

## Gaining Projects in the Education Market

by Richard N. Pollack, FAIA, FIIDA



PHOTO: COURTESY RICHARD POLLACK

**Contract** has invited Richard N. Pollack, FAIA, FIIDA, to write a regular, ongoing column about business practices in design. Pollack is the CEO of San Francisco-based Pollack Consulting, which supports firms' growth and success through improved business development, winning presentation techniques, recruiting top talent, business coaching, and ownership transition implementation. He began Pollack Consulting after founding and leading Pollack Architecture for 28 years. For this issue, he tells readers how they can enter a market segment that might be new to their practices.

With *Contract's* focus this month on design for education, I'd like to offer suggestions on how design firms can enter the education market if they had not been designing education facilities in the recent past. And for firms already engaged in design for education, these same strategies can be used to gain more ground in this and other markets.

Effective business development is no different than designing a successful project—you have to plan and manage the effort. It starts when the firm's leaders make a decision to target a new market. Their rationale may come from various directions: Wanting to do something new, realizing that few firms in the area are competing in the new project type, or the basic need to increase revenue and grow the firm.

The first step—too often ignored—is to spend real time researching opportunities in the prospective market sector. Broad-scope research in the education market should include the following strategies:

- Analyze the size and frequency of projects in your firm's geographic coverage range.** Connect with contractors who are building schools in your area and get details on typical costs and schedules. From press, websites, and direct contacts (as in *call them*), learn which school districts are building and remodeling. Review public records to see if there are bonds being used to fund remodeling or new schools, and connect with the public officials and politicians involved.
- Understand the cost of market entry.** Determine if you have the internal expertise or if you need to recruit an experienced professional. For a new hire, research the cost of recruiting him or her, including salary and any expenses. And, establish that he/she has a book of business in education projects that can be used (with proper firm attribution) to demonstrate expertise.
- Chart revenue and profit expectations.** Using the research, project expected revenue versus expense in the first, second, and third years. Have a new hire billable on other projects while the firm is seeking educational projects. And learn if public project agreements might constrain the firm's profit percentage.

Assuming that the research supports pursuing the new market, the business development effort begins—not by sticking a toe in the water—but with a cannonball dive off the dock. The following are a few initial networking avenues when entering the new or expanded market:

**Join and become involved with the professional associations of your peers for knowledge sharing.** The AIA Committee on Architecture for Education is ideal for networking, and you can get a good deal of information from its website.

**Most importantly, get active in the professional associations affiliated with your potential clients.** You could participate by submitting articles, sponsoring a meeting, or potentially speaking at one of their events. The Collaborative for High Performance Schools and the American Association of School Administrators are two such organizations. Also, the Council of Chief State School Officers members are various states's public officials. That council's meetings are not public, but that has never stopped an assertive business developer.

Do these starting steps really work? Absolutely—and here is an example from my experience. The firm I founded, Pollack Architecture, needed to expand its revenue base before I retired. Just like targeting a new market segment, our research looked at the need for a much expanded market. That, in turn, led to identifying all the Bay Area's locally headquartered corporations that had ongoing office transformation, and then developing a sales approach to make ourselves better known to them. A key professional organization that client base takes part in is CoreNet Global (Corporate Real Estate Executives Network), and I became active on the Membership Committee, was appointed to the Northern California board of directors as co-chair of membership, and I built a number of key relationships with the heads of corporate real estate groups. With those connections, my firm developed expanded and ongoing work.

For successful entry into a new or expanded market, here is a summary of several key take-aways:

- Research opportunities and make informed decisions to ensure success and build a solid foundation.
- Get the best people you can find—subject-matter experts in the market segment—to drive the initial research.
- Be focused, assertive, and incessant with your collateral, networking and overall business development. Create a sales mentality in your firm!

With these steps, you should be able to gain a foothold in the new market segment.