award stage

The final stage of the sales opportunity pipeline: the main contractor has now been appointed, and they're getting into the detail of who's going to be doing what.

This is the preferred stage for most subcontractors, and those specialising in the early trades – brickwork, roofing or plastering should get in touch now. Trades that come in once the shell of the building is complete, (for example electricians, joiners, painters and decorators) might want to hold off for a week or two. You'll avoid the rush of calls that inevitably happens once a main contract is awarded.

It's a little late for site services, as these tend to be booked in very quickly, but it's always worth a call. If you don't get this job, it's an opportunity to ask about what's coming up next. Material suppliers who sell to subcontractors can also use these leads.

Being really effective on the phone

Pick the phone up!

So you know what a sales lead is and which ones are most relevant to your company. But what's actually involved in following it up and chasing a lead? First, pick up the phone.

The phone is the single most powerful marketing tool at your disposal, and if you're going to make the most of your sales leads, you'll need to use it. If you're not comfortable with cold-calling, hire a marketing professional who is, even if it's just for a day a week.

Choose the A* leads to call first, the jobs you want most. Then make the call and introduce yourself. Say who you are, and what you're specifically interested in. Mention your experience, and make sure the person on the other end of the phone knows where to find out more about you and how to get back in touch.

This is important!

Remember that how you sound is as important as what you say – you want to come across as warm, interested, and the kind of person people want to do business with. The way you project yourself on the phone is critically important, especially in the first four or five seconds of the call. Think about it: if someone calls you and they sound interesting, dynamic and warm, you'll instinctively respond in a positive way. If they sound dreary, boring and monotone, you may switch off and find an excuse to end the call. A cheery warm 'Good morning' (or afternoon) helps right away!

You may occasionally hit the jackpot, but generally speaking you shouldn't expect wonders from the first phone call. It's relationships that primarily lead to appointments and tenders, so you'll need to call back. Be persistent, but not pushy.

When to call back?

There's no need to second-guess when to make a second call. Confirm that this is a job you can handle by saying you're keen to stay in touch, and ask THEM when you should call back. It's rare to get a 'don't call back' at this point. They will suggest the best time for you to call, and you're up and running.

How to use the phone to develop new business

Great leads will give you the information about the project and who to call, but there is considerable skill in using the phone well and making sales.

First, you need a dedicated and skilful operator. Many people don't like making cold calls. Unsurprisingly, they don't tend to be very good at them either. A marketing professional will be well versed in the art. With experience and confidence, they can use cold-calling to build relationships that lead to appointments and tenders.

Secondly, you need persistence. Lots of builders will call up prospective sales leads, but far fewer will make the next call. The quality and dedication of a true marketing professional is the second and third call – and more. It's that friendly persistence that slowly builds relationships.

At this point you may be aware that your company might not currently have the skills, leads or persistence in-house to achieve effective telephone marketing. One solution is to bring in a CMS sales hunter. We are dedicated, skilful operators who enjoy cold-calling and are very good at it. We also help you select the best sales leads to help your business grow. And we are amazingly persistent and effective in building long-term relationships with your work providers.

We can achieve all this for you through just one concentrated sales day per week. Give us a call now and see how we can help your business to grow.

The Rule of Seven

Research shows that larger sales take an average of seven contacts of one kind or another – from the initial call through to the follow-up and then on over some months if required – telephone calls, emails and maybe a personal meeting. Yes, you can hit the jackpot in two or three calls – but it can sometimes take ten or more. The contractor who stays the course is the most likely to secure a tender.

The importance of systems

As you get to work on the phones, you'll soon realise that there's something else you need: an efficient sales admin system and a good contact management database. You're going to need to record and keep permanent access to your contacts, conversations and projects of interest. This helps the marketing professional to be fully briefed and competent in developing ongoing leads and relationships.

Both your sales admin system and your sales database need to be efficient and easy to use. There's a good reason why – you may easily end up with hundreds of contacts and conversations. You want to be able to access each of them quickly and easily, getting up to speed for the next call.

Data entry and reporting can take up a lot of time, but you want your sales professional to spend as much of their day as possible on the phone! Keep it efficient and streamlined with a web based system, accessible 24-7 and without the restrictions of a local network or a single-user.

There are several heavyweight construction CRM databases on the market – though these are built for larger companies. Or alternatively CMS has a much simpler but very easy to use relationship CRM system online. Get in touch if you'd like more information about that.

To recap, you've got your leads. You've got your sales agent who is confident on the phone. They're going to make calls and keep making calls, and keep track of all the progress you're making in the system.

But what happens after you've had your first successful conversation?

Following up

Following up by letter

It's important that you follow up a successful phone call with a well-crafted email or letter. You've done the hard work of cold-calling, making a connection with the secretary, getting through to the decision-maker. Now what?

Hopefully, you've remembered at the end of the phone call to mention that you will follow up the call, and asked what the best way to do this might be. It's important to ask what the client prefers. Some busy architects get so many emails every day that they'd much prefer a hard-copy letter. Others go paperless!

The follow up letter or email is not just a way of confirming what you have said. It also starts to establish that you are someone who

The easy way to a good letter

How to structure a letter with AIDA:

Attention: secure the reader's interest in the first paragraph. What have you got to say or to offer that is really important to the reader?

Interest: the second paragraph builds interest. Give reasons why your contribution to the client's project will be significant.

Desire: the third paragraph provides evidence of your suitability for the work: references, examples of similar jobs, etc.

Action: finally, state the action you will be taking, and that was agreed in your phone call. (And remember to follow it up!)

keeps their promises. This is a key part in establishing trust, which, as we have said in earlier postings, is fundamental to long-term relationships.

Write in a conversational style, as if continuing the conversation you were having on the phone. Refer to the original contact you had, and any promise you made to write. Then set out what you want to say in clear, easy words: not more than 20 words in a sentence and not more than four or five lines to a paragraph. Make sure the letter is well set out, with plenty of white space.

Writing well is a skill. It is easy to be long-winded and unclear. You need a letter that is brief and clear, and you should expect to revise it a few times – or call in someone with professional writing skills to help you.

Appointments and presentations

After all the hard work of phoning and writing, you're going to be aiming for an appointment in person with the key decision maker. Whether this is a formal or informal presentation, it is critical that you get it right. The first impression is important, and you only get one chance to make it.

It's often said you should allow a ratio of 10:1 in the amount of time you spend preparing for a presentation. Ten hours of labour to get a one-hour presentation right. That sounds like a lot, but you need to take preparation very seriously. You are investing in a potentially valuable long-term relationship. As with any investment, you need to look at it very carefully before you commit. Of course, once you've got a great presentation, you can easily re-use or adapt it for the next time.

There are four key components in an effective presentation. This is equally applicable to a simple one-to-one appointment.

1. Show that you can meet the customer's key criteria for delivery of the service. Find out what those criteria are in advance, so you can communicate clearly that you understand the client's concerns, and that you have appropriate solutions.

2. Provide evidence that you will be of real value to the client.

3. Demonstrate facts and added value that distinguish you from the competition.

4. Motivate your client to employ you. For example, identify some potential benefits and values that you can add that either they have not thought of, or your competitors may not have. Leave them in no doubt you're interested!

Because presentations are so important, we'll come back to the topic in more depth in the final section. Before we leave the subject of sales, let's bring everything together by looking at a day in the life of a construction industry sales hunter.

A typical day in the life of a Sales Hunter

What would it look like to have an experienced CMS sales hunter for a day a week working in your office, helping to grow your business?

The day starts early with a short briefing with the MD or a Director. They review the last week's activity and calls, or any appointments that the director may have followed up. Together they agree on the new project leads to follow up that day, and the priority recalls for projects already under development.

Typically, we find that the ideal and most productive use of the day is to commit up to one third of the day to new leads – generally around six to eight brand-new project leads from Glenigan, Barbour ABI or Planning Pipe.

The larger part of the day – up to five or six hours is given to the regular and dedicated follow-up of the high-quality project leads under development. That's in the region of 14 -16 projects per day. This one third/two thirds split has always proved an ideal way to generate the best results while keeping the sales topped up with good new projects.

Of all the leads handled, around 10 -15% will be A* projects and given highest priority, with another 20 or so A leads to follow up. The next 50 - 60% will be of genuine B-level interest, and will be followed up assiduously. The remainder may be worth mailing, if there is time left at the end of the day. To stay focused, we run a strict discipline where we make the call, write it up on the online CRM database and get the email done before moving on to the next call.

Overall, the sales hunter will spend six hours or more on the phone, developing upward of 24 projects, either new leads or recalls. Out of this we would expect one or two highly targeted sales appointments where there are specific projects to discuss. This type of activity will also represent 1-1.5 highly targeted tenders brought in over the course of time. With other calls it will be a matter of keeping in contact, and building longer-term relationships for when the next project goes live.

After phone tasks, time may need to be spent preparing letters to follow up the calls, and carrying out research for the appointments that have been set. The day ends with a debrief, and always some genuine cause for satisfaction.

Interested? Give us a call.

3. Building competence

With a great sales professional working from a solid marketing base, you can expect to be securing new work. But there's more you can do to embed good practice in your company and really build towards the future. This final section of the guide is all about expanding your capacity, getting everyone involved, and becoming really good at construction marketing.

Getting everyone in your business involved in marketing

Starting with the receptionist

Yes, you have a marketing department, or you've brought in marketing consultants. But they won't do you much long-term good until everyone in the company, from the receptionist to the managing director understands their own personal place in marketing the business.

Help your staff to get away from the idea that marketing is only about brochures and advertising. Marketing – at its core – is about building successful long-term relationships with clients and about satisfying their needs profitably.

That's why the receptionist is one of your key marketing specialists. Because, for many of your clients, the receptionist is the first person an incoming caller will talk to. They will create the first impression, and we all know how important that is.

Everyone else in the business needs to get on board with marketing too. Whether they work on site or in the office, whatever they do for a client or say to a client can affect that relationship for good or bad. Good relationships are good marketing, and make for good business. If they are positive and helpful, that goes a long way.

If you want long-term profitable business, change the way your staff think about marketing. They are all involved.

Care for your corporate image

While we're on the subject of involving the whole company in marketing, it's worth stressing that everyone is involved in projecting the corporate image.

You will hopefully have done some of the groundwork and developed a coherent corporate image that reflects your values and expertise. Hopefully the mental image that people have of your company aligns well with what you are trying to communicate. The biggest factor in that alignment is the experience of dealing with your staff.

Every member of your staff impacts the image of your company every time they deal with a client. They could be damaging the image of your business through being off-hand on the phone, writing a sloppy letter, or failing to do what they promised in a timely manner.

Or more positively, they may be helping to improve the image of your company by their cheerful manner, their friendly helpfulness, their knowledge and professional skill, and their reliability in doing what they said they would do.

Every company has a corporate image. Make sure yours is a good one by helping your staff to be aware of their vital role in marketing your business – building good relationships with your clients.

Everyone is a sales spotter

Every employee needs to remember how their behaviour can affect, for good or ill, the image of your company, and your long-term relationship with clients. But more than that: every member of your staff is a potential sales spotter.

Potential sales leads can come from all over. Sales experts make use of Glenigan, ABI and Builder's Conference, but other members of staff may pick up hints from clients during the course of the day. Chatting over coffee or on the phone, a contact may mention an upcoming project, or a new company they have come across. Don't let these go to waste: these can be high potential contacts.

First of all your staff need to understand their role as sales spotters. They need to be able to recognise a potential sales lead when they see one or hear about one. And they need to know to pass it on.

Some companies have developed a tiered reward scheme to encourage staff to feed in sales leads. These can be very effective – provided you are careful to follow up the leads, and communicate the results back to the source.

The personal skills you need

The importance of courtesy

People tend to buy from people that they like. And as we know, effective long-term relationships develop with the people we get on well with.

Having the skills and expertise is not enough for marketing. You need to be genuinely friendly, outgoing, and pro-active. Above all, you need to be courteous.

Courtesy and thoughtfulness make a real difference. Instead of just launching in with your pitch, how about being sensitive to someone on the phone? 'Are you busy? Is it OK to talk for a moment?'

Courtesy means that you do take 'no' for an answer. Occasionally it's worth pushing harder to see if the 'no' is based, for example, on a misunderstanding. But take the longer view: don't argue the toss. When you call back, you want them to remember you as someone who is polite and sensitive to their needs, not someone who showed themselves to be selfish or even manipulative.

Sales and personality

You may be reading about phone skills and wondering if you're not really cut out for this kind of work. Don't worry - even quieter introverts can succeed in sales. After all, listening is a key skill in understanding a client's needs, and introvert-type people do this well. Extroverts might even talk too much and get less real selling done!

Honesty really is the best policy

An open, honest approach is always appreciated, and will win you friends. It's natural to worry that if you are honest about the things you can't do, or own up to a mistake you have made, people will think badly of you. But that's not the case.

We tend to be suspicious of people we don't know – are they telling us the truth? The whole truth? Sadly, some marketing people have been known to be more than a little flexible with the truth when it suits them.

So when people come across obvious honesty it can be quite refreshing. Your integrity can differentiate you from the competition.

If you are honest about the jobs that are really just a bit too big for you, or that will stretch you too far, you might lose a bid in the short term – but in the longer term you will gain so much more. Honesty communicates confidence, and it builds trust – something money can't buy.

If you are honest about what you can't do, people will believe you when you express interest in jobs you really do want. Honesty is a key building block in developing long-term relationships. And they in turn lead to repeat custom and a sound income stream.

Develop your ability to listen

Listening is critically important, and we are often so bad at it. We can assume we know what the other person is going to say, and then we switch off listening and focus on what we want to say. We might make the mistake of thinking that getting our point across is more important than hearing the other person out.

Good marketing is based on good relationships. Just think for a moment how you feel when you have had something important to say but the other person obviously couldn't be bothered to pay attention. Depending on your personality, your thoughts may focus on how the other person is being rude or foolish. You may focus more on how hurt you feel. Either way, it doesn't make for a good relationship!

If your client (or your potential client) is talking, make sure you are listening – I mean really listening. Try to follow it up with a relevant comment or question. Listening shows respect, and it shows intelligence.

And by listening, it is amazing how much you learn. I well remember something a former boss of mine used to say:

'You have two ears and one mouth. Use them in that proportion.'

Ask incisive questions

Much successful construction marketing has a journalistic edge to it. A good journalist has a nose for a story, and asks penetrating questions to find out the truth. A good marketer has a nose for good business opportunities, and asks relevant questions to find out more.

A good marketer always listens carefully to the other person. It is amazing how much information you can gather if you pay attention. You may pick up innocent personal details about the other person – when their birthday is, what they like to do on holiday – which you can feed back into the conversation at another time. This is not just a ploy: it shows you are taking your client seriously as a real person, and it sets you apart from much of the competition.

Listening well and asking intelligent questions also helps you get under the skin of the other person. You find out how they think, what they are concerned about, what their priorities are. This in turn helps you to develop your own set of solutions to help them.

Sales appointments and sales presentations

This section deals with substantial sales presentations where you and usually one or more of your colleagues will be meeting a potential client. That may be one person or more. The more informal sales appointments we usually set are really mini versions of a full sales presentation. Much of the same advice applies, so read the key points and apply them to your own upcoming meetings.

Delivering great presentations

Preparing to meet the people

So you've worked the phones and built the relationships, and it's time to meet the client. Making a good impression is vital, and we'll look at how to do that in more detail. Get this crucial step wrong, and all those sales calls will be in vain!

A good presentation is based on thorough research. Start preparing early, probably a fortnight in advance, because there's a lot to find out. Remember: 10 hours of preparation for one hour presentation is a good rule of thumb – if you're going to a more informal sales appointment, you still ideally need at least an hour of preparation.
First of all, find out about the people. Who are you going to be

meeting? What are their roles and responsibilities? Use the Web and LinkedIn to find out as much as you can about them.

What kind of firm is it? What are their values? Get the company brochure, and see what they say about themselves. Call up some of their employees and chat to them about what kind of firm it is. Talk to other colleagues who may know the firm.

Check what other projects they have done. Use Barbour ABI and similar data. What is their agenda likely to be for this project? What do think will be essential? What do you think they will regard as desirable but not essential. Prioritise accordingly.

Try to get into their way of thinking. Marketing, as I have said before, is about understanding the needs of your client, and meeting them.

Anticipating and pre-handling problems

For a successful presentation, you obviously need to demonstrate that you really understand the project and your client's needs.

As you research the project in detail, discuss it together within your team, so that you can identify the problems that you will be facing if you are successful in the tender, and develop solutions. Talk to others who have handled similar projects. Use the Web to look for solutions.

Your presentation will demonstrate your professionalism, as you have anticipated the problems and already come up with sensible, cost-effective solutions.

In your discussions within the team, identify what additional value you can bring to the project. We've talked about differentiation, and this is where it really matters.

Remember that the client will be listening to your presentation just after someone else's presentation, and just before a third one. What sets you apart from the competition? Why should the client choose your firm in particular? What can you offer the client that no one else can?

Preparing your team

A successful presentation is a team effort – and the success of the team depends on the weakest member. So make sure the whole team is thoroughly prepared.

You've already made a start on this with your discussions about your project. Now, as you plan out the presentation in detail, be very clear about who is doing what.

Who is responsible for the opening? You know that awful moment of doubt when everyone looks at each other, and no one is sure who's going first. If that happens, you might as well leave straight away! Who's leading the team? Who is greeting the client? Who is doing the introductions? A little bit of planning and briefing here will save any embarrassment.

Then be clear about who speaks to each section, and who is going to do the summary at the end.

Prepare all the documentation and the PowerPoint slides. Check if you need any other visual aids, and run through your technology requirements. Do you need to take a projector, or does the client provide one? Then practise!

Rehearsing a presentation

Some people are uncomfortable with role-playing or making a 'pretend' presentation to an empty chair. But that discomfort is as nothing to the discomfort you feel when the wheels come off your presentation in the presence of your prospective client!

So practise.

Get a couple of people to take the role of the client, and literally walk and talk your way through the whole presentation, all the way from handshake and hello to handshake and goodbye.

The first time through may well be awful, embarrassing, excruciating. But don't get angry or upset. That is precisely why you practise.

Practice sessions help you to find out where things are not working, and give you time to fix them. Perhaps the argument does not flow. Some information may be missing. The order of the slides could be improved. Maybe you may feel there is too much information and you need to use fewer words, or fewer slides.

Maybe you need to swap roles within the presentation. Perhaps someone needs to firm up their handshake!

All these things come to light while you practise. Through practising, you can radically improve the quality of your presentation so that, when you come to do it for real in front of your client, you are really impressive.

Making the presentation

A good presentation, like a good story, has a beginning, a middle and an end. You need to ensure that all three are really strong.

The opening is short – two minutes at most – but essential to build personal communication and trust. Pay attention to eye-contact, direct and clear speech, and confident delivery. Say thank you for this opportunity to meet. Introduce your team: their current roles, experience, and what their roles will be if you win the job. Confirm that you're positively interested in the work, and suitable to take it on. Show that you understand the project and what the client wants. Move on to a quick introduction to the areas to be covered in the presentation.

See why you need to practise? You need to deliver all that, confidently, clearly and succinctly, in one-to-two minutes.

Then comes the presentation itself, for which your team have thoroughly prepared and practised.

At the close, reiterate your thanks for the opportunity to meet. Reinforce your positive interest, and summarise your key strengths that make you distinctive and especially suitable for this job. Confirm what the next action will be after the presentation – on both sides.

After the presentation

At the end of the presentation, there are still at least two more things to do. Shaking hands and saying goodbye is not the end!

Firstly, if appropriate, write or email to say thank-you again for the opportunity to make your presentation. State your appreciation of the client's time and hospitality.

Secondly, get your team together to debrief. Make sure you learn for the future! Get everyone to contribute: What went well? What could have been done better?

This may involve some painful moments, if mistakes have been made. Although it sounds like a cliché, it is really true: handled properly, mistakes are a great way to learn. Be honest, let people say and hear the truth, and give everyone the opportunity to learn and do better.

Debriefing shouldn't be all negative, of course. Congratulate people for the things that went well, and if you used new ideas, make sure you note them down so that they can be used again and built on.

Encourage your team, and move on!

Developing long term relationships

Relationship development

Winning a tender is obviously rewarding, but the real prize is finding a partnership that will become a regular source of work. A great client may deliver three, four or five tenders a year, representing work worth half a million or much more for a medium sized builder.

Every architect has an inner circle, a handful of builders that they know well and trust and work with on a regular basis. However, every time they put a tender out they may include a builder they haven't worked with before, just to give them a try. If you can get that opportunity, you can prove yourself as a professional builder. Over the next year or two, you could easily penetrate that inner circle.

That's the end goal. To get there, you need to choose carefully who you're going to pursue. There are hundreds of companies out there, so be strategic, and narrow it down to those that specialise in the kind of work you want to do most.

From there, it's about chemistry. Two out of three approaches won't go anywhere, but when you click, you'll know it. It's that personal connection, when you phone up about one thing and end up having a longer conversation than you expected. It's the clients that feel like personal friends that are often the most profitable.

Getting to tender

Getting a place on the tender list is a great first step, and it's important to keep in touch throughout the process. For starters, you need to be talking at the right time as they consider the list assembly.

Adding sweeteners

Architects need you as much as you need them. If you can make their life easier, that'll get their attention.

When you call, tell them that you know their work and that you think you could work well together. Then try and add a service or extra that others might not have, but that they'd find very helpful.

For example, architects don't always know the full cost of what they're designing. Offer help with early budgets. Invite them to send over the drawings to run past your estimators. Help on lead times is another useful service, if you've got experience or connections in, say, ordering steel or special bricks.

It’s expensive to price a tender and they are valuable, so get on the phone and get as much information as you can to give your estimators a headstart:

- When is the tender coming out?
- Will it be on paper or electronic or both?
- How many others are tendering?
- What is the tender period?
- Are there any CDE’s – Contractor Designed Elements?
- And so on…

The more you know, the more prepared you can be. You’ll also spot ways to distinguish yourself from the competition, perhaps through addenda to the tender offering a value engineering opportunities for example.

If the tender comes in over budget, that can often open up new opportunities to help – perhaps your company can help with cost reductions, for example. Your assistance at this stage could make you the natural choice when the time comes.

After the tender

Even with a great team, competitive offer and a smart presentation, you can’t win everything. You should expect to win around one in four tenders. If you’re winning one in five or fewer, you need to evaluate what you’re doing.

Yes, you will lose maybe three in four tenders – but that doesn’t mean the end of the relationship. Get on the phone, be gracious in defeat and wish them well with the job. Then ask what they have coming up next. Pick up any feedback you can about how they came to their decision, and note any learning points for next time. If you’ve been professional and friendly throughout, the client will want you on the shortlist for the next job and your chances will have improved significantly.

Troubleshooting

Even with the best advice in the world, marketing is a learned skill and it will take time to get really good at it. This final section looks at a few things that may go wrong or might not work the way they should, and the best approaches to iron out those problems. Mistakes happen in every industry, including construction – and architects get things wrong too. The true test of a company's character is how they act to make things right.

Getting past the gatekeepers

One common problem with first calls is not getting to the right people, and calls getting no further than the secretaries and receptionists of the companies you're trying to approach.

As you well know, secretaries and receptionists are the gate-keepers. They don't make the decision about whether you are awarded a tender, but they may well influence whether you get past the front door in the first place. They control access to important people, and can shape how those people feel about you. How you treat secretaries and receptionists will influence how they talk to the decision-makers about you.

So treat them with respect. Don't try to manipulate them or bully them. They can smell a salesman a mile off. Be open and honest about who you are and what you want. Speak to them politely, as you would to any potential client. Take no for an answer if necessary, and then politely call back later.

Treat them like the full human being that they are! It's polite, and it's effective. If you are courteous, well informed and respectful, you're not likely to be rebuffed very often.

Why am I not hearing back?

Perhaps you've made a start on calling around and then following up a few sales leads, but you don't feel like you're making much progress. The companies you're after aren't getting in touch, and the work you expected isn't forthcoming.

If that's the case, you may need to focus on your recalls. We've mentioned this already, but it is critical to the sales process.

Anyone can make a first cold call. But it is the second call, and the third call which, if handled right, can build relationships. Good marketing is not about just getting a single sale: it is about building relationships and trust that bring repeat business over the long term.

When you call, ask politely if this is a convenient time to talk. If the answer is no, accept it. But also ask when would be a good time to call back, and make sure you call back at that time. That way, you have a reason for calling, which is that the potential client themselves suggested it. You have also taken a first step towards showing that you are someone they can trust: you agreed to phone at a certain time, and now you are doing so.

It may seem very small, but it matters. It is the beginning of a dialogue, and of a relationship. You can then build this in to your follow-up letter or email.

Getting more from your sales leads

If you're gathering sales leads, making phone calls and building relationships, work will follow. Or at least that's the theory – but what if you're a small company, and you're having doubts about whether or not those sales leads providers are really value for money? Let's look at how to squeeze a bit more out of sales leads.

- Use your market intelligence to find good future clients, not just jobs. A client may not have the right project for you just yet, but you can still use the lead as an introduction to get in touch and put yourself on their radar. When a job comes up that's up your street, you'll be in the running from the start.

- Market intelligence providers usually deliver far more leads than you'll ever be able to act on, so focus on the best of them. Make an A* list to follow up in person, but don't neglect the B list. If you're pressed for time, get someone else to make those calls, or send those secondary leads an email or mailshot.

- Be generous with your leads. As you build up detailed knowledge of your area and the current and upcoming contracts, you'll find you may be able to pass on 'hot tips' to some of your contacts. This creates goodwill, which in turn raises your company up their list of go-to contacts.

- Always look out for new players in the market – new firms, or companies expanding into your region. These are valuable leads, because they won't have many contacts in the area yet. Get in early, while there's a good chance of standing out, and you may win yourself a long term business partner.

- Look out for architects from out of your area, but with a project near you. They are unlikely to know many of your competitors (if any!) and they can be particularly productive contacts.

Damage limitation

Your company reputation and trust takes time to build, but can be very quickly damaged. We call it 'doing a Ratner'! But if you handle a mistake professionally and put it right honestly, it can actually help to build your reputation.

When things go wrong, as they inevitably do from time to time, it is essential for your company's sake that you deal with it well.

- Be honest, right from the start.
- Frankly admit the fault, and explain why it went wrong.
- Explain what you are going to do about it.
- Keep in touch with the client during the process of making things right.
- At the end, explain 'this is what we have done.'

Most people will accept an honest response to a problem. They are well aware that they themselves make mistakes, and need the same kind of forbearance from others.

Good firms pay a lot of attention to restoring a good relationship when a difficulty has occurred. And they spend a lot on PR when a job goes wrong.

Remember that there is an upside: if something does go wrong, but the company handles it well, this can actually serve to enhance the company's reputation.