AIA Minnesota

Public Relations Task Force Report

June 2011

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AIA Minnesota Public Relations Task Force Background

AIA Minnesota is the voice of the architecture profession. Providing advocacy that increases the public’s understanding of the AIA Minnesota architect’s value is a strategic imperative of our organization. Through comprehensive and coordinated programs, AIA Minnesota has a longstanding tradition of successfully raising the profile of our profession, positively impacting public policy and effectively communicating the value of architects.

In the rapidly changing economic environment of the last several years AIA Minnesota has advanced several important new initiatives on behalf of its members. In 2010 the Recovery Task Force conducted a study with the University of Minnesota Carlson School of Management to assist members with information and ideas to reduce expenses, expand services, and obtain work during the recovery from this severe economic downturn. The report of that task force, published in September of last year, has proven to be a resource to architects across the country (see page 5). The study advances two primary recommendations. First, architects need to develop new skills to practice successfully during and after the recovery. Second, architects need to help the public better understand their value. It is this second recommendation that led the AIA Minnesota Board to establish the Public Relations Task Force in January 2011.
Task Force Purpose Statement

AIA Minnesota Mission Statement

AIA Minnesota is the voice of the architecture profession dedicated to:

- Serving its members
- Advancing their value
- Improving the quality of the built environment

The purpose of the Public Relations Task Force is to develop key messages and tactics for communicating the value of architects to our public. Key messages are the central themes we want our audiences to remember. As the economic context in which architects practice continues to change, our messages must also change in nuanced ways and relate to our mission statement. The recent study by the AIA Minnesota Recovery Task Force and Carlson School of Management indicated that clients and the public often have incorrect perceptions about the role and value of architects. A strategy recommended by the Carlson School is the development of integrated marketing communications so that owners and others have a better understanding of the architect’s value.

Public Relations Task Force Process

In commencing its work the task force initially discussed its purpose, goals, and schedule. Resources included the AIA Minnesota Recovery Task Force and Carlson School Study, recent AIA marketing and public relations campaign materials, and other information. Based on additional research and personal insights, the committee focused on needs that all clients have in common that might form the basis of key messages.

Nemer Fieger, a strategic public relations consulting firm, was engaged to work with the Public Relations Task Force. This firm brought insight and discipline to the work of the group. This firm’s parallel engagement with the Homes by Architects Tour Committee proved to be advantageous as messages for that initiative have a relationship with those of the broader architectural community.

Early in the process the task force identified dozens of needs most clients have in common. These needs, articulated by qualities of the architect, were broad ranging. Examples include design advocate, visionary leader, trusted advisor, strategic partner, business consultant, trends expert, problem solver, process coordinator, time and cost manager, and resource steward. These qualities were analyzed and distilled into the primary categories of 1) Advocate, 2) Transform, and 3) Envision. These categories became our key messages. They are expanded upon in the Key Message Themes found on page 7.
Carlson School Study Summary Points

Through research, surveys, interviews, and analysis the Carlson School consultancy team highlighted several challenges faced by our profession. These challenges are broad in nature, ranging from greater competition from entities outside our profession to commoditization of the design of particular building types. The study highlighted several issues that are reducing the influence of the architect in the overall construction process.

- Functional specialization
- Increased cost pressure
- Owner perceptions
- Commoditization
- Technology

One of the more concerning challenges is the perception that architects are often seen as being more concerned about form than function or budget, although their real value to clients is mostly in problem solving and creating operationally efficient building solutions. Because of cost and time constraints the scope of the Carlson School’s surveys and research was necessarily limited. Yet, conclusions that the public and industry partners do not fully understand or appreciate the architect’s value are inescapable. Opinions by the different survey participants in the design and construction industry relating to the perceived value of architects are revealing. The following is highlighted in the study:

- An overwhelming majority of architects believe they add high value in the design and construction process yet well over half feel their fees are unfair.
- Initial surveys of owners and contractors reveal they believe architects add value to the process and that their fees are fair.
- There is a perception that architects often put form before function which increases project costs.
- Interdisciplinary partnering has reduced the importance and scope of the architect’s leadership.

Source: Carlson School Report, Carlson Consulting Enterprise
The issues facing the architecture profession today are not unique. The Carlson School study evaluated other industries that have adapted to a changing economic and technological environment. They include print media organizations, accounting firms, and human resources consultancies. As these industries experienced functional specialization they focused on activities that provide the most value. As they were impacted by technology they strived to become more efficient and productive. As they experienced a reduced perception of value, they developed integrated marketing communications to reinforce the value being provided. It is in this context that the AIA Minnesota Public Relations Task Force was formed to develop key messages and tactics for communicating the value of architects to our public.

Potential reasons for gap

- Architects believe they add more value than reality
- Other players do not fully realize the importance of an architect
- Other players may be trying to squeeze lower fees out of the architect
- Architects may be trying to be paid higher fees for the value they add to the project

Source: Survey for AIA Members, Carlson Consulting Enterprise
Key Message Themes

Key message themes provide an overarching framework for communicating AIA Minnesota’s messages and stories to clients and the public about the value of architects. This framework provides the opportunity for flexibility and creativity as specific stories and examples are crafted based on the nature of the audience.

1. ADVOCATE:

*Trusted Advisor, Advocate, Leader, Resource Management, Value*

Architects advocate for their clients and communities and lead the design and delivery process with vision, skill, experience, and passion.

2. TRANSFORM:

*Impact on Business; Translate Mission, Vision, Values*

Architects transform needs and aspirations of people through design solutions that evolve and enhance homes, neighborhoods, businesses, and communities.

3. ENVISION:

*Visionary Leaders; Quality of Product*

Architects envision new possibilities and invent the future with expertise and collaboration.

Tactics

As AIA Minnesota executes its mission of advocacy, multiple tactics will be employed to communicate key messages in a coordinated manner.

Building upon these key messages, develop supporting facts that introduce and reiterate the value delivered by AIA Minnesota architects

- Build short and long-form stories that can be re-told to stakeholders
- Identify primary and secondary stakeholder groups, defining them by their ideologies
- Prepare communicators to share the story to relate to the ideologies of their audiences
- Identify appropriate tools for communicating AIA Minnesota’s messages:
  - Collateral pieces
  - Video messaging
  - *Architecture Minnesota*
  - Direct Mail pieces
  - PowerPoint presentations
  - Media Relations
  - Signage/ Display Wall
  - Web content
  - Meeting notes
  - Newsletters
  - Editorial pieces
  - Other
- Develop timelines for communication of message to key stakeholders
- Execute!
- Report progress to Jennifer Gilhoi, Communications Director for AIA Minnesota
Communications Activities at Multiple Levels

AIA Minnesota has a number of ongoing initiatives that serve its strategic imperative of increasing public understanding of the AIA Minnesota architect’s value. Examples include the following:

Board Retreat
Over 20 AIA Minnesota committees carry out the mission of the organization. Half of these committees have an external focus. A prominent example, of course, is the Architecture Minnesota magazine committee. In September of 2010 our committees convened in a Board Retreat and began to articulate key messages in response to the Carlson School Study.

Communications Plan
Another initiative, which began in 2010, is the initiation of a comprehensive AIA Minnesota Communications Plan. This plan focuses on coordination of tools, events, programs, and committee activities. Updated key messages and related stories are being incorporated into this plan.

AIA Minnesota Communications Plan Overview

Objective: The objective of the Communications Plan is to increase understanding of and appreciation for the comprehensive services provided by AIA Minnesota architects, resulting in retention of AIA Minnesota architects for all phases and facets of the client relationship.

Tactics: The Communications Plan will help equip AIA Minnesota committees, board members and staff with tools that enable them to consistently communicate with the broad range of stakeholders who potentially benefit from the services of AIA Minnesota architects.

Committee Chairs Meeting
Representatives from AIA Minnesota’s committees will convene in late June 2011 to participate in “The Weave.” This process will help document and align key goals and initiatives of each committee with our strategic plan.

Public Awareness Committee Initiatives
The AIA Minnesota Public Awareness Committee has the mission of increasing the public’s understanding of the Minnesota architect’s value through advertising, public relations, and promotional efforts. Representatives of this committee were included in this task force and work was closely coordinated. The Public Awareness Committee will be charged with oversight of the key message implementation and will continue to work with the AIA Minnesota Board and staff in this regard.
**Going Forward**

AIA Minnesota Committees and staff have already begun the process of updating and refining messages and stories that communicate the value of architects. Building upon the work of the Public Relations Task Force, compelling, relatable, and personal stories will communicate the messages deemed important for our audiences to hear. One of the next steps will be to prioritize audiences to be reached and identify the appropriate AIA Minnesota Committees to share the message. A PR Tool Kit and guidelines will be helpful in this regard. An exciting idea under development is the creation of a Speakers Bureau, or Volunteer Clearinghouse, of design professionals who serve as a resource for the media on behalf of AIA Minnesota. In addition, it is hoped that many AIA Minnesota firms will connect with these key messages and expand upon them through outreach programs.

In carrying out its role as the voice of the architecture profession, AIA Minnesota has the distinct advantage of two dozen professional committees connected with experienced and dedicated staff. The current challenges faced by our industry provide the opportunity for these committees to take a fresh look at their focus and how they promote the value of our profession.

The AIA Minnesota Recovery Task Force developed ideas beneficial to all architects and the Public Relations Task Force built upon that work. As the economy recovers, we know that architectural practice will continue to evolve and change in new and exciting ways. Key messages, and compelling stories behind them, will need to be refreshed periodically so as to remain timely and relevant. As successful architects embrace the future, they will seek new ways to continue providing excellent value to their clients and public.