

Identifying Business Opportunities for Professional Services Firms

Introduction

To identify new opportunities that exist for your professional services firm a business development manager (BDM) may employ idea generation techniques. The resulting output is a business case describing each opportunity accompanied with research, costs and potential risks. This can then be used by executives of the firm to consider for implementation.

Generating Ideas

The idea generation process can involve a mixture of brainstorming and interviews, as well as application of formal processes such as the nominal group, the Delphi method and supplemented by environmental scanning, external research and client evaluation.

The idea generation process must be managed by the BDM and focused to achieve appropriate results.

As a starting point the BDM should select a general premise as the target subject for generating the idea and create 3 – 5 subheadings.

From there the BDM can employ a number of techniques including:

1. Staff Brainstorming Charettes
2. Interviews
3. Anonymous ideas
4. Research

Staff Brainstorming Charrettes

Within its existing staff, a professional services firm already has substantial creative resource to solicit ideas. Staff may also have wide experience outside of their day to day job and can bring different perspectives. Staff involvement is key, not only does brainstorming encourage a brief but focused occasion to engage about the business of your discipline but is also important to get staff buy-in and support should initiatives be later implemented.

The brainstorming process:

- Gather staff in a communal area free of I-Phones, I-Pads or other distractions for no longer than 30minutes. Often this is best achieved during a corporate retreat or staff training day. If the firm is large or geographically dispersed it may be more practical to undertake a number of sessions. It is important to get everyone involved from the receptionist to the Managing Director.
- Outline the ground rules to ensure an effective process and to encourage participation.

- a. Make it clear that the charrette is for ideas only and that every idea is welcome and this is not the appropriate forum to debate the merits of an idea. There is no right or wrong idea and critique is not part of this process.
 - b. Staff should be told there are no prizes for the number of ideas put forward nor is there any punishment for providing no ideas. Everyone is encouraged to participate and have their voice.
 - c. To ensure time is utilized effectively ideas are to be brief like bullet points. Discourage extensive elaboration (detail comes later).
 - d. While not unduly restricting extroverts and their numerous opinions ensure those more introverted are given ample opportunity.
- As people propose ideas write them down on post-it notes and place under the appropriate heading on large posters on the wall in-front of the group. Alternatively, have everyone write down as many ideas as they can on post-it notes and have the BDM place them under each heading, reading each one out and asking for confirmation of which heading. [See Figure 1]
 - When the allotted time is up have a short break and then allow staff to come up and view all the ideas to trigger further ideas.
 - To conclude read out every idea under each heading. The initial process can become quite rapid so this review allows the BDM to move an idea to the most appropriate sub-heading.
 - Thank everyone for their involvement and advise the next stage will be an evaluation of the ideas to assess their potential. Ask anyone who wishes to elaborate an idea in more detail or has new ideas that arise later to send through in an email to the BDM.
 - The BDM should then record all ideas for further evaluation under their sub-heading, eliminating any double ups.

Interviews

Conduct interviews with existing and past clients, key staff and management. Ask for their opinion and ideas around the general premise and subheadings.

Interviews are best in person, either informally via a simple coffee and chat or a more in-depth structured discussion. An email survey is likely to be less productive.

The premise may need to be framed differently when discussing an idea with clients. For example if the internal premise is "How do we generate more

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business”, the external premise may be something like “How can we be more valuable to you on your future projects”.

This is also a great way for the BDM to re-engage with past clients.

Anonymous Ideas

Staff are asked for their ideas by submitting anonymously. This can be facilitated via online surveys or a simple ideas box. Once again a premise and subheadings will often generate better results.

BDM Research

The BDM should also undertake research to find key ideas in the marketplace:

- Local and global best practice
- What competitors are doing?
- What the top firms around the world are doing?
- Environmental scanning - following and prospecting implications of environmental events and megatrends
- What applicable lessons can be drawn from other industries?
- Academic papers
- Review of trade publications
- Ideas gathered from networking and resources of industry associations (such as NZIA, PINZ, Property Council, RICS, IPENZ)
- Engaging a specialist research partner

Select & Prioritise

Of course not all ideas are created equal. Some of the outputs, especially from brainstorming, while being valuable information may be more statements or questions than ideas.

Therefore the BDM must extract the top 3-5 ideas that present the best opportunities. They are listed in approximate order of priority under each heading to focus subsequent attention.

The selection of ideas to include or reject should be made by the BDM ideally in consultation with a panel of ‘experts’, - those critical to decision making in the firm and closest to the issue or original premise.

Often ideas can be eliminated immediately as they have been tried before and proven ineffective, are simply too costly or beyond the practical ability of the firm or another obvious reason. However, the complete unedited list should be included as an appendix to the business case so they can be sourced in the future. If circumstances change the BDM may wish to reinvigorate discarded ideas at a later stage.

At the more formal end of the scale to select the most applicable ideas the BDM may utilise a nominal group process (vote on brainstorming where ideas presented are critiqued), focus groups and the Delphi Method¹.

Research

With the ideas selected the BDM should decide how much time and resource to allocate to investigate the potential opportunities presented by the idea.

The idea may already succinctly describe the whole opportunity itself and need little research. Alternatively the idea may represent a number of opportunities and /or have so much potential a full business case is warranted.

At this stage the list of selected ideas may warrant a review from executive management to discuss what time and cost will be required to investigate the idea before committing further.

Detailed research may include:

- Benefits
- Goals to be achieved
- Ways to measure achievement of the goals
- Implementation costs
- Implementation timeline
- Implementation HR requirements
- Marketing strategy & key tactics
- Evidence of the idea working elsewhere
- Potential risks
- Potential downstream effects.

It may be discovered the idea has little potential and should not be pursued further. This should also be documented for the final presentation and review.

Presentation

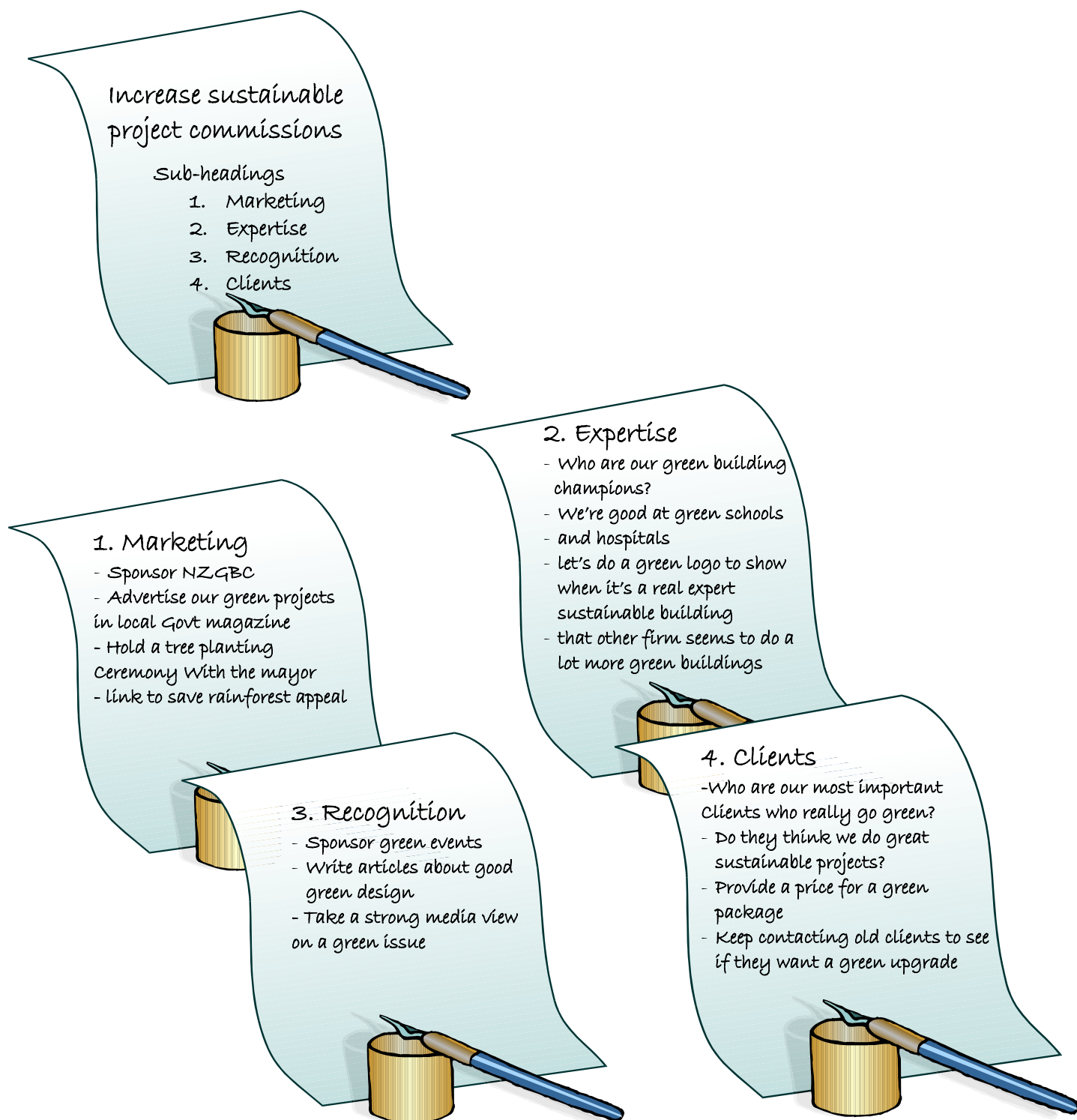
The idea & opportunities identified with supporting evidence and a proposed implementation plan is packaged into either an initial or full Business Case and presented by the BDM to executive management to make the decision whether to proceed.

Staff involved in the idea generation process should be also provided with feedback to show their opinions and ideas have been given the appropriate consideration. This also helps to grease the wheels for subsequent brainstorming and implementation.

All things going according to plan, the BDM will now have a great opportunity for the firm to embrace!

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Figure 1. Example of the output at the end of a business orientated brainstorming charrette



End Notes:

i The Delphi Method. Experts answer questionnaires in two or more rounds. After each round, a facilitator provides an anonymous summary of the experts' forecasts from the previous round as well as the reasons they provided for their judgments. Thus, experts are encouraged to revise their earlier answers in light of the replies of other members of their panel. It is believed that during this process the range of the answers will decrease and the group will converge towards the "correct" answer. Finally, the process is stopped after a pre-defined criterion (e.g. number of rounds, achievement of consensus, stability of results) and the mean or median scores of the final rounds determine the results may also be used to filter the list of ideas to the top five. Sources: United Nations Industrial Development Organization www.unido.org File:DelphiMethod.pdf.