

Hard Hat Services, Inc.

Founded in 2000, Hard Hat Services, Inc. is a relatively young firm, but it has already earned a place on *The Zweig Letter* 2006 Hot Firm List. Based in Naperville, Illinois, this 32-employee firm offers design/build, construction management, project management, engineering, and environmental remediation services. The firm also has offices in Chesterton, Indiana; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Kansas City, Kansas. Although located in the Midwest, the firm pursues work nationally and has done international projects in Canada and the Caribbean.

David Johnson is the director of business development at Hard Hat. He says that while he may ultimately be responsible for business development activities at the firm, every member of the staff is expected to play a role. "It's a cultural thing. Everyone is conducting business development all the time. This firm is all about business development," he says.

Technical staff members are encouraged to attend trade shows, publish articles, and network with colleagues and clients to further the firm's presence in the marketplace. "We try to encourage everyone to be selling, not to the point of being impulsive, but to make positive statements about Hard Hat's experience, delivered results, and the firm itself. We strongly pursue listening to our clients and offering solutions," he says. However, this isn't always as easy as it sounds. He says that it's important to wed business development skills with engineering skills, and if someone doesn't have those business development skills, they are encouraged to pass leads and ideas along to him for follow-up.

Because business development is such an inherent part of the firm's culture, Johnson says that training is ongoing. "When a new associate joins the firm— regardless of their engineering pedigree— the Hard Hat vision, strategy, and their personal responsibility is explained to them in detail. We ensure that every individual is able to communicate our strategy, philosophy, and understands their role in growing Hard Hat."

Johnson says some firms have difficulty communicating a consistent front because many staff members have different ideas and convey different thoughts about what it is their firms do for their clients and why they're in business. He says that Hard Hat tries to present a uniform concept of itself that crosses all markets. "We have a coherent, understandable strategy and client value proposition that everybody can communicate to clients. Even the administrative people are involved."

Tactical Toolbox

- **Orient all new employees.** When new employees start with the firm, make clear your expectations about the role they will play in business development at the firm. Train them from the start in how you want them to make contact with potential clients and how the BD process works in your firm.
- **Sum up your firm's philosophy and values in a simple graphic that you can share with clients and potential clients.** The more clearly and succinctly you can communicate your value proposition to clients, the more easily they will understand how you're different from other service providers.
- **Put out a consistent message.** Make sure everyone in the firm is putting out the same information and a standardized, consistent message of what your firm is and what you're about. This will help keep clients from getting confused by conflicting information and will make your firm look like it's got its act together.

On the marketing side, Hard Hat strives to build awareness of the firm and its services. "As a small firm, this is vitally important," Johnson says. Getting the firm's logo, name, and "value proposition out in front of as many people as possible," are all integral components of the firm's business development strategy. Other elements the firm uses to build brand awareness include direct, consultative selling, relationship selling, maintaining an updated web site, and trade show presence. "When we go out on the sales or awareness side, we're not selling Hard Hat services *per se*. We're out there selling our value proposition to clients and the brand that's associated with our name and logo. Because we represent a blend of engineering and

