



Key to growth: Specialization

Ask yourself this question: would I rather be one of six firms invited to compete for a client's business, or the only firm a client can find that can help them? I thought so.

In the last issue of this publication there was an article entitled One-Stop Shops. While the featured studios are likely the sought-out exception, the dilemma I find with generalist firms is that there is very little to differentiate them. Awards, a diverse portfolio and a certain reputation are all great things to have, but are they really enough to motivate the best clients to seek out your services?

Pair this with the drive for reinvention as the key to a designer's happiness as postulated by my business partner Mark Busse in this very space last month. While entirely true that you must change with the times in order to grow, don't confuse adaptation with the pursuit of variety driven by a fear of repetition. It's the generalist's security blanket to say "yes" to everything.

I would contend that being a generalist is a greater risk to your business than selecting a specialty, and designers who chose not to specialize will have poor marketing that casts a wide net with a "we are full service" promise attracting low quality clients who fall for it (smart clients know better). It's a cycle of repetition. And we designers hate repetition right?

The strong argument against being all things to all people is growth potential: yours and your clients'.

This industry isn't alone in its bloat of meaningless rhetoric-filled websites and diverse portfolios that appeal to peers more than the business professionals they depend on for revenue. Want to be singled out from the herd? The first key is to consider how clients

view us and what's important to them.

But how do you get there? The answer is, specialization: horizontal (practice) and vertical (category).

At our shop, our core expertise is strategic brand consulting and communication design (horizontal) and a focus on, and experience in, the architecture, engineering and construction (AEC) vertical. This focus allows us to quickly parse and prioritize issues and opportunities much more clearly. We see the patterns and create connections that add significant value to the process of helping our clients find a unique voice. This is what positions them for real growth. This is what positions us for real growth.

Was taking that leap to specialization scary? You bet.

Questions arose: unless you are incredibly fortunate to have distinguished your firm on something no one else can do, why would anyone outside of your general geographic location seek you out? How will they even find you?

We deal with this all the time, but you have to start somewhere to develop your expertise, and unless you are approaching projects strategically it's likely going to cost you more to continue doing work in areas you are unfamiliar with—that's the cost of pursuing variety. Put down your designer hat for a second. Why are you in business? Making profit should be your first priority. Without that, you might as well go work for someone else who gets that.


From our own experience, here's what we've found: having industry knowledge has been helpful to our partner-driven clients mostly because we save them valuable (i.e. billable) time by approaching projects efficiently and anticipating issues that we know we will face.

No, you don't have to give up work outside of your specialty, but your marketing and reputation is not based on it. A few people will think that working with a vendor with no experience in their sector will allow them to come up with fresh ideas and not fall into a pattern of doing things. But a good designer will have great ideas no matter what, and they will not stay complacent. It stands to reason that it helps everyone (even if only a little bit) if they've worked in the sector before.

Nothing replaces experience. We've become known for our work in the AEC sector, and we know this because clients we don't know seek us out based on the strength of our past work and referrals.

The success of our specialist positioning can be measured in Air Miles. Seriously. Smart clients know what they need and have no qualms going further afield to find it.

Whether generalist or specialist, if you're an established firm, the assumption is that you are skilled at your profession. The critical layer that appeals to clients and gets you doing end runs around RFP cattle calls is your deep experience and understanding of a client's industry and market.

Designers who specialize are driven, focused business people who refuse to let business happen *to* them, but grab hold of their own destiny, with desirable clients who understand the value of specialization and are happy to pay for it. The best part: they'll give you the freedom you need to stay engaged in your profession and treat you like the creative, skilled partner you are, not a replaceable vendor. And word gets around. 

Ben Garfinkel is a founding partner of Vancouver-based Industrial Brand.



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