



Communication Resources Northwest recently helped Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup win the \$500 million Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

Image courtesy of Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup

# Coach says winning AEC projects is ‘not about you’

By KATIE ZEMTSEFF  
Journal Staff Reporter

Meg Winch of Communication Resources Northwest coaches teams competing for big jobs, but she’s not concerned with hand gestures or what time of day you make your presentation. Customer service is what wins, she said, and that’s what she focuses on.



Winch

also coached Lydig Construction in competing for the county’s new Bow Lake Transfer Station. Lydig won that \$38.5 million construction contract.

“It’s not about you. It’s never about you. It’s always about the customer and resolving the customer’s needs. It’s pretty basic but I’ve got to say a lot of folks forget that,” she said.

“(Firms) need to be focused on training their employees how to think differently about customers and how to listen better to what’s really driving your customer.”

Winch recently coached Gustafson Guthrie Nichol in its bid for the Seattle Central Waterfront Project. GGN lost the job to James Corner Field Operations. She

Winch has also worked with the city of Seattle, the Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. General Services Administration.

Since starting her Mill Creek-based business 21 years ago, Winch has coached AEC firms and agencies nationwide. She said her win rate last year was 75 percent. Her firm also works with clients on training and development, facilitation and communications.

Jeff Callinan, vice president of operations for JE Dunn Construction in Minneapolis, has worked with Winch’s firm for eight years on projects including the Northrop Auditorium at the University of Minnesota and renovation of Minnesota’s state capitol.

He said Winch is good at understanding how to meet an owner’s expectations. “Meg is extremely energetic, resourceful and is just a very quick study when it comes to what an owner’s perspective would be in regards to procuring construction management services.”

## Tough times

The recession has changed the business of competing for projects. The biggest difference, Winch said, is owners are more motivated by price than ever before. Teams are being asked to

submit a cost proposal, either sealed or not, in addition to doing an interview.

Winch said firms should spend as much time on their cost proposals as they do on presentations because awards can be decided by small amounts of money. She said clients have lost projects this year because of price, not presentations.

The cost proposal must be competitive — a good interview won't win a project — but the number needs to be real. Her teams are spending time in presentations educating clients about what they're really buying.

Companies are submitting more proposals and doing more interviews. To cope with increased demand, Winch recommends firms create templates and branding for presentations. Time savers include having standard templates for PowerPoint presentations, banners and procedures, and a photo library.

But the recession also has driven firms to become more innovative and creative. Teams are using theatrical tools such as video, and using modeling and timelines to show the details of a project.

Communication Resources has also made changes. It has been working on some projects — such as the National Renewable Energy Lab in Golden, Colo. — as part of a team, acting as a consultant on communications. Communication Resources' coaching costs \$3,000 a day, but it charges less as a team member.

Winch said she's kept her rates steady for the past five years. She recently helped a team win a \$100 million job. "At that point, my rates are pretty good."

But in today's market, many firms can't afford coaching. To help those customers, Communication Resources recently created a \$395 DVD with training materials on interviews, strategies and goals.

The type of work Communication Resources is getting these days has changed with the market. Over the past year, coaching has increased, but the volume of training has gone down.

## What clients need

Winning a job begins by understanding the problems unique to a project and responding to them, Winch said. Every shortlisted firm could do the job. What wins, Winch said, is how a team identifies the owner's underlying need. The interview is built around those problems and solutions.

Communication Resources visits the project site, interviews owners, does research and might travel to similar sites across the country with the shortlisted team.

"Why a firm would spend time, resources and energy creating a presentation that repeats their qualifications is beyond me," she said. "The entire presentation ought to be about the client, the project, the pain points."

For example, she coached a team that was going after the Bell Museum in Minneapolis. At the time, the Museum of the North in Fairbanks was the newest natural history museum in the country. During a phone call, the Fairbanks museum director asked if Winch could visit. Winch flew to Alaska with her team and they learned first hand about the needs of such museums.

Her team built its presentation around those needs and won the job. Winch said this kind of effort is required if you really want a project.

"You can't do it on a couple hundred thousand dollar proj-

## Some tips for teams

- Carefully read the RFP or RFQ — all of it.
- Do Internet research.
- Go see the site.
- Don't change your presentation the morning of the interview.
- Don't tape yourself. Focus on getting comfortable with the material and building body memory.
- Practice so you look like a team during the interview. Watch and smile as fellow team members are talking.
- Avoid overly staged interviews.
- Rehearse, but not too much.
- Make the presentation about the owner.

ect but you can do it on a multi-million (dollar) project," she said. "Your money is far better spent doing that than locking your team up for three days in a conference room to present your project on PowerPoint, which is what a lot of teams do."

She recently helped Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup win the \$500 million Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall. Hal Davis, senior vice president of SmithGroup, said, "Meg's quick insight and understanding of the personalities of each of the four firm partners was especially helpful in blending a cohesive presentation."

Winch said she asks good questions and listens carefully. She talks to users and tries to find out what makes their job difficult and how it could be improved. "I fall in love with every one of the teams I work with and I think that shows in what we do."

Winch works nationwide. In August, 70 percent of her time was spent away from Seattle, but in September most of her time was spent here.

She offers a few tips for teams trying to win more projects. During presentations, team members need to listen, lean forward and smile at each other.

But the most important thing is the go/no-go decision because it costs a lot of money to get on a shortlist. In today's market, owners can shortlist a number of firms but Winch likes to see just two or three.

"The amount of money these organizations spend getting ready for a major pursuit is mind boggling," she said. "If you can't make up your mind among three, there's something wrong with that."

Winch said the recession has tested a lot of firms and she has been impressed with the dedication of those she works with. "What is wonderful about this recession is the firms we work with have not lost their souls... My clients have not lost their way in the recession, they're just working harder to do good work on tighter margins."

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