

**Marketing Insight**

By David M. Grant

**Getting Approvals: Don't Client-tell**

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the first of a new quarterly column focusing on issues related to marketing and public relations within commercial real estate.

We all know that more and more architects, engineers and contractors are marketing themselves now, ever since the Supreme Court ruled in 1977 that licensed professional service firms cannot legally be prohibited from doing so.

That's all to the good. But one aspect of marketing has become an important problem, and must be addressed carefully by any firm that is serious about getting its name out. I'm referring to the problem of client approvals.

Often, a service firm that is eager to market itself will want to mention its work on behalf of specific clients. This is perfectly understandable, of course. The problem arises when a firm does not explicitly clear this with the relevant clients first.

The situation becomes especially nettlesome when it involves the media, because when that happens, a third party is involved—and the media are not bound to either you or your client. After all, we have free press in this country, and a story that you pitch to the media does not offer you anywhere near the kind of control that a paid advertisement does.

We have occasionally encountered situations where a client gives us the go-ahead to pitch a story based on work the company doing for its client, only to then have our client's client decide that proposing such a story is not in its best interests. There is nothing wrong with deciding that you can't publicize a particular story; the problem is deciding this after you've already alerted the media to that story.

Before that particular genie is out of that particular bottle, let me suggest some simple guidelines for you.

1. Before you speak with a reporter, always check with your client to make sure the interview subject is okay to discuss. Your client may allow you to speak about a project under certain conditions, and it's best to know what you can and cannot tell a reporter before you divulge anything. If possible, try to obtain your client's guidelines in writing (or via e-mail).

2. Keep in mind that you never have to do an interview with any reporter if you feel your client would be unhappy if you discussed projects concerning the client.

3. Don't feel obligated to answer every question a reporter asks you. If you or your client are not willing to disclose certain matters, you do not have to answer.

4. Don't rely on or expect a reporter to clear any information with your client.

5. Let your public relations people or firm know if a client is especially sensitive to the media. As public relations professionals, they will check to see if your client approves press exposure, and if approval is granted, then they are generally free to pitch all media, set up interviews and speak freely about the project. If the client press approval is limited to only one aspect of public relations—perhaps only a particular news release—let your public relations people know at the outset.

Though some of these points may seem obvious to you now, inadvertently overlooking them later can end up hurting a very valuable relationship you have with a client. Accordingly, I will say it one last time with emphasis: please obtain approval from your client—in writing—before approaching the press!

And, since I hate to end an article on such a doleful note, let me add one more point: if you follow these guidelines, the results can actually be wonderful all around. An example is a New York Times story we proposed on behalf of a construction client of ours, John Gallin & Son. Our client had done all of the interiors work for the new Times Square headquarters of its longtime

client, Ann Taylor. Before we suggested a particular news angle to the Times, our client made very sure that the angle was approved. Not only did Ann Taylor endorse the idea, but was delighted when the story came out (as was our client).

Being very careful can pay big dividends. Not being careful can cause a calamity. The choice is yours. —RENY

*The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not Real Estate Media or its publications.*

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