

## Visibility: Getting and Keeping It

Part 1 - "Things Worth the Writing"

By Richard G. Weingardt, P.E.

*"If you would not be forgotten,  
As soon as you are dead and rotten,  
Either write things worthy reading,  
Or do things worth the writing."*

— Benjamin Franklin

In many crucial ways, we all control our own image and visibility. Obviously, one of the best ways for engineers to project a favorable image is to do quality work and complete as many award-winning projects as possible. Happy clients will help spread the word! We, however, cannot totally rely on our clients, patrons and references to ensure that we receive proper credit for our achievements and good work – and that this good work stays visible.

This goal is enhanced by positive marketing and public relations, skillful communications, and image management and promotion. How? By engineers getting "things worth the writing" recognized and publicized.

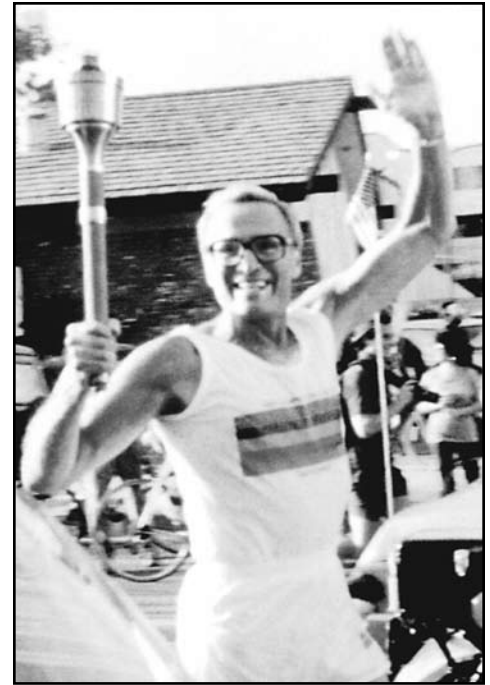
The mainstream media in the United States generally don't find engineering feats or engineers particularly interesting or newsworthy today. And, like it or not, news is what the media representatives say it is. So no matter how outstanding engineering accomplishments are, getting coverage in the general-readership press or on TV and radio requires foresight and planning. Razor-sharp, targeted and attention-grabbing words and presentations do get noticed!

Engineers often come across to the public as being narrowly focused technicians only interested in themselves and their work – and not in their communities. That's why getting involved in leadership roles and becoming visible beyond engineering circles greatly improves their chances for attracting favorable media attention.

So how do we do "things worth the writing" for both trade and non-trade entities? And what can engineers do to maximize their visibility well beyond the narrow confines of the profession? Consider the following concepts and suggestions.

### Office Newsletters/ Magazines

One sure means to receive proper recognition in the media for engineering accomplishments is to become a media outlet yourself. Produce your own newspaper (newsletter) or magazine and then you control what is "news," the editorial content and format. Plus, you set its frequency and distribution,



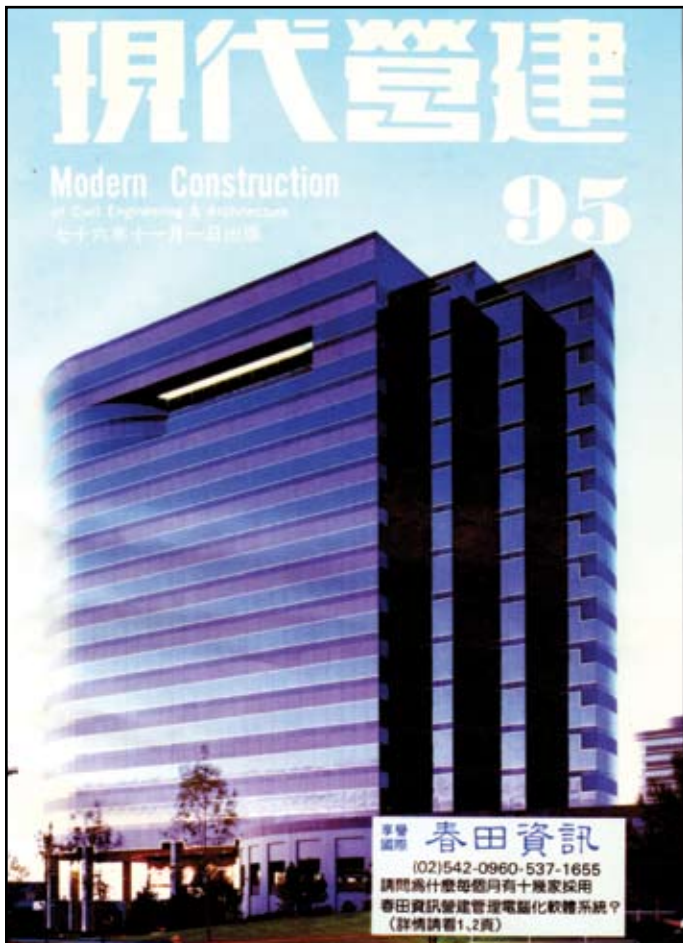
*Producing award-winning work and projects is similar to winning an athletic event or race. They uplift the human spirit and capture the public's imagination. Engineer Albert Dorman carrying the 1984 Olympic Torch through the city of Los Angeles did both. Courtesy of Albert Dorman*

sending it to a select group of people – clients, prospective clients, patrons and supporters – or a wider audience in targeted communities including business and governmental leaders and the mainstream media.

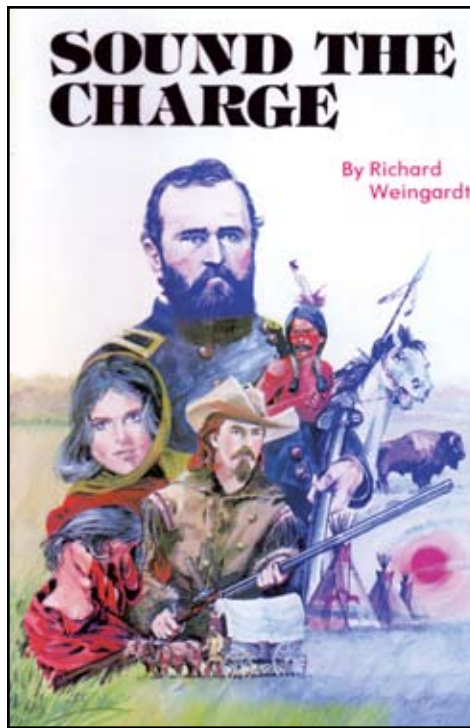
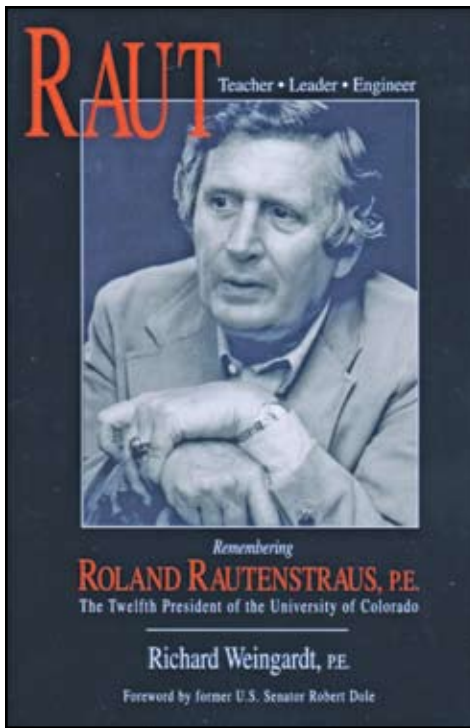
One of the keys to writing a successful office newsletter or magazine is to make sure its contents are interesting to the non-engineer, not just a catalog of your projects or a fluff piece. To be effective, newsletters/magazines must be user friendly – written for people, not faceless entities – and refer to relevant news items of the day.

For the best results, self-published newsletters/magazines should be distributed at least twice a year and addressed to a named person – sometimes several individuals in a firm. For that to happen, mailing lists must be constantly updated and revised. With the ups and downs that occur in our industry and business in general, people change jobs and positions regularly. You may have to spend as much time keeping your mailing lists current as you do preparing your newsletter itself. And in today's world of electronic communications, the basics of successful newsletter/magazine programs have to be adapted to the Internet, office websites and more.

*continued on next page*



*Cover story in an international magazine — about an innovative U.S. Project — generated new clients and associations, and several lucrative projects in Taipei, Taiwan. Courtesy of Richard Weingardt Consultants, Inc.*



*Books about or by structural engineers directed toward a wide range of audiences greatly enhance the visibility of engineers within society. Courtesy of Richard Weingardt Consultants Inc.*

## Engineering Excellence Award Programs

Most engineers do outstanding work regularly. Sometimes, however, because they get so close to a project, they don't see its greatness, so they fail to submit it to awards programs. Even run-of-the-mill projects, though average overall, can have a number of special innovative features. Zeroing in on these features and describing them passionately and eloquently can produce an award winner.

First, enter as many of your projects as possible, big and small, in awards programs; then, let the media know about them, whether you win or not. Follow the old adage: "Do good work and tell the world about it." Never totally rely on the sponsors of award programs to get you all the media coverage possible, especially in the mainstream media.

## Community-Interest Seminars

Another opportunity for garnering public attention and visibility is to create a media event, such as a community-service seminar. One of the best such seminars that my firm ever created focused on wind design – the effects of sidewalk-level wind forces on pedestrians because of the changing wind patterns caused by the construction of so many new high-rises in downtown Denver, Colorado.

The half-day seminar began with breakfast and ended with an awards luncheon. World-

class, leading-edge experts from all over the country were flown in to speak and participate. The event's standing-room-only audience included decision makers and leaders from business, civic and governmental agencies, as well as the design and construction industry.

News conferences held both before and after the seminar, were also well attended by reporters and newscasters. This event generated a massive amount of media coverage, including cover stories in all the major newspapers and magazines in the area, and even a 15-minute spot on Denver's largest TV station.

Well received by professionals, the public and media, this community-service affair offered practical solutions to an emerging public problem. That was a major key to its success.

## Expert Outside Of Engineering

Become an expert in an area outside of engineering and broaden your perspective. You could develop your hobby to its highest level, even if it's just fly-fishing. If you become the best fly-fisherman west of the Mississippi, others will quote you and seek advice from you.

Show your expertise by writing a book. I wrote a local history book about Colorado's last Plains Indian battle. To write it, I had to do a lot of research and became an expert on western frontier history. Because of that, I've been interviewed by (and featured in) several major newspapers and magazines, and on TV

programs and radio talk shows. I've been a keynote speaker at numerous historic society groups and a special guest at Nebraska's annual Buffalo Bill Days Fair, as well as the central speaker at the inaugural Summit Springs Battle celebration in Colorado. And it never fails – whenever I speak at one of these events and get interviewed, the topic of my engineering work comes up. It's always a golden opportunity to expound on the merits of the engineering field.

All of this outreach resulted in the governor of Colorado appointing me to a six-year term on the highly visible State Historic Preservation Board – the first structural engineer to be appointed. This Board, which designates natural and man-made works that are historically significant, was previously controlled by architects, historians, educators and lawyers. Few engineering projects – bridges, dams, tunnels or building structures – were deemed to be significant in the eyes of the Board. They are now! It indicates that one person, any engineer, can make a difference and improve the image and visibility of this profession just by showing up!

The world is run by those who show up, especially if they do so as experts and leaders.

## Community Involvement/Leadership

I suggest all engineers strive to be active in their professional societies – and, whenever possible, serve on crucial engineering committees, take on leadership roles in their industry and write relevant technical papers. However, getting involved only in engineering activities is limiting and will not give you enough public exposure to become well-known in the community.

For that to happen, increasing numbers of top engineers need to show up as pacesetters in their communities. And to be effective societal leaders, they need a broad perspective – a good understanding of big-picture issues and matters that go beyond the engineering industry itself.

Engineers can get involved in any number of public boards and commissions and neighborhood groups – school boards, long-range planning commissions, or even youth groups and fine arts councils (push your comfort envelop). Non-engineering-industry-type groups are ideal places for engineers to mingle with the average man-on-the-street. Unlike other professions where individuals may know their own doctor, lawyer, accountant or architect, having an engineer serve on such groups may be the only time the layperson meets and works with one.



*Involvement as an expert beyond engineering broadens an engineer's perspective and contact base — an allows engineers to increase their ability to think outside the engineering box. Courtesy of Colorado Mountain Club.*

Plus, such bodies are often made up of community “movers and shakers.” By serving with them at a grass-roots level on their pet charities — which media representatives love to cover — helps engineers get acquainted with both potential clients and reporters/newscasters.

To maximize the benefits of getting involved in worthy civic activities, engineers should participate not just as a member, but as the chair — the leader of the group. Hands down, the media prefer to interview leaders rather than followers.

### Civic Speakers Bureaus

Join local speakers bureaus and get on the circuit to speak to service/business clubs like the Lions, Rotary or Optimists, and to Chambers of Commerce, high schools and colleges. Explain how a new treatment plant, structure, bridge or highway you're designing (or have designed) will make things better and help the local economy — and how it will improve everyone's standard of living.

In addition to telling how good engineering improves things, talk about your hobby or your area of expertise outside of engineering. Then make sure you leave the audience with the knowledge that you're an engineer and what you do affects them in a positive way.

These groups usually have in-house “office newsletters/magazines” so when you speak for them, you'll be featured in their publication. As a bonus, they often submit news releases about their speakers to a wide range of mainstream media contacts.

### Writing Worthy Things

Doing the items discussed above greatly increases the potential to get work published and gain recognition — and improve visibility both within and beyond the profession. But, what steps can be taken to make sure that the media, indeed, picks up on them? What types on submittals should be prepared? That will be the subject of Part 2 of this series. Watch for more in an upcoming issue of STRUCTURE® magazine ■

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