

## Questions for Marjanne Pearson

BY MATT HANDAL

Someone told me Marjanne Pearson is a superstar recruiter who knows everybody in the industry. But when you talk to her, you quickly learn she is more than that: Marjanne helps A/E/C firms envision what they want to become and then finds the people they'll need to make that evolutionary step. And her journey into that role is quite fascinating.

During Build Business 2010, I sat down with Marjanne to talk about her experiences as well as challenges related to hiring the right people and finding employment opportunities in the current economic climate.

**Matt Handal (MH): How did you get your start in the A/E/C industry?**

Marjanne Pearson (MP): I had always intended to teach elementary school, but my father was in the construction industry (and a fellow of the Construction Specifications Institute), and I had developed an interest in architecture.

After receiving my degree in English/Linguistics, I realized I wanted to work in the design world. I started in an administration position for Wurster Bernardi & Emmons—an old-line San Francisco firm—and then moved on to Skidmore Owings & Merrill. I always say that my years at Skidmore Owings & Merrill were the equivalent of an MBA in design firm management.

In 1974, I joined a start-up—a 15-person architectural firm called Robinson and Mills. We got through the recession and then started growing. I learned something new every day in that job, and in addition, I had the opportunity to meet and work with **Weld Coxe** at the point when he was writing his books, *Marketing Architectural and Engineering Services* and *Managing Architectural and Engineering Services*.



In 1978, I became a partner with Robinson and Mills. As we had grown to 65 people, I had to make a choice between marketing and human resources. Weld advised me that they were two sides of the same coin, with one focused on development of the business and the other on development of talent. I opted for HR, with additional responsibilities for the firm's legal matters.

**MH: So, how did you become a consultant?**

MP: In the 1982 recession, I realized that I needed to explore other opportunities, and I withdrew from the partnership. Weld offered me a job with The Coxe Group, a management consulting firm that specializes in our industry. So I entered the consulting world. I was essentially working on my own for the first time in my life, but I knew that I had Weld's support, and I really liked the broader A/E client base.

*"We need to be our authentic selves. As Polonius said to Laertes in *Hamlet*, 'To thine own self be true.'"*

Unfortunately, I didn't feel comfortable as a management consultant when working with large engineering firms. I had been involved with HR and hiring for years, and I liked recruiting, so I opted to focus on that. After five years of working for Coxe, it was time for me to leave the mothership, and I set up my own recruiting practice, based in San Francisco. After seven years, my clients asked me to get more involved with strategic planning and that led to a virtual consulting alliance with **Nancy Egan** and **Paul Nakazawa**.

**MH: In your recruiting practice, your focus is on matching the right person to help a firm achieve its objectives. Can you tell us about some of the firms you've worked with?**

MP: When I was with The Coxe Group, my first real search was for a large, national A/E firm. The leadership wanted to raise the quality of design in the firm, and they decided to recruit 12 directors of design—one for each office, with more in a few offices. We identified a slate of about 10 candidates to interview. They hired one at that time, and a few years later, they hired another, who grew to prominence. But during that time, the firm went through its own transition; the overall goals and objectives changed, and the design leader search was no longer a priority.

That was my first lesson in corporate dynamics.

**MH: I understand one of your most notable clients has been Frank Gehry?**

MP: Yes, Frank was interested in hiring an architect to manage his practice, and The Coxe Group assigned the search to me.

Interestingly, from the start, I thought I knew the perfect person for that position, but I didn't think he would leave San Francisco. He was a friend, and one night he came over for dinner. He had a difficult day, and he told me that he was ready to pack up and move to Los Angeles, where he planned to throw himself on Frank Gehry's doorstep and beg him for a job. I was stunned. I told him about the position with Frank, and the next day I forwarded his credentials to Frank, who interviewed and hired him.

**MH: How do you go about finding that perfect person for an open position?**

MP: It's a lot of luck and intuition. And a lot of networking with people whom you really like. What's interesting is that over the 20+ years I've had a recruiting practice, I've had many people work with me. I'd always assumed that, if I could do it, then anyone could do. That's not true, because it really is a gift. First of all, you need to understand what the client really needs because often what the client articulates is not really what the problem is.

Second, you need to be able to reach people who are either potential candidates or connectors to potential candidates, but it's a creative process, not just connecting dots.

Third, you need to be able to evaluate what the potential candidates can really do. That's a matter of predicting future behavior, which is really hard. When you think about it, whenever you hire someone, you are going on what they tell you, what their references tell you, what you know about them from word of mouth. But you don't really understand what's going to happen with them in a particular situation or in a particular firm.

So what you try to do is take all this information and analyze it in a way that you can predict how someone will perform in a new situation. That's the hardest thing in the whole world. It's very intuitive and very objective at the same time.

**MH: Do you get a good enough sense of someone from looking at a resume or do you really need to talk to them?**

MP: From a resume, all you can get is what they've done, where they have been, and how they present themselves. Those are significant indicators. But then you have to have conversations with them as well as with people who have worked with them. You engage in these conversations to start getting clues about what they have done in specific situations.

**"Firms are always interested in talking to really talented people."**

And you may not be able to ask a question directly because you will get a scripted answer. You have to be able to engage in a conversation about what they really do and then extrapolate.

Frankly, the best search results I've ever had were for non-searches—situations where it was clear that there was a trajectory in the firm for someone with specific talent and expertise, but the firm had not yet developed a specific position.

**MH: The market seems to be getting better. Let's say that you were looking for a marketing coordinator or marketing manager position today. How would Marjanne advise candidates?**

MP: Firms are always interested in talking to really talented people. It's important to do a really good job in your current position, as well as in civic and professional activities like community organizations and SMPS.

In addition, although it's not likely that someone else will find your next job for you, it is definitely possible that someone in your network will hear about an opportunity and be willing to recommend you. If you're thinking about new opportunities, start researching firms in which you might be interested and then draw on your personal "C-Suite" resources—colleagues, classmates, consultants, and clients—to ask them about the firms you have researched. Don't be surprised if they offer to make introductions on your behalf.

You also want to be found, and today that means online. You not only need to have good profiles on LinkedIn and MySMPS but an about.me page, too. Start publishing: You could write articles for

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your firm's blog as well as your own. When you make presentations within your firm, for SMPS, or for other organizations, post them on SlideShare, YouTube, or Vimeo. In addition to posting, you need to edit your online presence: Make sure that your Facebook page or Twitter stream portrays you as you'd like a potential employer to see you.

Finally, make sure that you understand your own best value for a potential employer. We're all different, and there are many different types of marketing positions, as well as the firms they are in and the leadership styles in those firms. Just as you need to edit your own profile, you should also filter opportunities. What do you enjoy most about your current position and firm? What would you like to do more of, and what less? What are your credentials that will be most important to a potential employer? Who are your best "clients"?

**MH: You are suggesting writing articles on the Web and other ways to "put yourself out there." But I think there is a question among people like me, who do put themselves out there, on whether it really is a good thing to do when looking for a job? I've found those who are in a position to hire to be very risk-averse. So if a decision-maker can Google you and come across a conclusion or opinion they don't agree with, isn't that giving them a reason not to hire you?**

MP: Would you, as a marketer, really want to be hired by someone who didn't value your opinions? Or who didn't at least want an opportunity to debate the issue with you?

I think the point is that we need to be our authentic selves. As Polonius said to Laertes in *Hamlet*, "To thine own self be true." People can be anxious about finding work, and that's completely understandable. And they can get smart-alecky about what they say (in writing or aloud), which might make sense at the time. As mature adults, we all need to be able to apply filters.

**MH: OK, good point. What would be your approach if you were looking for a CMO position?**

MP: A CMO is not only part of senior management but is responsible for the leadership necessary for alignment of the firm's vision and aspirations with its marketing goals. This places the marketer at the center of the firm's strategy and practice agendas, not just as a ringmaster but as a driver of growth.

The CMO needs to be able to recognize currents of change in the broadest cultural, social, and economic contexts and use that understanding to position his/her firm for competitive advantage.

In order to be considered for a CMO position, you need to have demonstrable proof as well as testimony that you can do these things. If you do, then it will be evident in the work that you do, the influence that you have created, and the reputation that you have built.

**MH: I know you are a Twitter user. If you could send a tweet to Marjanne Pearson when she was just getting started in the business, what would it say?**

MP: I've always been interested in what's next—not just technology but real evolutionary development. I would tell Marjanne to work with the clients whom she admires, because then she'll be able to do her best work, for herself and for them.

*Part Two of this interview with Marjanne can be found at HelpEverybodyEveryday.com. You can learn more about Marjanne at <http://about.me/marjannepearson>.*

*Editor's Note: This is from a series of interviews conducted during Build Business 2010 in Boston. *

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## About the Interviewer



**Contributing Editor Matt Handal, whose last piece was "Gilbane's Karen Penn" in the February 2011 issue, serves as marketer for Trauner Consulting Services, Inc. ([www.traunerconsulting.com](http://www.traunerconsulting.com)), and as producer of the Construction Netcast podcast. Contact him at [Matt.Handal@traunerconsulting.com](mailto:Matt.Handal@traunerconsulting.com) or @MattHandal on Twitter, or subscribe to his articles at [HelpEverybodyEveryday.com](http://HelpEverybodyEveryday.com).**