The Seller-Doer Business Development Model

Opportunity shines for collaboration in capturing new business.

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The painful recession in the latter part of the 2000s created a shining light of opportunity for A/E/C practitioners ready to capitalize on it in the decades ahead: The integration of business development and professional/technical work—and the practical expansion of the seller-doer model.

Today, the mantra is “everyone should be involved in business development,” evolving the early-era rainmaker model and the later approach borrowed from other industries’ use of dedicated sales (business development) representatives. New research indicates that an integrated system of technical professionals and business developers works best.

The most recent model shift initially occurred with blunt-force trauma. As the 2008 recession tore into established A/E/C businesses, specialized business development staff were dismissed and project managers were asked to step in and help bring in new business through their network.

Today, though, conditions are very different and now the story is a shortage of time and, in some cases, qualified business development professionals. Without planning, coordination, and specialized training, overworked doers may struggle to apply the best business development practices. Even if firms try to resolve the problem by rehiring dedicated business development specialists, they will find that some clients may prefer meeting with “doers.”

SMPS Foundation research from the book, A/E/C Business Development - The Decade Ahead, has uncovered the vitally important observation that some clients prefer to do business with seller-doers than dedicated business development representatives. In other words, the seller-doer model, developed during the recession as a business survival tool, reflects what should be best practices for business development in thriving conditions.

The result: SMPS is developing training programs for technical professionals at all levels to better understand and implement business development strategy. One program is a day-long preconference program being held prior to Build Business, The Seller-Doer Symposium: Building Your Bottom Line through Business Development. This is a 300-level program designed to create and support a seller-doer culture, with the appropriate tools, incentives, and accountability. Presenters in the program are all technical professionals who will share best practices and lessons learned in developing a firm-wide culture for winning work. For 100-level training, the workshop, Business Development for the A/E/C Industry, is also being offered prior to the conference. In addition, one Build Business breakout session will focus on train-the-trainer methodology to support non-technical business developers who provide in-house education within their firms.

The Evolution of the Seller-Doer
Scott D. Butcher, FSMPS, CSPM, vice-president and CMO of JDB Engineering, Inc., and a past-president of the SMPS Foundation, says the original seller-doer model—rainmakers—reflected the business norm for A/E/C professional services before the 1970s marketing revolution, when professional practices were allowed to advertise and work with non-technical business developers for the first time.

In the old days, principals and partners often were their firm’s most effective business developers. Rising stars with
business development ability could quickly achieve prominence and success as they had the strategic ability to attract new business, while maintaining professional credentials. Most of these rainmakers seemed to have natural ability, though there were some guides, such as Ford Harding’s books on rainmaking, which sought to codify business development processes.

Construction businesses, meanwhile, either generally competed in “low bid wins the job” competitions or relied on existing networks and relationships to uncover new business, when concepts such as design-build, integrated project delivery, or public-private-partnerships were rarely if ever applied.

When marketing and business development rules were relaxed by professional associations in the 1970s and 1980s, firms sought out and began hiring non-technical business developers or salespeople. Butcher says these business developers have personality traits often the opposite of the technical professionals. “Engineers are trained culturally to be 100 percent correct in everything they do,” he notes. This is reasonable, of course, because you don’t want to be guessing about the reliability or safety of engineering specifications. However, he continues, “With sales, there is no such thing as 100 percent perfection. Every prospect is different. In sales, you are constantly experiencing objections. People say no.”

In practice, this means that without guidance, when project managers enter the business development world, they may initially be enthusiastic, working on a proposal, developing interviews, and seeking business. “But when you start experiencing rejection, it can be very disheartening and demotivating,” Butcher states.

The solution, says Butcher and SMPS President Paula M. Ryan, FSMPS, CPSM,
director of marketing for Jezerinac Geers & Associates, Inc., lies in the fact that in many cases the doers “don’t know how to build deliberate relationships or ask the right questions of clients—it’s a case of they don’t know what they don’t know.”

The doers then can throw their hands up, say “that’s enough business development for me,” and retreat back to their technical or professional work, adds Butcher. He continues, “Many doers have little interest in selling. And even those who have an interest don’t necessarily have the right skillset or mindset.”

The solution, say Butcher and Ryan, is to provide training and support for technical professionals, while recognizing there will be some who will want to spend less of their time on business development than others. The ones with business development interest should be encouraged to develop their skills and given greater responsibilities.

“There is always going to be a role for non-technical business developers,” Ryan says. “New SMPS/SMPS Foundation research clearly illustrates the partnership that needs to take place between business developers and technical professionals.”

“Business developers will provide training and coaching, help strategize meeting agendas, and develop one-on-one coaching on how to build client relationships,” Ryan explains. “They will also help with client targeting, participating in client-led organizations, and be the ‘opener’ for their firms—meeting prospective clients and making the introductions to the technical representatives.”

**What the Future Holds**

Accordingly, just as seller-doers increasingly need to put business development in their work schedule, non-technical sales professionals need to grasp the industry’s technical focus, trends, and operations and know enough to bring the right technical person to initial business development meetings.

“The quality of the decisionmakers at the client end has increased,” says Butcher. “In many cases, they are licensed architects or engineers, or they’ve come out of the construction side of the business with extensive practical knowledge and experience. As a result, they have much higher demands right from the first conversation.”

In practice, this means most potential clients have little if any time to meet with a salesperson, who likely can’t suggest solutions to the actual technical and design challenges, according to the SMPS Foundation’s book, *A/E/C Business Development – The Decade Ahead.*

Butcher says A/E/C firms appear to be taking these observations to heart. A recent SMPS/SMPS Foundation research study, *Sell. Do. Win Business.*, indicates that a solid majority—53 percent—of firms believe they are going to be continuing with the hybrid business developer/seller-doer model in the next decade. However, an impressive minority (24 percent) say they will exclusively use seller-doers, suggesting the vital overall importance of the seller-doer model, along with the right training. The remaining 23 percent are not sure.

Ryan says a summary of the new business development research is available to members on the SMPS website.

Butcher states junior staff often embrace the seller-doer model and can be valuable resources as they develop their professional careers. These traits were advocated a few decades ago by rainmaker gurus, but more often were initiated by the individual than the organization. Some firms are building business development personality trait evaluations into their hiring processes, he notes.

Meanwhile, benchmark research included in the *Sell. Do. Win Business.* report indicates that for technical professionals, job title typically influences business development goals. For example, 44 percent of staff with the title of principal, owner, or partner have personal business development goals, as do 20 percent of employees with the title of project executive or project manager. Having business development goals equates to having firm budget that allows for allocated time to be spent bringing in work.

There is one final piece of good news for practitioners interested in the seller-doer model. Selling doesn’t need to be a rejection-laden ordeal that some might associate with business development.

Ryan and Butcher agree that some of the best results often come from relationships built through voluntary participation in association involvement. Speaking engagements at conferences and events are helpful. And for those more introverted people who would rather write than talk, contributions to technical articles and publications will provide valuable business development opportunities.

Finally, of course, connecting, serving, and working well with current clients will provide key leads and insights for business development opportunities. The seller-doer can then report the opportunities to the practice’s business development specialists and managers to be guided on the best approaches for pursuing opportunities without stress or painful rejection.

“Softening the sales part of business development is going to bring in a larger group of people,” Butcher concludes. “The opportunities in educational-based marketing are opening whole new worlds.”