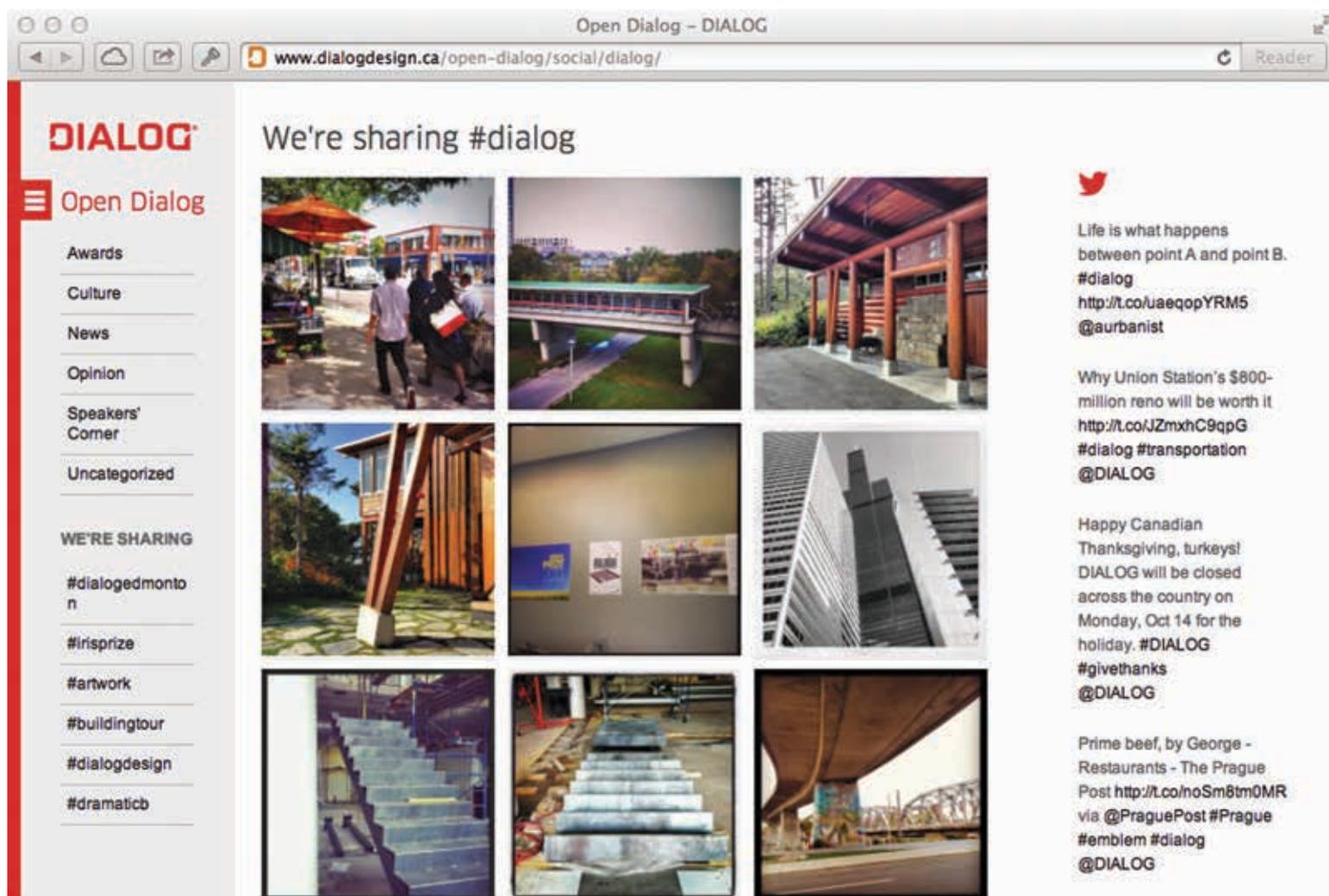


# NEW IDENTITIES



BRANDING STRATEGIES HELP FIRMS MAKE OVER THEIR IMAGE AND DEVELOP FRESH APPEAL FOR GENERATION Y EMPLOYEES AND CLIENTS.

**ABOVE** DIALOG'S SOCIAL MEDIA PAGE CREATES A VIBRANT IMAGE OF THE COMPANY BY INVITING PARTICIPATION FROM EMPLOYEES, CLIENTS AND OTHER COLLABORATORS.

**TEXT** MARK BUSSE

“Brand wasn’t even a word in our vocabulary when I was in architecture school,” says Roger Hughes, a founding partner of Hughes Condon Marler Architects (HCMA). “Before marketing, our brand was our work, our reputation, and we just waited for the phone to ring and jobs to walk in the door—a door with our last names on it.” Like many architects of the Baby Boomer generation, Hughes is near retirement and is engaged in succession planning, keen to leave his firm thriving and in good hands. But he has found that operating a successful firm these days requires more marketing than ever. Replacing the names of partners on doors, the firm’s brand is ascending to a central role.

A growing number of architects’ customers and employees are Millennials who have different views, priorities and career aspirations than their predecessors. They mistrust big business and traditional marketing, instead seeking ideological alignment from companies they do business with or work for. These young professionals seek out authentic brands that engage them in a meaningful way. Unfortunately, being open

and authentic has not been the habit of the architecture industry. “Times have changed and too many architecture firms still view marketing as a dirty word,” says DIALOG principal Bruce Haden. “Firms must give this critical aspect of business the time, energy and resources it deserves in order to thrive in this increasingly competitive industry—especially if they want to attract and retain the best talent.”

In its simplest form, a brand is a belief system—a set of ideals that an audience associates with a company. Though there are tangible words and images associated with a brand (a logo, symbols, colour schemes, fonts), its essence lies in the intangible values it elicits. In the architecture field, many of the firms that are thriving are those that have moved beyond marketing messages focused merely on the buildings they design, to express their underlying motivation and story.

Architecture is a service industry at its core, providing for society and people, yet architects struggle to put relationships at the root of their branding and marketing strategies. Firms often focus on past accom-

plishments and completed buildings instead of those who live, work and play in them. Many architects have not taken the time to understand where they specialize, what they believe in, and who they aspire to be.

These firms have not only missed out on business opportunities and revenues, but are also challenged in attracting the best new graduates from architecture schools. Talent acquisition and retention has become as urgent as other business needs, even rivalling new business development. In the next decade, many Gen X architects will take over from the Baby Boomers who have dominated leadership positions in the industry for the past four decades. Millennials will also make up an increasing share of the workforce in the coming years, and the architecture industry will be forced to respond to a new audience that seems increasingly disinterested in traditional approaches to business and marketing.

“Creating a brand that moved away from names on the door was critical with a merger of four firms,” says Roger Graham, former marketing director at DIALOG. There are numerous examples of architecture firms reconsidering their company name, discarding the last names of retired past partners in favour of an identity inclusive of stories about the firm’s current people, ideas, success and impact. “One of the advantages of marketing done well is the ability to create authentic relationships with both clients and staff based on a set of values,” offers Haden. “The challenge is those values have to be more than just marketing and rather something that can be lived up to.” This is especially poignant when one considers the desire of Millennials for a sense of belonging to a community; if they feel a misalignment of values, they are much more inclined than previous generations to quit and move on.

Beyond DIALOG’s new name, they invested in a highly interactive, mobile-friendly website. By publishing thought leadership through posts and integrating social media channels into their portfolio case studies, DIALOG empowers staff to participate in the conversation. That form of engagement provides website visitors with “excellent visual clues about

how we work with clients, what our values are, and how we treat our people,” says Graham. The result has been strong business growth and a notable increase in the quantity and quality of new recruits.

The web is a far more important branding and recruitment tool than many firms seem to realize. Recent statistics show a rapid increase of architecture/engineering/construction (AEC) professionals engaging the web and, most importantly, researching architecture firms from mobile web devices. Yet most architecture websites are not responsive and many don’t work on mobile devices. As an industry, architects must learn that beautiful photos of empty buildings—without a person in sight or expression of the context, problem, approach or results—are rapidly becoming an ineffective means of marketing.

Not all firms are in a position to spend the time and resources necessary to completely reinvent their brand and marketing—and certainly not all should. The good news is that any architecture firm can make improvements to their brand performance if their leaders are willing to shake off old modes of thinking. Often, our consultancy begins by asking clients: what is the WHY behind your brand? If I were to visit your website today, would I be able to quickly ascertain what your firm stands for and believes in? Would I feel engaged and able to enter a dialogue with you? What makes your firm stand out against the competition to engage younger clients and talented recruits? If you’re still relying on a list of names of past partners and a portfolio filled with photos of old designs, there’s never been a better time to reinvent your brand and story. **CA**

*Mark Busse is a founding partner of Vancouver-based strategy, brand and marketing consultancy Industrial Brand, which specializes in creating a distinctive market position for AEC professional services firms. He is a past chapter president of the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada, a design writer and an educator. You can follow him on Twitter at @MarkBusse.*