

# Emerging Trends

in A/E/C Marketing and Business Development

## 2026

*Strategic Insight for Industry Leadership*

Brought to you by



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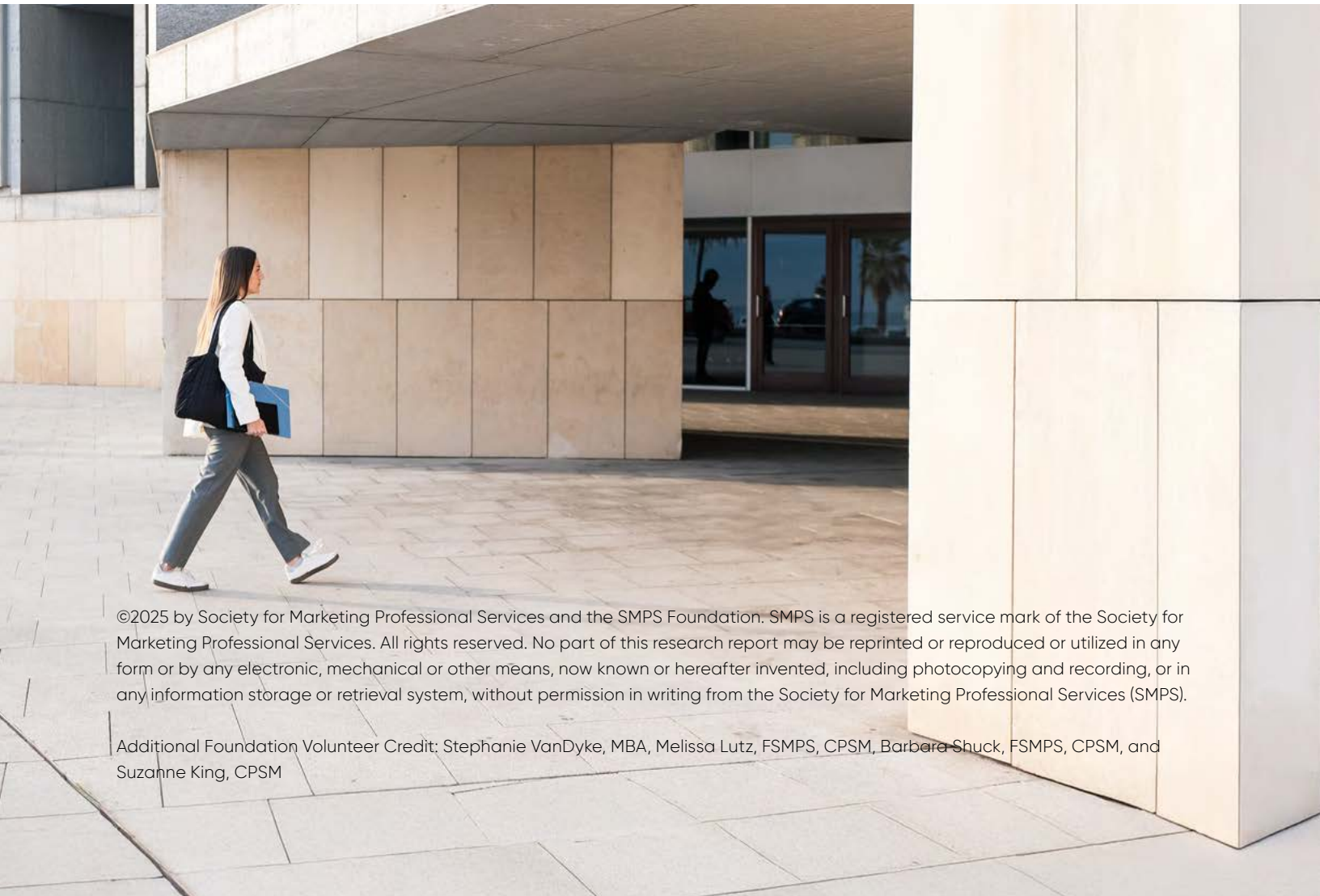
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# About the Research

The SMPS Foundation launched a critical research initiative aimed at capturing emerging marketing and business development trends across the A/E/C industry in the United States and Canada. Conducted in partnership with FMI Consulting, the findings are grounded in a blend of primary research—including more than 200 survey responses and 25 in-depth interviews with firm leaders—and reinforced by FMI's broader industry insights and targeted secondary research from adjacent professional services sectors such as consulting, law, and accounting, as well as

institutional models like higher education. The contributors to this study represent a diverse cross-section of the industry, encompassing C-suite executives and senior marketing and business development professionals. All interviewees were actively employed in architecture, engineering, or construction firms at the time of the research. All quotes featured in this report reflect the authentic perspectives of survey and interview participants. To protect anonymity, statements should not be attributed to specific individuals or firms.



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## INTRO

# Navigating Flux:

*Key Trends Shaping A/E/C Marketing and Business Development*

**The last five years have brought profound transformation across industries worldwide.**

For the Architecture, Engineering, and Construction (A/E/C) sector, this change has not been a disruption to overcome—it has been a catalyst, accelerating cultural, operational, and market shifts that continue to evolve in real-time.

From shifting client expectations and changing workforce dynamics to supply chain volatility and rising material costs, the pandemic's ripple effects have set a new trajectory. What's clear is that this is not a return to normal—it's the beginning of something new. And in that context, adaptability is no longer optional; it is foundational.

## TURNING TRENDS INTO STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY

As firms navigate this complexity, the most successful will be those who approach the future with clarity and intention. This report offers insights to help A/E/C leaders understand the forces reshaping the industry and respond with purpose.

Whether your focus is refining a go-to-market strategy, reimagining client engagement, or positioning your team for sustainable growth, these emerging trends offer a strategic foundation. In an era defined by accelerated transformation, those who embrace change and lead through it will earn a lasting competitive advantage.

# 1 Evolving Client Buying Behavior

Client expectations are shifting—rapidly. Today’s buyers of A/E/C services are seeking more than just technical capabilities; they want collaborative, tech-enabled partnerships that offer transparency, strategic insight, and value that extends beyond the scope of work. This trend examines the drivers behind this evolution, including the increasing influence of artificial intelligence (AI) in procurement and decision-making, and offers actionable insights to help your firm stay aligned with how clients want to buy today—and how they will engage as the next generation of decision-makers emerges.

# 2 The Differentiating Importance of Client Experience (CX)

As client expectations evolve, Client Experience (CX) has emerged as a strategic differentiator—one that drives loyalty, reputation, and long-term value. This trend examines how CX is reshaping marketing, business development, and service delivery in the A/E/C industry, offering practical insights for firms ready to embed experience-driven strategies across the entire client journey.

# 3 Maturation of Marketing and Business Development

Marketing and business development are no longer support functions, they’re strategic growth drivers. This report highlights how these roles have evolved into high-impact functions that shape firm direction, influence revenue, and connect operational performance with long-term strategy.

From the creation of new, specialized positions to the rise of executive marketing leadership, firms are elevating these disciplines to reflect their value. At the same time, business schools are expanding their focus on data, CX, and brand strategy, fueling a new generation of marketing leaders who bring sharper, more commercially aligned skill sets into A/E/C firms.

This trend makes one thing clear: marketing and business development are now indispensable to firm performance and to the future of an industry being redefined by business transformation through strategic communications and client experience.



## TREND 1

# Collaboration Is the New Currency:

*Why Clients Expect More Than Services*

The A/E/C industry is undergoing a pivotal evolution in how value is defined and delivered. **Clients are no longer sourcing technical services**—they're selecting strategic partners who can mitigate risk, contribute foresight, and navigate complexity alongside them. In a market shaped by constrained resources and heightened expectations, collaboration has become the differentiator. According to survey findings, 58% of respondents anticipate a significant uptick in demand for collaborative project delivery.

## THE FORCES DRIVING THE DEMAND FOR PARTNERSHIP

The A/E/C industry is experiencing a definitive shift in how clients define value. Increasingly, they are seeking more than technical proficiency—they are looking for strategic partners who will share risk, bring proactive insight, and help navigate complexity with confidence.

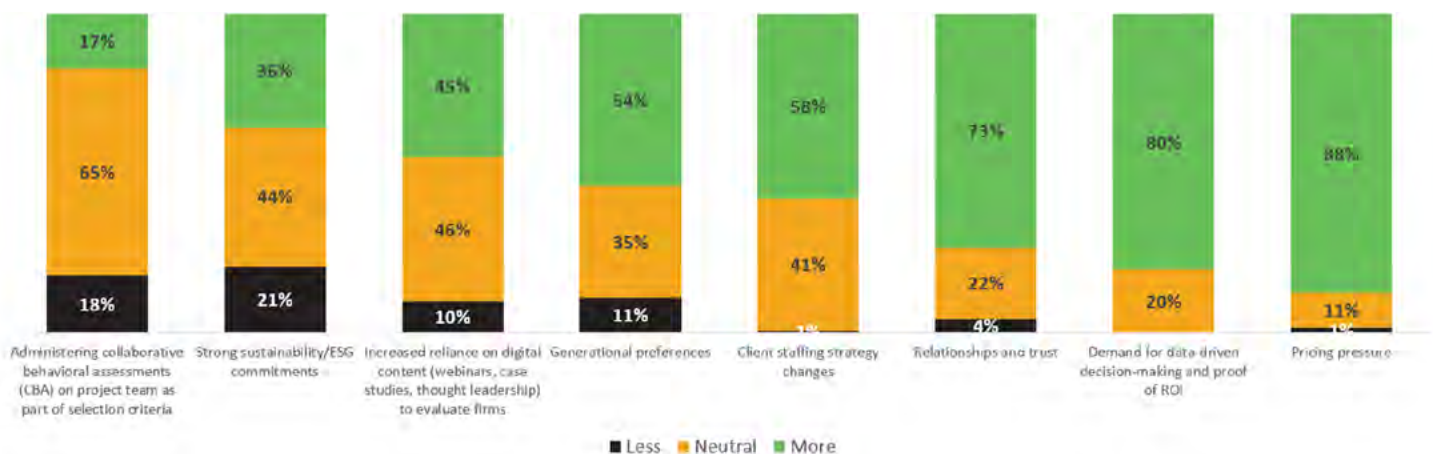
This trend is especially pronounced among clients overseeing high-stakes, resource-constrained projects. More than 80% of survey respondents cited cost pressure, the demand for ROI transparency, and data-informed decision-making as the defining influences on their future buying behavior. As one executive succinctly stated,

**“Owners want to lower risk—that’s the bottom line.”**





We asked respondents: ***What trends/disruptors do you expect will shape the buying behaviors and procurement preferences based on how you think client behaviors are evolving?*** (Indicate the degree of change you anticipate: More, Less, Neutral)



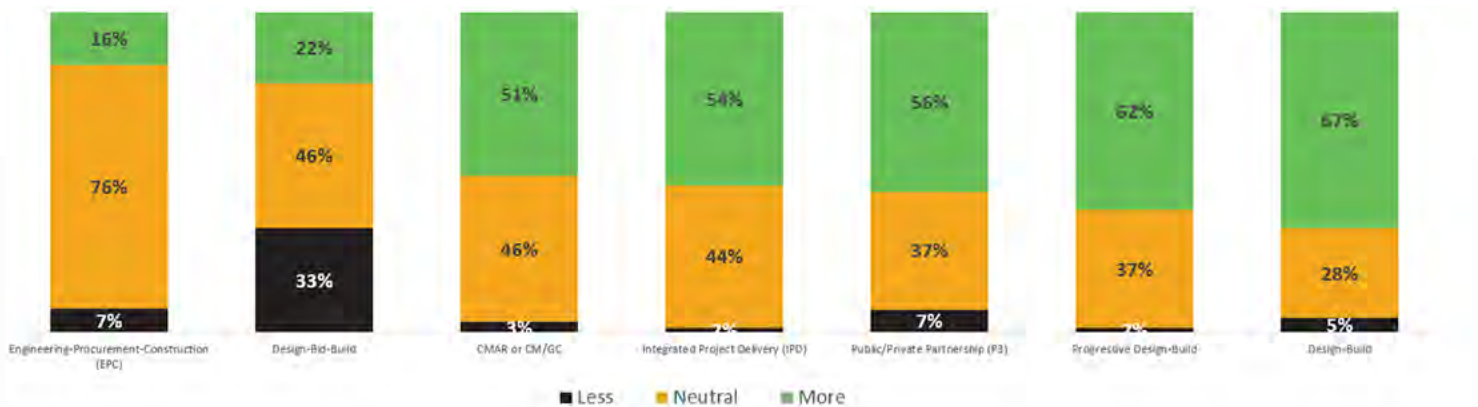
***80% of the Emerging Trends survey respondents see a growing demand for clients to make buying decisions based on data and proof of ROI. Book end this with pricing pressures and decisions based on trusted relationships, winning firms will be those who bring solutions, share risk, and make collaboration the cornerstone of delivery.***

## ALTERNATIVE DELIVERY AS STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE

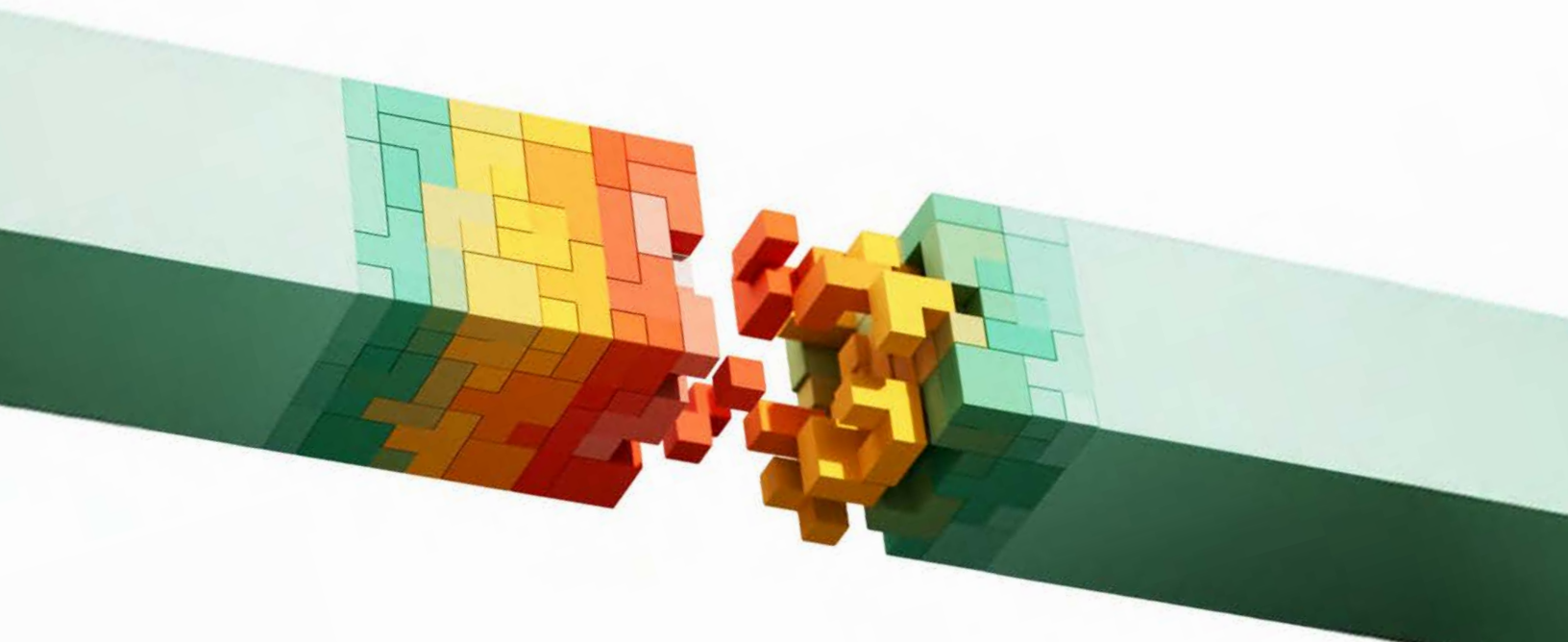
As project complexity increases and internal client resources become scarce, delivery models such as design-build, CMAR, and P3s are gaining traction. These frameworks embed collaboration early in the process, aligning incentives and enabling nimble decision-making—exactly what clients now prioritize.

Nearly two-thirds of survey participants anticipate increased use of design-build in the coming years, with over half forecasting expanded CMAR and P3 adoption—especially across public infrastructure and industrial sectors. States advancing design-build legislation, such as California, Washington, and Colorado, signal a broader trend toward delivery models that formalize partnerships, transparency, and shared accountability.

We asked respondents: ***How do you expect clients' preferences for delivery methods to evolve?*** (Indicate the degree of evolution in delivery: More, Less, Neutral)



*Design-build (67%), progressive design-build (62%), CMAR (51%), and P3s (56%) lead as the delivery methods expected to grow most. These models enable early collaboration, risk-sharing, and faster decisions—core to navigating today's complex, resource-limited environments. Survey respondents also foresee EPC gaining ground, reinforcing a shift toward integrated, partnership-driven approaches.*





## Next-Gen Decision Makers Are Raising the Bar

A generational shift is reshaping how clients evaluate firms and define partnerships. As Millennials and Gen Z step into leadership roles within client organizations, they bring new expectations for communication, trust-building, and collaboration. According to the U.S. Department of Labor's 2024 Trendlines Report, these two generations now make up more than half of the A/E/C workforce, with Gen Z ascending more rapidly than retiring Baby Boomers.

As one Senior executive reflected,

“We’re working to give younger team members more tools and resources for business development, but something was lost with the retiring generation—not just the gray hair, but the seasoned perspective that could say, ‘Here’s why these matters, and here’s what happens if you don’t.’”

These generational dynamics are not a passing trend—they are fundamentally redefining client expectations and procurement behavior. According to the Emerging Trends survey, 54% of respondents anticipate a significant shift in client behavior driven by generational preferences, underscoring the need for firms to adapt their marketing strategies and engagement models.

**Millennials and Gen X now dominate decision-making roles**, bringing with them values centered around trust, inclusion, and collaborative problem-solving.

As Gen Z accelerates into positions of influence, their comfort with digital platforms and insistence on purpose-driven, value-led partnerships will increasingly shape how firms are selected and retained. Deloitte's 2023 Global Human Capital Trends report confirms this shift, highlighting the demand of younger generations for meaningful digital interactions and authentic brand experiences. Simultaneously, the growing adoption of AI among buyers is altering how decisions are made, raising the bar for relevance and responsiveness.

To remain competitive, **firms must adjust not only how they communicate but also how they build trust and demonstrate value**. This evolution touches everything from proposal development to project delivery. Key areas of generational influence include:

## Digital-first Engagement

Younger decision-makers expect intuitive, frictionless experiences, from a firm's website and proposal templates to follow-up communications. Traditional methods, such as cold calls and static brochures, are often ineffective compared to dynamic content, responsive digital tools, and well-branded virtual interactions.

## Values-driven Decision-making

Purpose and impact matter. Millennial and Gen Z clients care deeply about a firm's mission, culture, and social commitments. Prioritizing sustainability, innovation, diversity, and community engagement is no longer optional—it's expected.

## Transparency and Authenticity

These buyers are savvy and skeptical of performative marketing. They seek real-world outcomes, candid conversations, and demonstrable impact over polished messaging or inflated claims.

## Speed and Efficiency

Raised in the on-demand era, younger clients prize responsiveness and streamlined processes. Lengthy procurement timelines or convoluted communications are often seen as red flags, signaling a lack of adaptability or modern capability.

**Ultimately, generational change is influencing more than procurement—it's reshaping the nature of client relationships.** Firms that can embody cultural alignment, digital fluency, and purpose-forward messaging will be better positioned to build trust and loyalty with the next generation of decision-makers. Those who ignore this shift risk becoming disconnected from the values and expectations that drive today's and tomorrow's client choices.

## Smart Tech, Savvy Buyers: Navigating the AI-Powered Landscape

Artificial intelligence is beginning to redefine how A/E/C firms are evaluated, not only through the services they provide but also in how they communicate value, differentiate expertise, and engage with clients. Increasingly, procurement teams are incorporating AI-assisted tools for scoring, proposal analysis, and vendor management. Automation is becoming standard in early-stage filtering, enabling clients to assess qualifications at scale with unprecedented speed and accuracy.

As one business development leader observed,

**“ We are already witnessing a shift in client buying behaviors driven by AI innovation and the increasing commoditization of written proposals.”**

Internally, A/E/C firms are expanding their use of technology to influence perception and positioning. AI-enabled CRM systems, video-based storytelling, and strategic social media deployment are no longer “nice-to-haves”—they are decisive elements of brand credibility. According to Gitnux, 60% of construction marketers report that social media engagement, including project walkthroughs and short-form video updates, directly generated new business opportunities.

The increased reliance on AI has two immediate implications for firms seeking to compete effectively:

### Written content alone is no longer sufficient.

Algorithms can rapidly detect boilerplate responses, compare standardized language across submittals, and identify overlap among qualifications. Firms that lean too heavily on recycled content risk becoming indistinguishable from their competitors—especially when the first screen is automated.

### Live presentation and digital presence carry greater weight.

Clients are shifting focus toward real-time engagement: how teams communicate, connect, and deliver insight under pressure. Storytelling and team chemistry are increasingly critical differentiators.



This evolution places strategic pressure on marketing and business development functions to adapt:

- Marketing teams must ensure that case studies, project summaries, video content, and team bios are **current, relevant, and aligned with the firm's positioning**. Differentiation now depends on precision, quality, and resonance with client priorities.
- BD professionals must be equipped to lead with credibility and connection. Including **presentation coaching, narrative development, and relational fluency** that goes beyond technical credentials.

Ultimately, this shift necessitates a fundamental reevaluation of messaging and engagement strategies. The mandate is clear: move beyond promotion toward partnership. It's no longer sufficient to explain what you do. Firms must demonstrate how they think, why they matter, and how they collaborate. Marketing and BD are no longer downstream support functions; they are primary vehicles for building trust, influencing outcomes, and achieving competitive advantage.



## Redefining Collaboration Through Technology

For emerging generations of clients, technology is not an add-on—it's an expectation. Millennials and Gen Z professionals operate in digital-first environments and expect the same level of fluency from their partners. In this landscape, technology is not merely a communication tool; it is a strategic enabler of transparency, agility, and trust.

**These clients are seeking more than convenience, and they are drawn to environments where ideas are exchanged openly and where platforms enhance, rather than replace, human interaction. As AI and**

digital collaboration tools become more embedded in daily workflows, the role of technology is shifting. It is no longer viewed as a substitute for human judgment but as an extension of strategic thinking and innovation.

Recent research highlights the emergence of “collaborative intelligence” a model in which human expertise and AI capabilities are designed to complement each other. In this paradigm, firms don't just deliver insights; they **co-create solutions with clients in real-time, using technology to unlock speed, accuracy, and deeper alignment.**

To remain relevant, A/E/C firms must adopt this mindset. The most successful firms will be those that:

- **Embed technology into the client experience** rather than layering it on top of outdated processes.
- **Use digital tools** to foster clarity and responsiveness, not just efficiency.
- **Demonstrate fluency in collaborative platforms** as a reflection of their broader adaptability and forward-thinking culture.

In short, the future of collaboration is a hybrid of high-tech and high-touch. **Firms that treat digital tools as part of a broader commitment to strategic partnership, not as a workaround, will signal their ability to lead with relevance in a rapidly evolving marketplace.**





# The Risk of Having a Transactional Delivery Mindset

In a market defined by complexity, uncertainty, and rising client expectations, **firms that cling to a transactional delivery model face significant strategic risk**. Clients are no longer seeking vendors—they're looking for advisors. They expect proactive guidance, shared accountability, and a commitment to long-term value.

When marketing and business development teams default to generic messaging, recycled proposals, or last-minute pursuit strategies, they reinforce the perception that they are interchangeable. And in today's environment, **interchangeable means expendable**.

## The cost of a transactional mindset is measurable:

### Early engagement opportunities are lost.

Without demonstrating insight or value early in the client journey, firms are excluded before the shortlist is even formed.

### Differentiation erodes.

Clients struggle to distinguish between firms offering similar technical services, making decisions based on price or convenience rather than alignment or trust.

### Brand equity suffers.

Transactional behaviors can diminish the firm's ability to be seen as a strategic partner, ultimately weakening positioning in competitive pursuits.

Moreover, marketing teams that lead with capability lists rather than impact stories dilute the firm's value proposition. Business development professionals who fail to initiate strategic conversations or offer pre-positioning insights risk appearing out of sync with client needs. The lack of pre-positioning isn't just a matter of winning or losing projects; it also affects the overall success of the organization. It is about protecting the firm's relevance, reputation, and long-term growth trajectory.

**Firms that continue to operate with outdated approaches will fall behind**, not because their services are weak but because their mindset isn't aligned with the market they're trying to reach.

## THE REWARDS OF EMBRACING COLLABORATION

Firms that intentionally foster collaboration—across delivery models, pursuit strategies, and client relationships—are not just keeping pace with change; they're gaining measurable strategic advantages.

According to research from the ACEC Research Institute, 40% of firms reported increased profitability on projects characterized by high collaboration, particularly in design-build environments. The message is clear: collaboration is not a feel-good value; it's a business accelerator. Marketing and business development leaders play a pivotal role in turning this opportunity into performance. When these functions align with a collaborative mindset, firms are better positioned to:

- **Strengthen client relationships by providing insight-rich content**, thought leadership, and consistent value before, during, and after the pursuit.
- **Influence projects earlier**, shaping scope, strategy, and delivery expectations before formal procurement begins.
- **Differentiate meaningfully**, moving beyond generic responses to demonstrate a deep understanding of client priorities.
- **Elevate win rates by anchoring proposals in partnership**, not just qualifications.

This approach requires more than updated talking points. It demands a cultural shift in how firms present themselves in the marketplace. Collaborative storytelling, values-forward messaging, and impact narratives must be embedded throughout marketing materials. Meanwhile, BD professionals must evolve from "rainmakers" to relationship stewards, individuals trusted not only to win work but also to sustain it. As one respondent shared,

“**Success in Design-Build and CMAR isn't just about price or schedule. It's about collaboration, transparency, and service.**”

Firms that embrace this philosophy, from first contact to final deliverable, build trust that endures beyond any single project. **Collaboration, when practiced with intention, becomes more than a delivery method.** It becomes a market position, a growth strategy, and a differentiator that clients can feel.



# What now?

## *Turning Insight Into Action*

Today's clients are navigating a landscape marked by economic volatility, political uncertainty, and generational transition. In response, their expectations are evolving. They want more than qualified firms. They want strategic partners who engage early, collaborate deeply, and provide proactive solutions.

For A/E/C firms, this is not just a moment of change; it is a call to recalibrate both how work is delivered and how the firm shows up in the market. Marketing and business development leaders are uniquely positioned to lead this evolution.



## HERE'S HOW TO MOVE FROM INSIGHT TO EXECUTION:

### 1 Evaluate Your Current Strategic Position

Evaluate how effectively your messaging, pursuit strategy, and client relationships convey a collaborative and consultative approach.

- Are your proposals tailored and **aligned with client values**?
- Do your digital assets convey **expertise, impact, and trust**?
- Are BD professionals **empowered to engage** early and strategically?

### 2 Define Your Collaborative Advantage

Clarify where your firm creates distinct value in a shifting market.

- Do you excel in **mitigating risk, accelerating delivery, or navigating complex procurement**?
- Is your brand aligned with your **internal capabilities and cultural ethos**? This is the moment to articulate how your firm helps clients succeed, beyond scope and schedule.

### 3 Prioritize Differentiation and Strategic Investment

Equip marketing teams to tell compelling stories of trust, adaptability, and resilience.

- Highlight firmwide commitments to **DEI, ESG, and innovation**.
- Ensure BD teams are trained to **initiate high-value conversations** and build trust across generational lines.
- **Strengthen your digital presence** to compete in AI-influenced, tech-forward procurement environments.

This shift in client behavior isn't a passing trend. It represents a **structural shift in how decisions are made**, relationships are formed, and value is perceived.

The most successful firms will be those that internalize **collaboration as a mindset**, embody it in their market presence, and leverage it as a strategic edge.

In a time where **clarity is the ultimate differentiator**, now is the moment to lead with purpose, communicate with conviction, and invest in the relationships that will shape your firm's future.



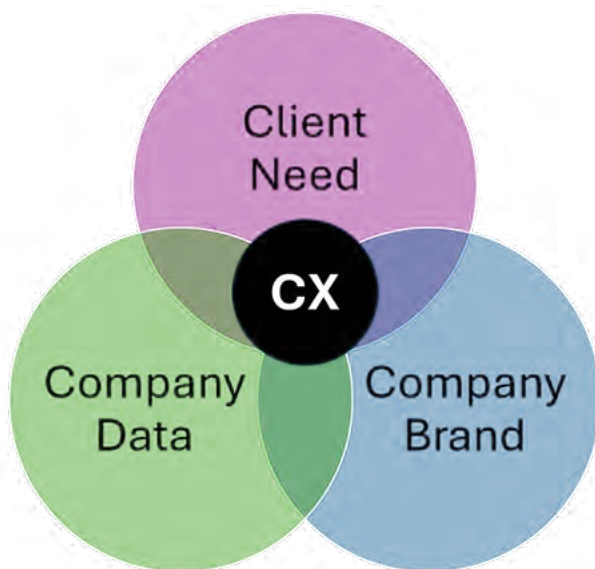
## TREND 2

# The Momentum of Client Experience (CX):

## *Strategic Imperative for A/E/C Firms*

Client Experience (CX) is rapidly emerging as one of the most powerful differentiators in the A/E/C industry—not because it is new, but because it represents the intersection of three critical forces: data, brand, and client need. At its core, CX is the total of every interaction

a client has with your firm, from the first social media impression to project turnover and beyond. It involves every person, every touchpoint, and every opportunity to deliver on the brand promise.



CX is not a tactic; it is a strategic lens through which firms can understand and elevate their value proposition. It aligns what the firm knows (CRM insights, pursuit intelligence, and delivery history), how the firm presents itself (brand positioning), and what the client expects and experiences throughout the engagement lifecycle.

In today's competitive landscape, where qualifications and pricing are increasingly commoditized, CX is where firms have the greatest opportunity to stand out. Clients are no longer satisfied with a technically successful project. They expect an experience that is seamless, responsive, and highly personalized.

Firms that embed CX into their business strategy consistently generate stronger relationships, repeat work and resilient reputations. Those who do not are at risk of being seen as interchangeable—and ultimately left behind.

## WHY CX IS GAINING MOMENTUM

Across the A/E/C industry, firms are awakening to the strategic importance of Client Experience. What was once viewed as a soft skill is now recognized as a business imperative, driven by shifting client expectations, generational turnover, and technological advances that make it easier to personalize communication and gather real-time feedback.

Several key forces are propelling this evolution, each reshaping how firms earn trust, build loyalty, and compete in an experience-driven market:

### Clients Expect More, and They Have More Influence

Today's buyers no longer choose firms solely based on credentials or price. Increasingly, decisions hinge on how clients feel about the people they work with and the experience they receive. A 2024 survey by Zweig Group found that 58% of decision-makers favor firms that offer forward-looking guidance, signaling a clear preference for partners who bring insight—not just execution—to the table.

One leader summed it up this way:

“The people hiring us want to feel a connection to our values. They're not reading our specs; they're scrolling our Instagram.”

This evolution is both cultural and generational. With Gen X and Millennials now holding the majority of client-side roles and Gen Z quickly rising, expectations reflect a digital-first mindset. These buyers conduct extensive research, favor authentic content, and expect self-service options throughout the buying process. They are also more vocal about dissatisfaction and demand consistent, seamless experiences across all channels.

“It's about delivering a client experience that feels like Amazon Prime: fast, trackable, and frictionless.”





## Technology Has Lowered the Barrier to Entry

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## CX Creates Tangible Business Value

Client experience is now directly tied to revenue growth, client retention, and even talent attraction. Repeat business, referrals, and brand advocacy all stem from trust, and trust is built through intentional, high-quality experiences.

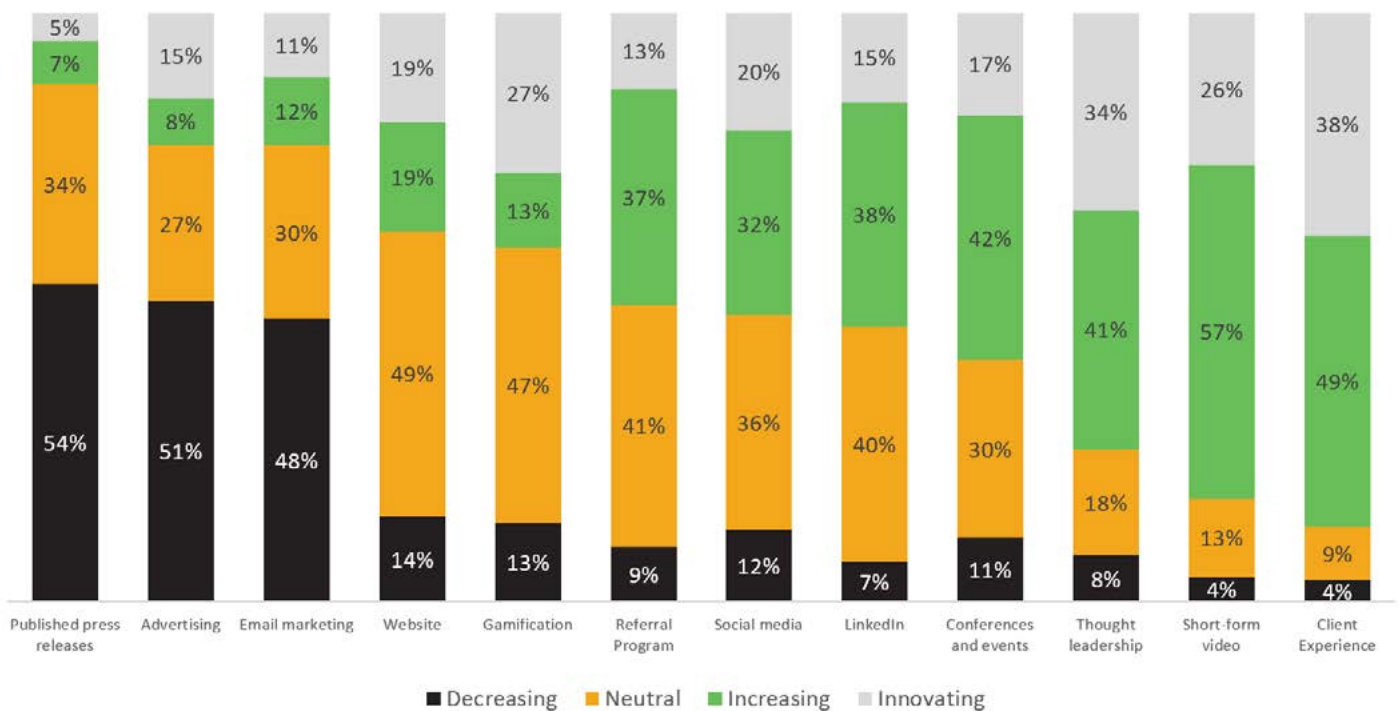
According to a Harvard Business Review study, acquiring a new client is five to seven times more expensive than retaining an existing one. It's no surprise that 49% of survey respondents reported increasing their investment in CX, with another 38% actively innovating in this area. By contrast, traditional marketing tactics such as email, advertising, and press releases are seeing far less traction, with only 12%, 8%, and 7% of firms increasing investment in those areas, respectively.

Forward-looking marketers now see CX as a natural bridge between brand and operations, a high-impact zone where strategy, service, and loyalty converge.

As one strategist put it:

“CX is the marketing cross-over to operations, where most marketers don’t hang out but have a significant opportunity to influence revenue and profit.”

**Which marketing and communication channels/methods do you expect to be the most effective for generating leads in the next three to five years? (Indicate whether the effectiveness for generating leads is increasing, decreasing, innovating, or neutral.)**



Firms are prioritizing relationship-oriented marketing channels over traditional channels. Video, virtual events, social media, and personalized campaigns are gaining traction as emotionally resonant, data-informed touchpoints.

Regardless of firm size, 87% of survey respondents indicated that CX as a marketing tool is expected to be most effective for generating leads in the next three to five years.



## It's a Strategic Priority for Firm Growth

Client Experience is no longer a peripheral initiative. It has become central to firmwide growth strategies. Leadership teams across the A/E/C industry are recognizing that CX is not just a marketing concern but a cross-functional driver of client satisfaction, reputation, and revenue.

In the Emerging Trends survey, the role of Client Experience Strategist emerged as one of the top future-facing hires, ranking second among anticipated roles firms plan to add in the next three to five years. Nearly one in four respondents indicated an intent to bring this capability in-house, underscoring the growing institutional focus on optimizing the client journey.

Firms that are gaining a competitive edge are those that have made CX part of their organizational DNA. These firms prioritize:

- **Automation to streamline operations** and remove friction from client-facing workflows
- **Analytics to measure engagement**, satisfaction, and brand perception
- **Client-specific systems** that enable tailored communication and consistent delivery across teams and geographies

The payoff is clear. As reported in Unanet's 2025 A/E/C Inspire Report, firms that are more mature in their technology and CX practices tend to:

- **Win more** bids
- Deliver projects **on time** more consistently
- Accelerate **cash flow**
- Report stronger indicators of **long-term profitability**

Some contractors are even embedding CX into their mission statements. One global firm now defines its commitment as delivering exceptional client and employee experiences—a recognition that culture and service are deeply intertwined.

Firms that collect and apply client feedback through post-project surveys, real-time check-ins, and pursuit debriefs are positioning themselves not just to win work but to win relationships. These insights inform both short-term tactics and long-term growth strategies, aligning pursuit efforts with the deeper expectations of today's decision-makers.



## Industry Norms Are Changing

The rise of Client Experience is not unique to the A/E/C industry. It is part of a broader shift across all professional services sectors. CX has become a strategic focal point in industries where trust, reputation, and relationship depth are key determinants of long-term success. For A/E/C firms, the message is clear: **clients are bringing expectations from outside industries into their professional relationships**, and those expectations are reshaping the competitive landscape.

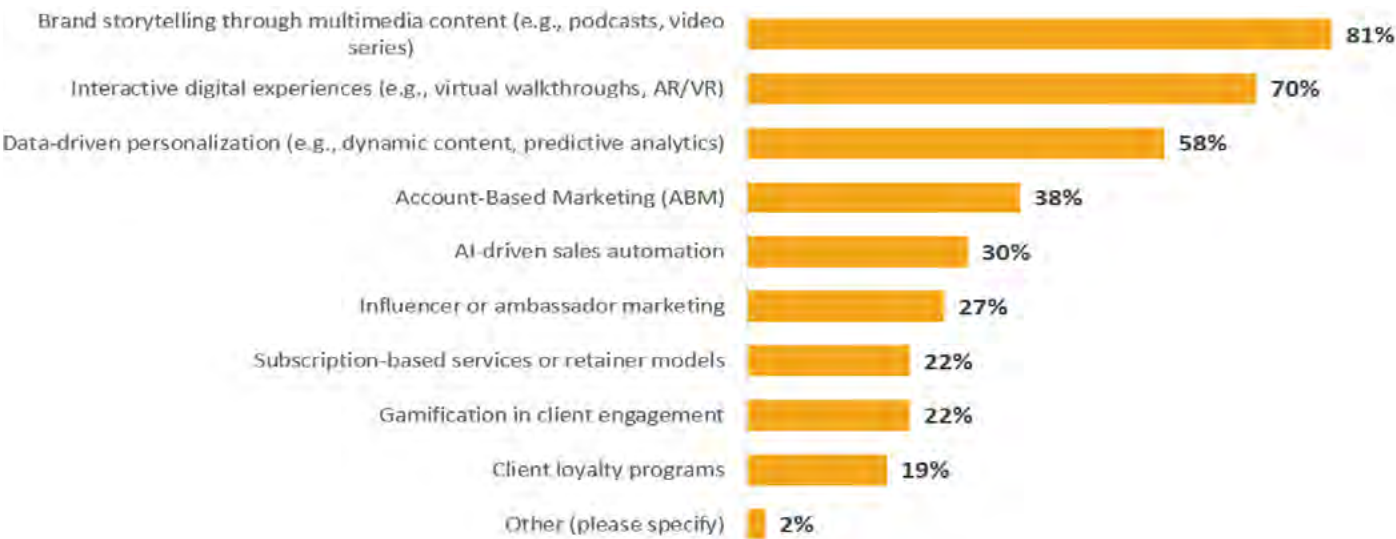
According to PwC’s Experience is Everything study, **positive client experiences are among the most influential drivers of purchasing decisions** across service-oriented industries. While pricing and technical quality remain important, CX has emerged as a key determinant of loyalty, particularly in high-touch sectors such as healthcare, banking, and legal services.

A/E/C clients regularly engage with firms in these industries. As a result, their expectations are shaped by what "great service" looks and feels like elsewhere, and they apply those expectations to their design, construction, and engineering partners.

## Best Practices from Other Professional Service Industries

Marketing and business development professionals find inspiration to innovate from other professional service industries like creative agencies, tech and SaaS, management consulting, and real estate development. Some best practices that are viewed as highly transferable include:

Respondents were asked: *What marketing or business development strategies from other industries do you believe could be successfully applied to A/E/C?* (Select all that apply)



In short: the bar has been raised.

“We don’t build anything, so how we treat our clients is what we get judged on. That’s the product.”

Firms that want to lead must study how other industries are delivering seamless, intuitive, and emotionally resonant client experiences. That includes integrating voice-of-client feedback, using CX metrics to inform strategy, and viewing every touchpoint as a brand moment.

As Gen Z continues to ascend into decision-making roles, these elevated expectations will only intensify. This generation is digitally native, highly informed, and values-aligned. They expect:

- **Mobile-first**, transparent interactions
- **Seamless onboarding** and service delivery
- Messaging that reflects **purpose, impact, and shared values**

Key CX opportunities firms should prepare for as emerging decision-makers gain influence include:

- **Intent-based personalization:** Delivering tailored content and outreach based on client actions, such as attending webinars or downloading case studies, to enable faster, more relevant engagement.
- **Productized service packaging:** Making services easier to understand, evaluate, and select by clearly articulating benefits, showcasing results through case studies, and providing a frictionless onboarding experience.
- **Video-first, mobile-first communication:** Prioritizing short, human-centered video content as the preferred medium for younger clients to engage with firm insights, people, and offerings.

To compete and win, A/E/C firms must move beyond traditional norms and embrace CX not just as a best practice but as a standard of doing business.

One industry leader noted,

“We’ve started thinking like product marketers. What content gets the client to the next step?”

The firms that will lead the next decade are those building experiences that feel familiar, fast, and intuitive to younger buyers who are less influenced by traditional A/E/C conventions.





## CX IS TRANSFORMING MARKETING & BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Client Experience is not just reshaping how firms deliver projects. It is also fundamentally redefining the role of marketing and business development within A/E/C organizations. Once viewed as support functions, **marketing and BD are now emerging as strategic growth drivers**, empowered by data, client insights, and cross-functional collaboration.

Insights from the Emerging Trends survey reveal a clear shift: marketing and BD teams are no longer simply producing materials or responding to RFPs. They are leading the charge to **embed client-centric thinking across the entire firm**. Here's how that transformation is taking shape:

### Evolving Client-Centric Messaging

While client storytelling and customized proposals have long been staples of the A/E/C playbook, CX is accelerating a shift from reactive messaging to proactive empathy. Leading firms are moving beyond reworded boilerplate and embracing narratives that reflect their client's purposes, challenges, and priorities.

**In this context, qualifications aren't just credentials; they are tools to help clients achieve what matters most. The message is no longer, "We're the experts." It is "We understand what you're up against—and here's how we'll help."**

This shift builds trust, emotional engagement, and client alignment. A 2024 Forbes article, *The Power of Empathy*, reinforces this trend, showing that emotionally intelligent marketing strategies consistently outperform those grounded in features and facts alone.

## Elevating Marketing as a Strategic Player

CX places marketing at the center of firm growth strategies, expanding its role far beyond brand awareness and proposal support. Today's marketers are expected to lead initiatives like journey mapping, persona development, feedback systems, and personalized campaigns, often in collaboration with operations and delivery teams.

By formalizing marketing's role in shaping the client experience, firms not only unlock more intentional brand-building but also reduce the reliance on technical staff to carry the full burden of client engagement. This shift directly supports overextended seller-doers, enabling them to focus where they create the most value—on delivery—while marketing helps drive relationship-building and pre-positioning efforts upstream.

In high-performing firms, marketing is no longer a passive function. It has become an active partner in shaping perception, supporting client retention, and driving top-line growth.

## More Integrated, Data-Driven Business Development

For business development teams, CX elevates the expectation to move from a relational to an insight-driven approach. Modern BD professionals are expected to respond not just to RFPs but to behavior-based signals, real-time client needs, and strategic growth opportunities.

**What factors will influence the evolution of your firm's marketing/business development team structure over the next three to five years? (Rank these factors in order of expected impact, with 1 being the most influential and 10 being the least influential.)**



**Other responses include:** increased training roles for internal education of staff with responsibilities in marketing/bd as well as brand development, and client education approaches, Ability and funding to upskill, AI

Adoption of new CRM, automation, and data analytics tools ranks as the second most influential factor expected to reshape marketing and BD team structures over the next 3–5 years. As firms pursue scalable, insight-driven strategies, tech investments are accelerating the shift toward smarter, more responsive client engagement.

Firms are investing in modern CRMs, journey tracking, and automation to inform pursuit strategies, which enables BD teams to:

- Prioritize leads based on behavior and timing
- Customize outreach based on buyer role, market, or service line
- Collaborate with marketing to deliver cohesive, relevant experiences

## Creation of New Roles and Skills

The rise of Client Experience is reshaping how firms structure their marketing and business development functions. New positions are emerging, focused not just on promotion but on orchestrating seamless, data-informed, and personalized client engagement.

The survey revealed a notable trend: roles such as CX Strategist, CRM Administrator, and Marketing Automation Manager are among the most anticipated hires in the next three to five years. This signals a meaningful shift in how A/E/C firms view the purpose and potential of these departments.

These roles are not administrative add-ons—they're strategic enablers. Their focus is on aligning systems, teams, and messaging around a more holistic client journey. They help firms:

- Centralize and activate client data
- Build automated, behavior-based engagement workflows
- Ensure marketing and BD efforts reflect current client expectations—not outdated processes

Architecture and engineering firms are leading the way in making these investments, recognizing that differentiated experiences require new skill sets and dedicated expertise.

As CX continues to mature, firms that invest in specialized talent will be better equipped to scale personalized outreach, create consistency across touchpoints, and transform marketing and business development into performance engines.





## Deeper Involvement Across the Project Lifecycle

As Client Experience takes center stage, the role of marketing and business development is expanding far beyond the traditional handoff at project award. Today, **these teams are increasingly embedded throughout the full lifecycle of client engagement**—from initial contact through final turnover and beyond.

With a CX mindset, firms recognize that the client relationship doesn't stop at contract signing. It evolves throughout the design, construction, delivery, and even post-occupancy phases. That's why marketing and BD professionals are now contributing to:

- **Client satisfaction surveys** during and after project delivery
- **Post-project debriefs** to extract insight and drive continuous improvement
- **Long-term feedback loops** that inform re-engagement and future pursuits

One respondent shared,

“**We're looking at client feedback not just at kickoff or mid-project, but after turnover because that's when you find out if you really delivered on the promise.**

This expanded involvement allows firms to strengthen relationships, demonstrate responsiveness, and gather actionable intelligence that directly impacts future success. It also reinforces the idea that marketing and business development are not overhead functions but strategic partners in the client experience.

By staying engaged across the lifecycle, these teams help close the loop between **brand promise and service delivery**—ensuring the story clients are sold aligns with the experience they receive.

## RISKS OF IGNORING CX

For firms that fail to prioritize Client Experience as a strategic focus, the risks are both immediate and long-term in a competitive marketplace where differentiation is increasingly based on how firms engage rather than just what they deliver. Neglecting CX can compromise growth, retention, and brand relevance.

The most significant risks include:

- **Losing Repeat Business:** Even technically successful projects won't lead to loyalty if the client experience is inconsistent, unresponsive, or impersonal. Poor experiences drive clients away, silently and permanently.
- **Being indistinguishable from competitors:** Without a clearly defined and consistently delivered client experience, firms are left to compete on cost or availability. That dynamic erodes margin, weakens positioning, and commoditizes expertise.
- **Attracting the Wrong Clients (or None at All):** As clients increasingly prioritize easy processes, tailored communication, and aligned values, firms that fail to deliver on these expectations will lose ground to those that do.

In today's market, the absence of a CX strategy not only creates a competitive disadvantage but also sends a message that the client relationship is transactional rather than intentional. Firms that want to lead must recognize CX not as a trend but as a baseline expectation for doing business in the A/E/C industries.



## BENEFITS OF GETTING CX RIGHT

Companies that prioritize Client Experience are reaping significant rewards across multiple facets of business performance. When implemented effectively, CX is not just a differentiator; it is a powerful growth engine driving success. It instead becomes a growth engine.

Key benefits include:

- **Stronger client loyalty and referrals:** Positive experiences don't just retain clients—they turn them into advocates. According to a 2023 Qualtrics study, a "5-star experience" generates **3.1x more referrals** and **2.3x more repeat business**. Trust and satisfaction compound over time, fueling organic growth.
- **Higher Win Rates:** Empathy-driven messaging and personalized engagement, supported by CRM-integrated proposal platforms and behavior-based targeting, are helping firms close more deals more efficiently. A recent Breakcold.com study revealed that CRM adoption alone resulted in a **41% increase in sales revenue** and a **32% reduction in marketing costs**.
- **Improved Efficiency:** By automating and digitizing key client interactions, firms reduce friction and free up teams to focus on high-value, relationship-oriented work. Business Tech Weekly reports that **60% of CX leaders** believe AI will be a game changer for CX soon.
- **Cultural Transformation:** When CX becomes a firmwide priority, it elevates the entire service model. The emphasis on client empathy, responsiveness, and continuous improvement reshapes how teams collaborate, communicate, and deliver value.

“Although the model is complex, the advantages of the seller-doer model are clear: commercial organizations are empowered to strengthen existing client relationships, develop new relationships, and drive long-term success in a progressively competitive market.”

~ Alexander Group, a professional services sales consultant

In short, firms that get CX right aren't just building better experiences — they're building stronger businesses.



# What now?

## *Turning Insight Into Action*

Recognizing the strategic value of Client Experience is the first step. Acting on it, firmwide and intentionally, is what separates high-performing firms from the rest of the field. To move from awareness to impact, leaders must align CX efforts with business goals, operational practices, and client-facing strategies.



Here's how to begin:

# 1 Take Stock of Where You Are

Audit your current client journey, from first impression to project closeout.

- Where are the **friction points**?
- Are you actively collecting and responding to **client feedback**?
- Does your messaging reflect **empathy, clarity, and alignment with client values**?

If any part of the journey feels outdated, inconsistent, or overly transactional, that's a signal to make a change.

# 2 Plan

Establish a shared CX vision across the firm, including aligning leadership, marketing, BD, and operations around what exceptional experience looks like and why it matters. Set clear goals and metrics for improvement. CX isn't just about being "nice." It's about being **deliberate in creating value, loyalty, and differentiation**.

# 3 Invest Intentionally

Prioritize the tools, training, and roles that will elevate your CX maturity. These may include:

- **CRM enhancements and automation**
- **Dedicated CX Strategist** or client feedback lead
- Integrated **client journey analytics**
- **Structured debriefing** and survey programs

Pilot what works, measure what matters, and scale with confidence.

**The firms that will lead the next decade are those that treat client experience not as an initiative but as a core business strategy.**

Marketing and business development leaders are at the forefront of this transformation. By embracing CX as a strategic lever, they help elevate the brand, grow client trust, and position the firm for sustained relevance and growth.



## TREND 3

# The Maturation of Marketing and Business Development in A/E/C

Across the A/E/C industry, marketing and business development teams and structures are undergoing a profound transformation. What was once considered a support role, or, in some firms, an administrative extension, is now recognized as an essential strategic function that drives growth, shapes perception, and influences client relationships at the highest levels.

A combination of internal evolution and external disruption is fueling this shift. Market complexity, economic uncertainty, and rising client expectations have created a demand for deeper insights, stronger positioning, and more intentional engagement. In this environment, firms can no longer afford to view marketing and business development as reactive functions; they must be empowered as proactive, integrated partners in strategic planning and delivery.



## New A/E/C Marketing & BD Roles

As highlighted earlier in this report, nearly half of survey respondents indicate investment in new roles aligned with strategic growth. These include crucial positions like:

- **Marketing technologists** and **CRM strategists** who turn data into client insights, guiding smarter pursuits.
- **Talent brand managers, digital content creators,** and **CX** professionals elevate how firms communicate value and deliver personalized experiences.
- **Proposal strategists** and **pursuit leads** who help navigate complex delivery methods.
- **Recruitment marketers** who attract scarce talent, particularly vital in construction markets strained by labor shortages.

*In the next three to five years, what positions will be new to your organization? (Select all that apply)*

Top 10 Positions

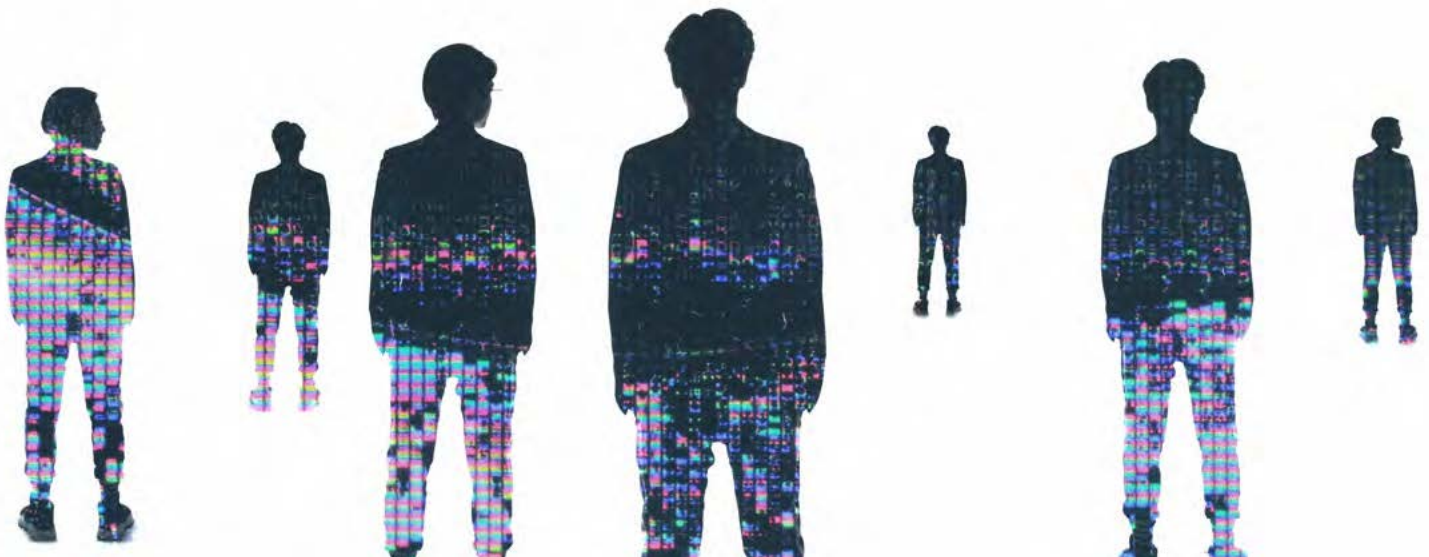


## WHY THE SHIFT IS HAPPENING

Several macro-level forces are accelerating the evolution of marketing and business development roles across the A/E/C landscape:

- **Private Equity Influence:** As more firms receive PE backing, the pressure to demonstrate growth, market share, and brand value increases. This shift is driving demand for more measurable marketing performance, strategic targeting, and scalable client engagement practices.
- **Leadership Transition:** As Baby Boomers retire and Gen X and Millennials step into firm leadership, there is a growing openness to cross-functional leadership models. Marketing and BD are gaining influence in the C-suite as these new leaders prioritize agility, digital enablement, and purpose-led messaging.
- **Data and AI Adoption:** Tools like Power BI and AI-enhanced CRM systems are empowering marketers to bring actionable insights to the executive table, repositioning marketing as a source of strategic intelligence—not just brand stewardship.
- **Seller-Doer Fatigue:** Technical professionals are increasingly burned out by the dual demands of billable work and business development. With utilization metrics under tight scrutiny, firms are creating specialized growth roles to relieve pressure and allow technical staff to focus on delivery.

“ Our industry has a huge opportunity to lead strategically where business sense and technology work hand in hand. Right now, how we deliver and pursue work is still too piecemeal. Aligning those efforts could drive stronger marketing, business development, and firm growth, especially as we compete with private equity-backed firms focused on EBITDA.”

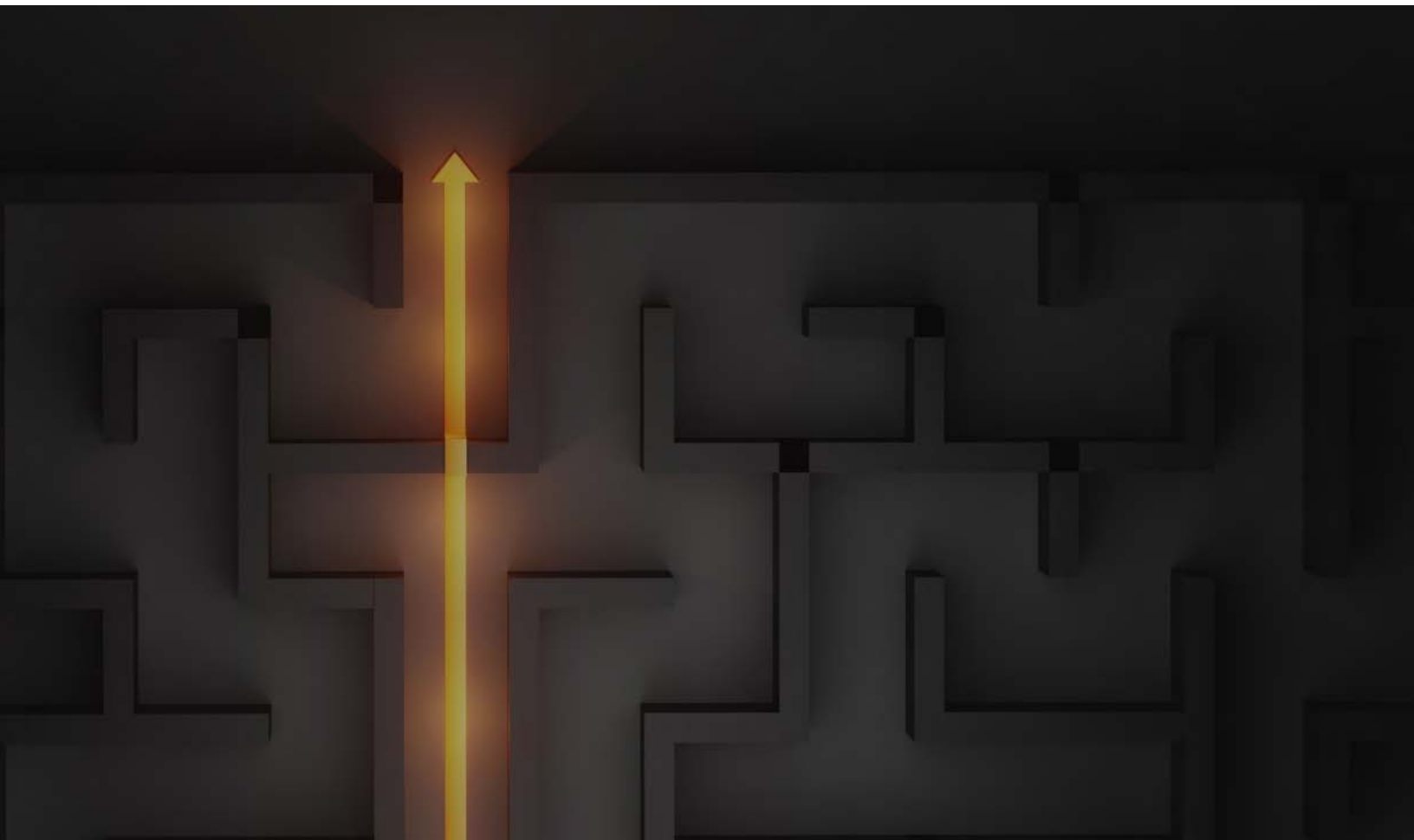


## The Future Marketer And Business Development Professional: Data-Driven, Tech-Enabled, Strategic

The profile of successful marketing and BD professionals in the A/E/C industry is evolving rapidly. No longer defined by coordination or collateral development, these roles are increasingly analytical, consultative, and closely embedded in the firm's strategy.

Tomorrow's leaders in these functions will be:

- **Data-driven:** Equipped to extract actionable insights from CRMs, pursuit analytics, and client behavior data. They will inform decisions about where to focus resources, which clients to pursue, and how to tailor messaging for maximum impact.
- **Tech-enabled:** Comfortable using platforms like Power BI, HubSpot, Salesforce, and other automation tools to orchestrate campaigns, monitor engagement, and measure ROI. They'll bring fluency in tools that connect marketing and operations—and enable client-centric delivery.
- **Strategic:** Active participants in firm growth planning, not just executors of tactics. These professionals will shape the go-to-market strategy, design the client journey, define brand positioning, and develop integrated business development approaches.



## What Top Business Schools Are Teaching Tomorrow's Leaders

Leading academic institutions are reflecting this shift. Programs at Harvard, Wharton, Cornell, and others are redesigning their marketing curricula to emphasize:

- Analytics and data science
- Behavioral economics and psychology
- Purpose-driven branding
- Customer experience strategy
- Cross-disciplinary collaboration

The message is clear: the marketers of the future must be more than creative; they must be commercially strategic.

“The future marketer isn't just writing proposals - they're running CRM, tracking client data, and predicting pursuit outcomes.”

This redefinition mirrors what's happening in high-performing A/E/C firms: marketing and BD are no longer on the sidelines. They're integrated, forward-facing, and aligned with how clients want to engage.





## Lessons from Outside the Industry

Marketing leaders in adjacent professional service sectors, such as consulting, technology, real estate, and creative agencies, have long adopted practices that are now gaining traction in A/E/C. These industries offer essential lessons for firms seeking to modernize, scale, and compete more effectively.

According to the CMO Insights Report 2025, the shift away from generalist marketing teams is well underway. In just one year, the percentage of companies **relying on generalist marketers dropped from 69% to 52%**. In contrast, specialist roles—focused on areas such as SEO, video production, digital campaigns, and marketing automation—are experiencing double-digit growth.

What's driving this change? A fundamental reframing of marketing as a revenue-aligned function, not simply a creative one.

In that same report, **62% of CMOs identified data literacy as their top hiring priority**, surpassing even creativity, marking a significant departure from past models and underscoring the need for measurable impact, predictive capability, and performance visibility.

For A/E/C firms, the implications are clear: to keep pace, marketing and business development structures must evolve beyond coordination and production. That may include:

- Hiring CRM analysts, CX strategists, and proposal strategists to **bring specialization and focus to growth activities**
- Exploring **fractional CMO models** to bring senior marketing leadership without long-term overhead
- Investing in **content marketing, automation, and client journey mapping** capabilities that mirror best practices from other high-growth industries

Firms that modernize their marketing infrastructure will be better equipped to scale, differentiate, and align with revenue goals without losing sight of the relational depth that makes A/E/C unique.

## The CMO Advantage: Strategic Leadership at the Helm

As marketing and business development evolve into strategic functions, many firms are beginning to recognize the value of formal marketing leadership at the executive level. Enter: The Chief Marketing Officer (CMO).

The CMO Insights Report 2025 highlights this trend across industries where CMOs are increasingly being tapped to:

- **Align cross-functional teams** around brand, growth, and client experience
- **Lead data-driven strategies** tied to revenue outcomes
- Influence service **development, market positioning, and innovation**

At a time when economic uncertainty is forcing firms to justify every investment, the CMO role becomes more than symbolic. It becomes a practical lever to ensure marketing and business development efforts are integrated, intentional, and impactful.

Firms that embrace this level of leadership benefit from the following:

- **More aligned** go-to-market strategies
- Clearer ownership of **brand reputation and market relevance**
- **Stronger internal advocacy** for marketing's role in driving growth

In short, a strategic marketing leader at the helm helps transform marketing from a service function into a performance engine, one that works in tandem with finance, operations, and delivery to shape the firm's future.



## THE RISK OF DELAY VS. THE REWARD OF ACTION

With every challenge comes the potential for growth and innovation. In firms that continue to view marketing as a support function, untapped potential is waiting to be unlocked. Many marketers already lead CRM strategy, content development, client targeting, and pursuit analytics. When empowered with access to financial insights and strategic planning conversations, these professionals can deliver measurable impact on growth, differentiation, and client experience.

Firms that embrace this shift are gaining competitive advantages with stronger brand cohesion, greater alignment between client needs and firm capabilities, and increased market share. One interviewee leader noted,

**“When marketing has a seat at the table, we don’t just respond to opportunities; we shape them.**

The risk isn’t giving marketing too much influence; it’s waiting too long to adapt. Firms that delay integrating strategic marketing leadership may be outpaced by more agile, insight-driven, and client-focused competitors. By investing now, A/E/C leaders can future-proof their firms, empower their teams, and unlock the full value of marketing as a catalyst for growth.

**“We’ve built credibility over time by bringing data into every conversation - building ally after ally across the company. Now senior partners advocate for marketing’s role without us needing to push it ourselves.**



# What now?

## *Turning Insight Into Action*



The maturation of marketing and business development presents a pivotal opportunity, but only for firms willing to act with intention. To capitalize on the trends reshaping the industry, firm leaders must reimagine how these functions are structured, perceived, and empowered.

Here's how to get started:

# 1 Take Stock

Evaluate how your current marketing and business development structure aligns with your firm's growth strategy.

- Are you still relying on outdated expectations or legacy workflows?
- Do your teams have access to the tools, data, and conversations that influence strategy?
- Honest reflection is the first step toward strategic alignment.

# 2 Plan the Future

Identify the capabilities your firm needs to stay competitive in the evolving A/E/C landscape. Whether it's client experience, digital marketing, proposal strategy, or data analytics, clarity about future needs is essential. Design a roadmap to evolve from tactical execution to strategic leadership. Map new roles, upskill existing talent, and build cross-functional collaboration from the ground up.

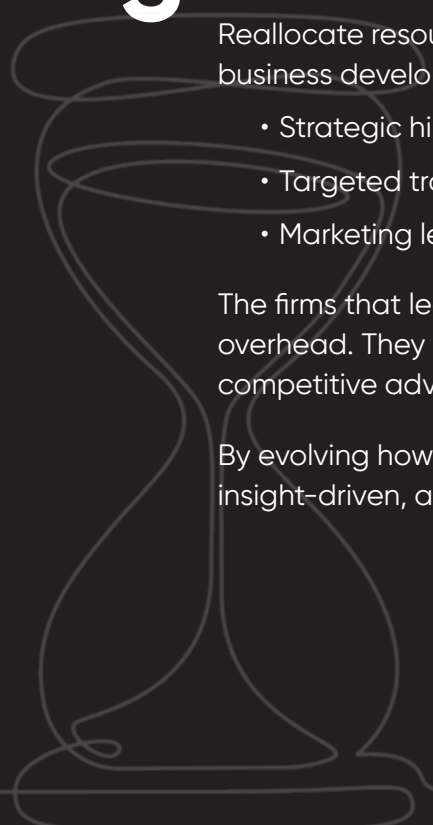
# 3 Invest Strategically

Reallocate resources toward the roles and technologies that position marketing and business development as core business functions, which include:

- Strategic hires
- Targeted training programs
- Marketing leadership participation in financial and firm planning

The firms that lead in the next decade won't treat marketing and business development as overhead. They will treat them as growth engines, embedded, data-informed, and central to competitive advantage.

By evolving how these functions operate, A/E/C leaders can build a future that is more agile, insight-driven, and resilient—and better aligned with how modern clients engage.



# Looking Ahead: From Insight to Industry Leadership

The trends outlined in this report are not passing observations. They are signals of profound structural change shifting across the A/E/C landscape. Each trend presents a powerful opportunity for transformation, not just in how firms win work but in how they define value, build relationships, and lead the industry forward.

The emergence of Gen Z into decision-making roles will only accelerate this momentum. Their expectations for authenticity, speed, purpose, and digital fluency are reshaping the way services are evaluated, selected, and experienced. Preparing for this generational shift isn't optional; it's a strategic imperative.

Firms that use this moment to align marketing, business development, operations, and client experience with the realities of today's marketplace will be positioned to lead, not react. This report offers not just an analysis but a roadmap. The future is not waiting. Use these insights now to shape a strategy that ensures relevance, resilience, and competitive advantage in the years ahead.



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## About the Society for Marketing Professional Services

### **BUSINESS TRANSFORMED THROUGH MARKETING LEADERSHIP.**

**The Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS)** is the only organization dedicated to creating business opportunities in the A/E/C industries. With more than 7,000 members, SMPS provides leadership and professional development programs, industry research, business-building events, and vital marketing resources. Through SMPS, A/E/C professionals in North America tap into powerful networks to form project teams, secure business referrals and intelligence, and benchmark performance. The Society is committed to validating the practice of marketing and business development as essential to the success of all professional services firms. To learn more, visit [smps.org](https://smps.org).

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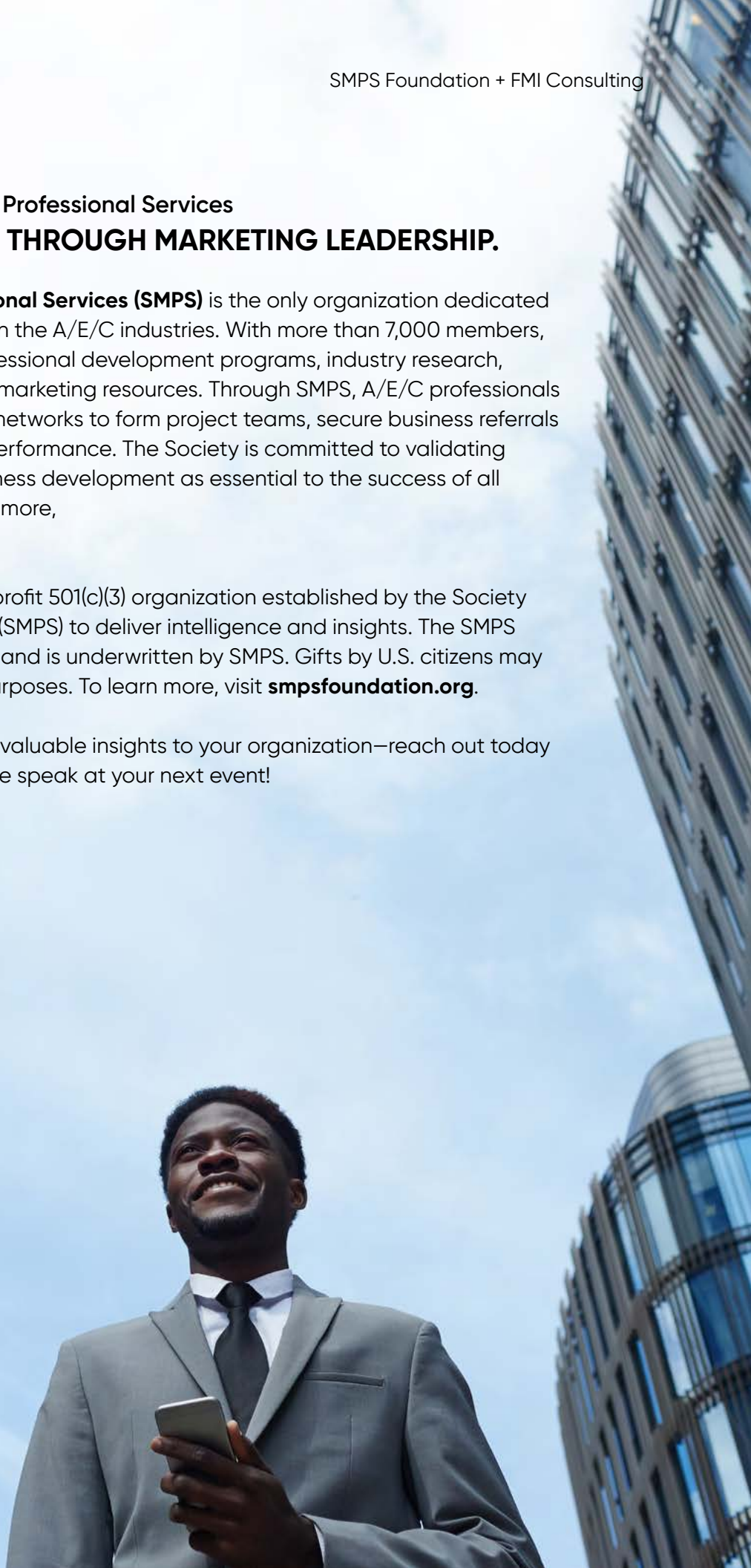
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