



PHOTO COURTESY RICHARD POLLACK

How Young Practitioners Can Present Themselves As Leaders

by Richard N. Pollack, FAIA, FIIDA

Richard N. Pollack, FAIA, FIIDA, writes a regular column for Contract on business practices in design and professional development. This month, he focuses on how emerging professionals can develop as leaders within their firms and the design industry.

One of the marks of success for the architecture firm I founded was a focus on marketing, business development, and yes, sales. Marketing and business development are traditionally the words we use when we mean sales but don't like to say the term sales. In any case, selling is what designers do not only when trying to secure new project work for the firm or presenting design ideas to a client, but also when young practitioners are working to advance themselves within a firm.

First, a bit of perspective based on my experience. As a young practitioner in New York, and then San Francisco, I joined the AIA and Institute of Business Designers (IBD, now IIDA) and was attending their local meetings. I did that primarily to be in a milieu to meet other designers and to learn about components of the profession that were not part of my daily project work. After each association meeting, I would write a summary of the presentations and notable professionals in attendance and distribute it within the firm. Because the firm I was working for granted me the time to attend, and sometimes paid for a portion or all of my membership, I felt that I should share the information. I continued to do that throughout my career.

I didn't do this—get involved or inform my colleagues about the events—with the intent of ingratiating myself with managers and principals to get raises or better jobs. I simply thought it was appropriate to do, and in hindsight it certainly helped my professional advancement. The firm's leadership recognized my efforts, and they were subsequently more willing to give me added responsibilities and compensation. In fact, I was selling and promoting myself in a non-pushy, non-aggressive style within the firm without necessarily requiring a personal upside. Looking back now, it's clear that this was the onset of my progression into management and then leadership.

Learning from colleagues, completing good design work, and improving one's professional efforts are certainly vital to future success, but one also needs to be visible to leadership: that's selling yourself. This means finding appropriate and comfortable approaches that will lead to your progression in the firm. Here are several strategies and

tactics to help young practitioners bypass my decades of unplanned growth within firms.

1. Becoming active in professional associations

Becoming active in AIA, IIDA, ASID, or related organizations of interest allows you to be visible to leadership, and the sharing of information about the profession will be of benefit to your firm and colleagues. An important component of this, though, is to not only join but to be active in the organization.

2. Volunteer in community organizations

Two organizations—Architecture for Humanity and Habitat for Humanity—for example, are nonprofits that benefit many communities. As you get involved, be sure to recruit colleagues at your firm to participate. You could get your firm to potentially sponsor an event, or at least support you and your colleagues' minimal office time involvement. Share photos or videos from the event at an office function or on the firm's social media platforms.

3. Put in extra effort

Even with IIDA's Student Mentoring or AIA's Intern Development Program, a young practitioner may not be exposed to various aspects of professional practice needed for advancement. Ask your managers or senior colleagues to mentor in areas of interest that are not part of your project work. Admitting a lack of knowledge and asking for mentoring is part of professional growth, and you can then develop a new or improved skill and then promote that development.

4. Propose and organize professional extra-curricular activities

Too many firms do not have regularly scheduled design crits or discussions. If this describes your firm, propose the idea to your firm's leadership, and perhaps take the lead to develop a business plan for such activities. This, again, demonstrates your leadership to the firm.

You can easily see how efforts beyond your day-to-day tasks will make firm management and leadership more aware of your contributions, which will help you sell yourself up the responsibility and compensation ladder. Good luck!

Richard Pollack is the CEO of San Francisco-based Pollack Consulting, which supports firm growth and success through improved business development, winning presentation techniques, recruitment of top talent, business coaching, and ownership transition implementation.