



Does a Name Have Value?

By Barry Arnold, S.E., SECB

Your name is probably your greatest asset. Contained in a name are a person's or company's brand, identity, and reputation. There was a time when agreements were made based only on a person's name. Does a name have value? Absolutely! A name is so important that each year, people and companies spend millions to clear their name, protect their name, and promote their name. The following are a few specific examples.

A Name is Used to Market a Product

Fishermen in the south pacific catch a fish named the Patagonia Toothfish. Despite its delicious taste, it never found a broad market because of its unsavory name. In 1977, the name was changed to Chilean Sea Bass, and it became an immediate culinary sensation. A great amount of money and effort is spent annually by corporations to research product names to enhance marketability.

A Name Provides Clarity

When a person suffers from acute abdominal pain, they seek the assistance of a gastrointestinal specialist. Although a podiatrist or rheumatologist can offer advice, they will likely not provide an accurate diagnosis and remedy. A name reduces confusion, aiding the person seeking a specific type of services.

A Name Increases Clout & Credibility

Thirty years ago, geotechnical engineers were often referred to as "dirt guys" or "soils engineers," which undermined (no pun intended) the important service that they provide. They undertook a grassroots effort to enhance their reputation by promoting the name "geotechnical engineer." It took time, but they now receive the respect that they deserve.

A Name Confers Distinction and Acknowledges Achievements

When someone at a project meeting introduced himself as an architect and an engineer, he was questioned about his credentials. Upon discovering that he was a registered architect and had completed a BS in civil engineering, but was not licensed as an engineer, he was told not to

say or imply that he is an engineer unless and until he met all of the corresponding education, experience, and examination requirements.

This particular incident notwithstanding, the effort to protect the engineer title was fought and lost many years ago. We now have a plethora of people calling themselves engineers who are not engineers at all. The fight to protect the PE title is now underway. Although the name "Professional Engineer" is protected, the abbreviation PE is not, allowing contractors to call members of their construction team "project engineers" and advertise them as "PEs."

"Structural Engineer" is a protected title only in those states that have passed legislation to that effect. Elsewhere, that title can be used by anyone – even those who have no particular skills or knowledge of structural design. Instead, engineers are left to decide for themselves which projects they will pursue, guided only by a code of ethics. The assumption is that engineers will "perform services only in the areas of their competence" and "hold paramount the safety, health, and welfare of the public." This approach has worked, to a degree, but has received mixed reviews as to its success and value.

That may seem good enough for us, but our clients – whom I define as persons or companies that put their money and livelihood at risk by relying on the expertise of the structural engineer – feel differently. In the absence of action by the engineering profession, many public and private clients have assessed the situation and provided their own remedy, taking matters into their own hands to protect their investments. Relying on government entities, professional organizations, and ethical individuals to ensure that only qualified individuals are allowed to practice engineering and use certain titles is a gamble that they do not have to take.

In a world where one can get a PhD online for any profession at next to no cost, clients have reason to be skeptical when it comes to believing everything that they read or hear in response to a Request for Proposals (RFP). Even though minimum credentials and

qualifications of a structural engineer may not be legally defined in the state where the project is located, they nevertheless publish RFPs requiring licensed structural engineers. Some have even gone so far as to establish their own criteria regarding education, experience, and examination, and they summarily reject proposals that do not meet their standards.

Protecting the Structural Engineer title has been a hot topic for many years, such that NCSEA, SEI, and CASE have individually published position statements supporting structural licensure – a key part of which is to define and protect the title. These organizations have joined together in a collaborative effort and formed the Structural Engineering Licensure Coalition (SELC) to promote structural licensure.

The name Structural Engineer is worth protecting because it can be used to market, provides clarity, adds clout and credibility, and is a title of distinction – it is an honor to possess it. Looking forward, the structural engineering profession should be at the forefront of the effort to protect the Structural Engineer title in every state.

To support this effort, my advice to all those practicing structural engineering is to take the 16-hour NCEES Structural exam. It does not matter what organizations you join, what your state SEA is doing, or how your legislators feel about structural licensure – take the exam. It does not matter if your company will support or reimburse you – take the exam. Passing the exam is an accomplishment that you can take with you anywhere and note proudly on any resume or proposal. Becoming a licensed Structural Engineer is a personal decision and one that will have long-term benefits throughout your professional career. ■

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