Understanding What Clients Value: The AEC Industry's Biggest Blind Spot?

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Savvy professionals know the importance of asking clients and prospects probing questions. Your goals may include learning more about their organization and role, their greatest challenges, and trends and drivers impacting their success. You may also want to determine how they define and measure value from a firm like yours in addition to understanding why you won or lost a recent project pursuit.

One underused and often misunderstood mode of questioning in the AEC industry—eliciting client feedback—enables your firm to assess the value you bring to the table. As strategy consultants to the AEC industry, we see far too many firms struggle with determining and articulating their differentiators, benefits, and value. All too often, expensive off-sites are held where principals, marketing staff, and others pontificate on these topics without the benefit of external data points. This is mind-boggling! If one of our primary challenges is establishing our value to command the fees we warrant (plus avoiding commoditization in some markets), then we must understand what our clients value and how they measure it.

The real opportunity is to consider ways to make feedback an effective tool to drive dramatically improved project outcomes. Improved outcomes translate directly into improved value.

Here are five ways to test your client feedback strategy to see if it's truly driving value:

- **Client responses change your process.** Client responses should have the ability to impact how you serve them. If you can't take action to a question answered, don't ask!
- **The request benefits the client.** The client receiving the feedback request must see the value (to them) of responding.
- **It's not an autopsy.** Requests made during the project while there is still an opportunity for their responses to be acted upon drive participation from your clients and give you time

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to take action when it matters most.

- **It can be acted upon.** Your client is responding to the person who can act on their feedback. No one else can fix the project other than the people working on it. Keep them involved.
- **It is not a time waster.** Don't throw away questions on "knowable" information. "Was the project on schedule?" That question is one you should already know the answer to and asking makes you sound like you don't know something you really should. Focus on areas that will benefit the client and that your firm can influence.

Here's how to put these tactics to work in your firm, so that you get to say to happy clients, "Thank you for allowing us to make this project a success."

1. Understand what the client experience means to your business. How does it differentiate you? What does it cost when the experience fails? What value will be created (for you and your clients) through improved client experiences?
2. Develop a "client-first" feedback strategy that puts the needs and interests of the clients as priority. Understand when to ask, who should ask, and what to ask—all in a way that benefits the client.
3. Get buy-in from key executive leadership, operations/project delivery, marketing, and

administrative support. Make sure everyone understands and is committed to the feedback strategy.
4. Encourage project managers to engage the client in a conversation and adjust responsiveness (if necessary) or provide alternate contact points for urgent questions. The result: a client that's thrilled with your responsiveness.
5. Commit to taking action on results as they are collected. Implement an accountability system to make sure feedback is being collected and corrective action occurs when the feedback warrants that.
6. Communicate the plan to your clients. Refine as needed to meet their specific needs. Keep the system flexible enough to handle your different client types. Identify where electronic feedback is appropriate, and where you may need to employ "deep dives" to gather more detailed feedback.

Once the system is implemented, use the results for targeted improvements across the organization. It won't take long to see a marked improvement everywhere. Opportunities will reveal themselves every week. Profits up. Stress down. Repeat business. Employees engaged. Clients happy. Value clearly communicated. Sleep at night. Nirvana.

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