



## Should Structural Engineers Seek Recognition?

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An engineer I know once said, “The best thing you can say about a structural engineer is that you’ve never heard of him”. While I understand his reasons for saying it, I have to respectfully disagree. If we provide a solution that requires exceptional innovation and creativity, why wouldn’t we want to find a way to celebrate that accomplishment and have it recognized? We should want to publicly acknowledge our outstanding achievements in solving complex problems, providing creative designs and technical innovations, and making efficient use of materials and labor.

One of the ways that we can bring attention to the amazing things we do is to use an awards program to educate the public regarding the contributions of structural engineers to the built environment and public safety. The NCSEA Excellence in Structural Engineering awards program, as well as the awards programs in various states, are excellent opportunities for each of our firms to do just that.

The NCSEA awards program celebrates the greatest achievements and recognizes the pre-eminent projects designed by structural engineers, both in the United States and throughout the world. Our awards program, which has grown steadily in stature and number of entries since its inception in 1998, will have expanded categories this year, in an attempt to make it possible for more firms to enter and be recognized for their achievements. Included in these new categories are “New Buildings under \$10 Million” in construction costs, “International Structures”, and “Forensic/Renovation/Retrofit/Rehabilitation Structures”. The categories for 2010 are as follows:

- New Buildings under \$10 Million
- New Buildings \$10 Million to \$30 Million
- New Buildings \$30 Million to \$100 Million
- New Buildings over \$100 Million
- New Bridge and Transportation Structures
- International Structures
- Forensic/Renovation/Retrofit/Rehabilitation Structures
- Other Structures

Please consider entering your projects in the NCSEA awards this year. The deadline is July 9. The submittal process is neither cumbersome nor costly; and your final product can be used for local marketing efforts and press releases. In this way, you will also be helping to get the word out, in your own community, about the important work of structural engineers. If we don’t celebrate and appreciate the accomplishments of our own profession, how can we complain if those outside our profession don’t take notice?

Another way to advocate for our profession is to promote ourselves to our clients, as a valued part of the team. When the NCSEA Advocacy/Clients and Prospects subcommittee did a survey asking structural engineers for their input on how our performance is perceived, where we are successful, and where we see our biggest challenges, responses to the following perceptions were both interesting and worth discussing.

- My clients are willing to pay more to work with me because they are confident in me and value my input.

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- Clients view structural engineering services as a commodity and will tend to select whoever offers the lowest fee.

A significant number of structural engineers responding to the survey bemoaned our lot in life, adding comments that ranged from complaining about clients using price as the only selection criteria, to clients who don’t appreciate that it requires technical skill to do what we do. If we feel this way, i.e., that we are increasingly becoming a commodity or feel underappreciated, what can we do? The key is to find a way to become a valued partner, not merely a vendor. We need to be more proactive in determining how to make ourselves the sought-after experts.

Some firms have been successful in this endeavor by focusing their practice in specific markets in which they can truly excel. By finding that niche market, these firms have found that it can be both more rewarding and more profitable. We all have books, calculators, computers, college degrees, and licenses, so how can each firm determine what areas they will be able to excel in? Following is a list of questions that may be posed when trying to differentiate your company from the competition:

- In what areas can we provide stellar service to clients?
- Do we have unique expertise with a particular building system or material?
- Do we have unique expertise with a particular type of building?
- Do our engineers have expertise in forensic design? Blast design?
- Is there a particular aspect of construction that we know more about than any other firm?
- Do we have the ability to be much more responsive than other firms?
- Would partnering with a construction firm to do design-build work be beneficial?

Also, consider, “time really flies when you are having fun”. We each want our career to be rewarding. One of the ways firms have been successful is to focus on the areas of practice, or the clients, that they really enjoy.

Breaking out of the commodity box requires looking at your firm, deciding what your strengths are, and then figuring out a way to capitalize on those strengths. By coming up with a competitive strategy that is unique to your firm and the people in it, and then strategically positioning yourself in those areas with clients that know and appreciate your efforts, you can become a valued, sought-after partner. ■

