



Social media broadens architects' reach

By: Kent Hohlfeld in Scrolling Box July 11, 2017 3:02 pm



Portland architecture firms are using various social media platforms as opportunities to build brand identity, reach potential clients and engage the public. (Photo illustration by Sam Tenney/DJC)

Social media has become a vital communication avenue for nearly everyone. Architects aren't going to be left behind.

"I would say it's important," said James Lee, marketing director at **Scott | Edwards Architecture**. "It's a link, a bit of connection to the public. Architecture is very public as far as what people see, but the process is less public."

ZGF Architects has 5,909 Twitter followers and nearly 21,000 Facebook followers; **Ankrom Moisan Architects** has 1,077 Twitter followers and 989 Facebook followers. These firms and others in the Portland-metro area are taking advantage of online platforms to promote their vision and show present and future clients what they are working on. Firms work hard to find the right message for the right channel.

"We create a personality for each of our social media channels," Lee said. "We have a message for specific kinds of people on that platform."

For instance, Scott | Edwards Architecture's 189 Facebook followers see a steady diet of information about the firm and its employees geared for people who already know about the company. The firm uses LinkedIn to reach potential employees and business contacts by sharing major news, white papers and advertising job posts. Its 1,287 Twitter followers generally see reposts of information from other sites or general information from the firm.

Mahlum Architects shares with its 336 Instagram followers photos from its employees' personal accounts.

"Instagram is about the visual effect and how we see the world," said Mahlum Architects' Niki Lesko, an associate principal and director of marketing and business development. "There are photos of things that people have taken on their vacations or trips. We mine them and then we ask them if we can use it."

The unique strategy provides followers more insight into the firm's employees.

"Our tagline is how we see the world," Lesko said. "We didn't want it to be curated just by a director of design. Our 80 or 90 architects see things in different ways. We thought Instagram could be a channel to do something different."

Other firms take a more conventional approach. Ankrom Moisan uses its social media channels to show off everything from the buildings it designs to the kinds of fabric samples they use in a building.

"We are still establishing our social media strategy," said Liz Wasson Coleman, associate marketing manager with Ankrom Moisan. "On LinkedIn, we'll have some job openings. On Facebook, it's a look at how much fun we have. We tailor our voice and our angle to the channel we are using."

But the public can always respond, and controversial projects can spark heated comments.

"We are in an industry where demolitions have been a hot topic," Lee said. "We see both sides of that. Sometimes an active neighborhood is opposed to a project. Every once in a while, they feel they have a voice they want to share. Occasionally our social media serves as a place for that."

Though Scott | Edwards Architecture hasn't had to block anyone, Lee said some followers can become agitated.

"People don't tend to start from a receptive place on social media," he said. "We would rather have a dialogue with that individual rather than one instance."

Mahlum Architects saw firsthand how hot-button political issues can stir up the social media universe.

"We, in particular, have done non-gender-specific bathrooms for the University of Oregon residence hall and Grant High School," Lesko said. "We have gotten some comments on the subject. That is the kind of stuff that we open ourselves up to on social media."

The best policy, Lesko said, has been to let people have their say and try to stay out of the specifics of a particular argument. Mahlum Architects generally allows comments to stay on the site, even if they seem derogatory in nature.

"It is best not to engage when we feel that conversation is not very productive," Lesko said. "We may talk about it, but in general we let a comment lie. We have had comments that were definitely derogatory, but it was that person's voice. If it was really bad, we would remove it, but it hasn't been to that level. It was nothing that was in a hurtful manner. If there was profanity or something like that, we would have removed it."

"We do monitor it and we have had some cases where we had some (constructive) dialogue."

Another concern regarding social media is making sure that everyone knows exactly what can be posted to a site and when. In the world of social media, posting an early or incorrect version of a project rendering can hurt a project's perception for a long time.

"I have seen some firms' early schematic images get released, and they start putting it out there," Coleman said. "The blogs pick it up. I have seen that go terribly wrong in Seattle. It's not a great way to engage."

Some blogs devote their entire existence to critiquing, often negatively, specific kinds of architecture. For instance, a blog called McMansion Hell is devoted to mostly criticizing designs of large, expensive houses on real estate websites.

Skyscraper.com provides a series of forum pages for people to comment on projects in cities around the world. It has numerous pages devoted to comments on buildings throughout Portland.

With the constant stream of blogs and websites dedicated to critiquing every image posted, only a single mouse click can do serious damage to a project's prospects. To combat that, firms stress to employees the importance of following social media policies. Posts are vetted through marketing departments. Staffers in those departments then check with project principals to make sure that posts are accurate and able to be released.

"It has not been an issue for us," Lesko said. "Everyone knows what our company's policy is. We have told them that it is a priority issue."

The biggest ally a firm has in making its social media strategy work is the desire of those working at the firm to help projects succeed.

"People understand the sensitivities of the projects," Coleman said. "The teams all don't want to be the ones to mess up a chance for a project."

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