

“I Didn’t Know You Guys Did That”

Duane A. Carey, CPG-10305



“I didn’t know you guys did that” can be one of the worst phrases a consultant can hear, because it represents lost opportunity. Consider the following example.

You’re a consulting hydrogeologist managing a groundwater monitoring program at a municipal landfill. Part of the site is closed, but there is an active face accepting trash daily. The facility manager, Don, is very pleased with your work over the past three years, and you have developed a very strong working relationship. Beyond the nuts and bolts of the job, you enjoy hearing about each other’s kids and you love to talk about football. One day, Don and you are discussing some recent monitoring results that appear to be statistical anomalies when you notice your biggest competitor arrive at the site and begin work near the open face. Uh oh.

You try to stay cool, not wanting Don to see you sweat, and you calmly ask what they’re up to. Don explains that the regulators are concerned about the integrity of the side slope and mandated a slope stability analysis. So the municipality asked a few engineering firms for proposals and your competitor’s was the best. They are now collecting data and will present their report on Friday. You explain that you have an entire geotechnical engineering division that can provide those services. Moreover, you could have saved Don the trouble of putting together the bid documents and soliciting proposals, because you could have wrapped such a small job into your existing contract. Don apologizes and says “I didn’t know you guys did that kind of work – I’ve always just thought of you as my groundwater monitoring guys.”

Three months later when it’s time to renew your contract, Don sheepishly

tells you that his boss was very pleased with the quick service from your competitor and wants them to bid on the work.

You have just paid a steep price for poor communication. You don’t know what the damage will be, but there will definitely be damage. In the worst-case scenario you will lose the contract; in the best case, you’ll lose a portion or all of your profit, because your competitor is willing to undercut his own costs to unseat you as the incumbent consultant. If you don’t want to lose the client, you might have to reduce your price.

What could you have done differently? You could have been a better communicator. Technical people often complain about having to “sell”. For many reasons, which we won’t go into now, they are unable or unwilling to take the risk and make themselves seem like that unsavory salesman who is concerned only with his personal gain. That’s a good thing! Who wants to be around someone like that? The truth is, you don’t have to be like that. All you need to do is communicate. Communicate your abilities. Communicate your company’s abilities. And most importantly, communicate the benefit of those abilities. Think how much Don would have personally benefited if he had known of your ability to do the slope stability work. He would not have had to write a Request for Proposal, review the submittals, choose a consultant, and tell his buddy that he would have to bid for the project on which he had done so well the last three years.

There are a couple of great ways to communicate your company’s abilities without sounding like a salesman. One method is to simply incorporate anecdotes into your discussions. If you’re a groundwater expert, talk about your coworker who did the archeological survey for the new highway. If you’re a

geochemist, mention the civil engineers in your office who saved the neighboring municipality a bundle of money by designing a more efficient pumping station. If the client knows you for one specific type of work, mention other projects you’re working on that require a different skill set. You never know what other needs they may have or if they can refer you to one of their colleagues.

If you are not comfortable speaking about all the great things that you or your company can do, put it on paper. One of my favorite approaches is to put together a “one-sheet”. People like to see examples of what you’ve done, rather than descriptions of what you claim you can do. I recommend making a one-sheet for every project you or your company completes.

As the name implies, the document comprises just one page. This will force you to be concise. I suggest including a photo for each project. Format all the one sheets consistently so it’s easier for the client or prospect to find the information of interest. Most importantly, include the five W’s and two H’s: who, what, where, when, why, how, and how much. Don’t hesitate to include these W’s and H’s as headings for the reader to easily follow along. You will have their attention for only a limited time and you’ll keep it longer if they can easily scan the document with their eyes.

After you complete your one-sheets, print and file them for easy retrieval. These documents can be great resources for last-minute proposals; just include them as addenda to establish credibility by showing examples of the types of project being proposed. Just as important, however, they can help you communicate

your abilities in an easy-to-read format that will speak very clearly to the reader. If you discipline yourself to write one for every project, even those that are incomplete, you will have an impressive marketing arsenal in no time at all.

If everyone in the company produces one-sheets for their projects, then any employee can have access to the information at any time. If you're on vacation when a coworker fields a call from a prospective client interested in groundwater monitoring at landfills, that colleague can email your one-sheets to the client before they even call the next name on their list. Moreover, if you occasionally send these to your existing clients to keep them abreast of things within your company, you might earn a bonus, keep a colleague employed, or keep your competition at bay when the client pleasantly exclaims "I didn't know you guys did that."

Duane Carey is President of IMPACT Marketing & Public Relations in Columbia, Maryland. He was a consulting hydrogeologist for 11 years prior to launching a marketing consulting firm in 2003. He earned his MBA at Johns Hopkins University (JHU), and is a Certified Professional Geologist (#10305) and past President of the Capitol Section of AIPG. In late 2005, he took over the helm of IMPACT, which was founded in 1990 by one of his professors at JHU. He can be reached at 410-312-0081 or duane@MilkYourMarketing.com

Professional Liability Insurance

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www.novickgroup.com
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Representative
Greta Palya