

## Water the bamboo and secure more sales

by Leo MacLeod

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During the postgame interviews after Oregon beat Oregon State in the Civil War, running back LaMichael James attributed the Ducks' successful season to "watering the bamboo." Reporters were stymied by the reference, but in the next room coach Chip Kelly was making it clear: "If you water bamboo in the first year, nothing happens. If you water it in the second year, nothing happens. If you water it in the third year, nothing happens. If you water it in the fourth year, it grows 90 feet in six weeks. You have to keep driving, keep paying, and it will pay off in the long run. And that's what those guys understand."

Earlier in the season, Kelly read a book called "Water the Bamboo," written by Greg Bell, a Portland author, speaker and corporate trainer. The Ducks fully embraced Bell's philosophy, which is a metaphor for patience, persistence and hard work. What does this have to do with business development for the built industry? Everything.

**"The quality of your bamboo will be determined by the quality of your relationships."**

Most of the time consultants and contractors are wearing themselves out answering Requests for Proposals. This is still a people business, and people buy from people they like and trust. If you want to grow, nurture your relationships. Get out of the office and reconnect with people. Friends, like plants, require constant attention. Don't believe that once you've grown your network, it will thrive on its own.

Here's a simple test: write down the five best champions of your business. When was the last time you thanked them? When was the last time you even called? Effective marketing is not just pumping out proposals. Take care of your vital relationships - they are the roots of your business.

Much like with giant timber bamboo, it's common to put in time developing new relationships without any signs of progress or interest. Push your agenda too quickly and you cut off the roots. Be patient and water, and time does the work.

A sales manager of a \$200 million design firm religiously called on prospects every month, regardless of their interest. One prospective customer told him, "You know, I need to see you a certain number of times before I'll do business with you." The sales manager asked, "How many times is that?" "Maybe you'll find out," the potential client answered. That's a great story of what it takes to earn trust. Most of us are suspicious of marketing in any form, especially when it's sporadic and unfocused.

Think about what it says about your character, persistence and trustworthiness if you faithfully call on a prospect every month for a year, or even two years? What if you coupled that with a keen interest in that prospect's business, taking the time to research their situation? After awhile you look less like a self-serving salesperson and more like a potential long-term partner. In the built industry, there's a tremendous amount of risk riding on projects, especially these days. There's a tendency to give up too quickly on the long-term investment needed to build trustworthy relationships.

Author Ford Harding of *Creating Rainmakers* studied more than 100 rainmakers and found that the only thing they had in common was discipline to stay in contact with their leads. What if the bamboo farmer had simply walked away one day short of seeing all his efforts pay off? Ask yourself if you have waited long enough for the right relationships to grow strong roots. Or did you pull the plug too soon because you didn't see immediate payback?

**"Practice makes permanent."**

The more you work on sales and building your network, the more successful you will become — guaranteed. There's no seminar or book that will give you the answers. It's not about being a super salesperson. It's also not about simply going through the motions of meeting with people.

Bell talks about the importance of "deliberate practice." He studied the NFL's Adam Vinatieri, the first kicker to play in five Super Bowls and win four. He practices so seriously that he videotapes every single kick. He pipes in the loudest crowd noise you would find in any stadium. He puts himself in such severe practice conditions that he's ready for any game kick he faces. That's dedication to a program.

Do you want to be a better listener? Practice effective listening all the time. Do you want to be a more persuasive presenter at competitive interviews? Don't wait until the day before to practice. Commit to

repeatedly rehearsing what you will say and how you will say it. Bill Gates, Mozart, Michael Jordan all have "watered their bamboo." If you want to be a better marketer, there are no shortcuts to success. Put in the time, starting today.

**"Don't water alone."**

Let's be honest: the main reason that people don't put the time into sales or marketing is because they would rather have a root canal. There are a handful of people who actually relish it, but most professionals harbor some resentment that the work won't come in the door if they simply deliver solid construction documents or a completed punch list. They also know that business development is necessary for success, if not survival.

The good news is that you have plenty of company with like-minded people. Don't make networking and sales calls a solitary task if you don't savor it; bring along a colleague or join a group. Find a way to make it more engaging and rewarding. Bell has created "bamboo circles" of people who realize that they can't successfully overcome natural resistance to the hard work required without the support and encouragement of others.

So why didn't the "Water the Bamboo" philosophy secure a Rose Bowl victory for the Ducks? Bell is quick to point out that this is only Kelly's first year as head coach and only third year with the Ducks. It's the fourth year when the bamboo really takes off. If you want results, you have to put in the work, whether it's on the field or in the office.

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