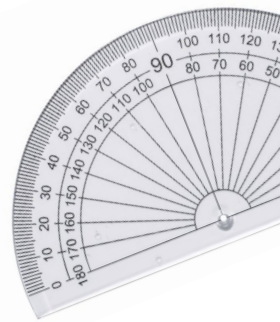


VISIBLE EXPERTSM

Research Study

Architecture, Engineering, and Construction Edition



Visible ExpertSM Research Study: Architecture, Engineering, and Construction Edition
Copyright © 2015 | Visible ExpertSM is a Service Mark of Hinge Strategy, LLC.

Published by Hinge Research Institute
1851 Alexander Bell Drive, Suite 350, Reston, Virginia 20191

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Design by Hinge.
Visit our website at www.hingemarketing.com

Table of Contents

4	A Period of Transition: An Expert Perspective
6	Purpose and Methodology
9	The Client Experience and High Visibility Expertise
18	How In-House Visible Experts SM Impact Their Firms
24	Visible Expert SM Profile: Sarah Susanka
26	Conclusion
27	About Hinge
28	Additional Resources

A Period of Transition: An Expert Perspective

In many ways, the AEC industry is a bellwether for the professional services marketplace as a whole. AEC firms face a period of transition, but in the midst of these challenges is great opportunity. Our research shows the issues that are most prominent in the minds of decision-makers, and the initiatives they are taking to get ahead.

The Hinge Research Institute studied over 530 professional services firms to identify their most commonly identified challenges and top-priority marketing initiatives. The results paint a clear picture for firms today — and the way forward for those firms that wish to grow.

Finding New Business

For firms in the AEC industry, the top two business challenges are clear:

- 60.2% of respondents said “Attracting & Developing New Business”
- 41.7% of respondents said “Finding/Keeping Good People”

Generating new business is a priority for firms across professional services industries, and AEC is no different. In this report, we explore the strategies through which firms may not only generate new business, but also mitigate the challenges of a competitive marketplace and attract the best talent.

The Importance of Expertise

The marketing initiatives prioritized by AEC firms are revealing. In order to generate new business, AEC firms report three top marketing initiatives:

- 43.2% plan to “Make Clients More Aware of Services”
- 39.0% plan to “Increase the Brand Visibility of the Firm”
- 37.9% plan to “Increase the Visibility of Firm Experts”

The most effective techniques to support these three initiatives coincide. By creating and promoting educational content online — content that demonstrates the nature and breadth of firms’ and individuals’ expertise — AEC firms can clarify their services by tying them clearly to their expertise.

In these goals, AEC firms benefit from the expanded credibility afforded by high-visibility experts. This research report shows how firms can successfully cultivate such experts and position themselves to succeed in the future.



Sylvia Montgomery, CPSM

Senior Partner, Hinge

Purpose & Methodology

High visibility experts are changing the way AEC firms go to market.

Our [past research](#)¹ has found that architecture, engineering, and construction services buyers seek out providers with a high profile and strong reputation in the marketplace. This demand prompted us to investigate the phenomenon of high visibility expertise more closely.

We conducted a comprehensive study on this group of professionals we call Visible ExpertsSM. How do they impact their firms and their clients? Why and how do buyers seek them out? Which tools do Visible ExpertsSM use to raise their profile, and can different techniques increase one's profile more quickly?

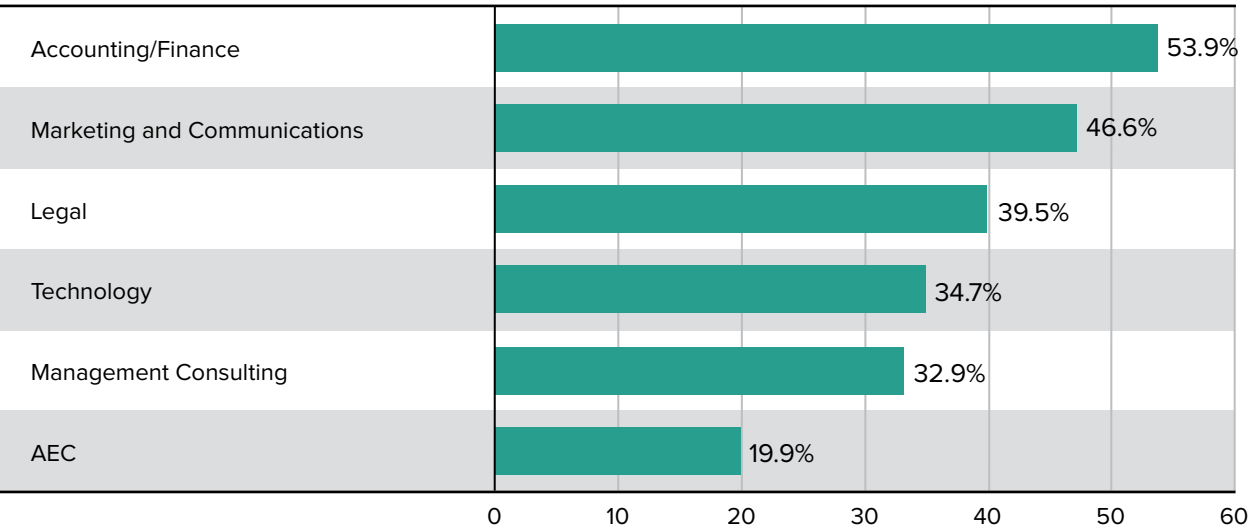


¹www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/book-inside-the-buyers-brain

We surveyed 1,028 professional services purchasers who bought services in technology, accounting and finance, law, consulting, and architecture, engineering, and construction.

Figure 1 shows which types of services our respondents purchased. Many buyers engaged several different types of professional services.

Figure 1. Types of Professional Services Purchased



Additionally, we interviewed 130 Visible Experts™. In our purchasers survey and expert interviews, we covered experts’ impact on their clients and firms, buyers’ perspectives on identifying and engaging experts, and the tools that experts used to cultivate their reputations.

The breakdown of the experts’ industries can be found in the full [Visible Expert research report](#). The experts were ranked into the following five tiers.



Level 1: The Resident Expert

Recognized as an expert by clients, staff, and colleagues, these individuals are not well known outside of their firms.



Level 2: The Local Hero

Known in the local market, these individuals' expertise has started to move beyond the boundaries of the firm, occasionally drawing business based on their reputation.



Level 3: The Rising Star

Individuals whose reputations are moving onto the regional or even national stage, attracting better business at higher fees.



Level 4: The Industry Rock Star

Nationally recognized names within a given niche, attracting top-tier business opportunities and commanding premium fees for the individual and the firm.



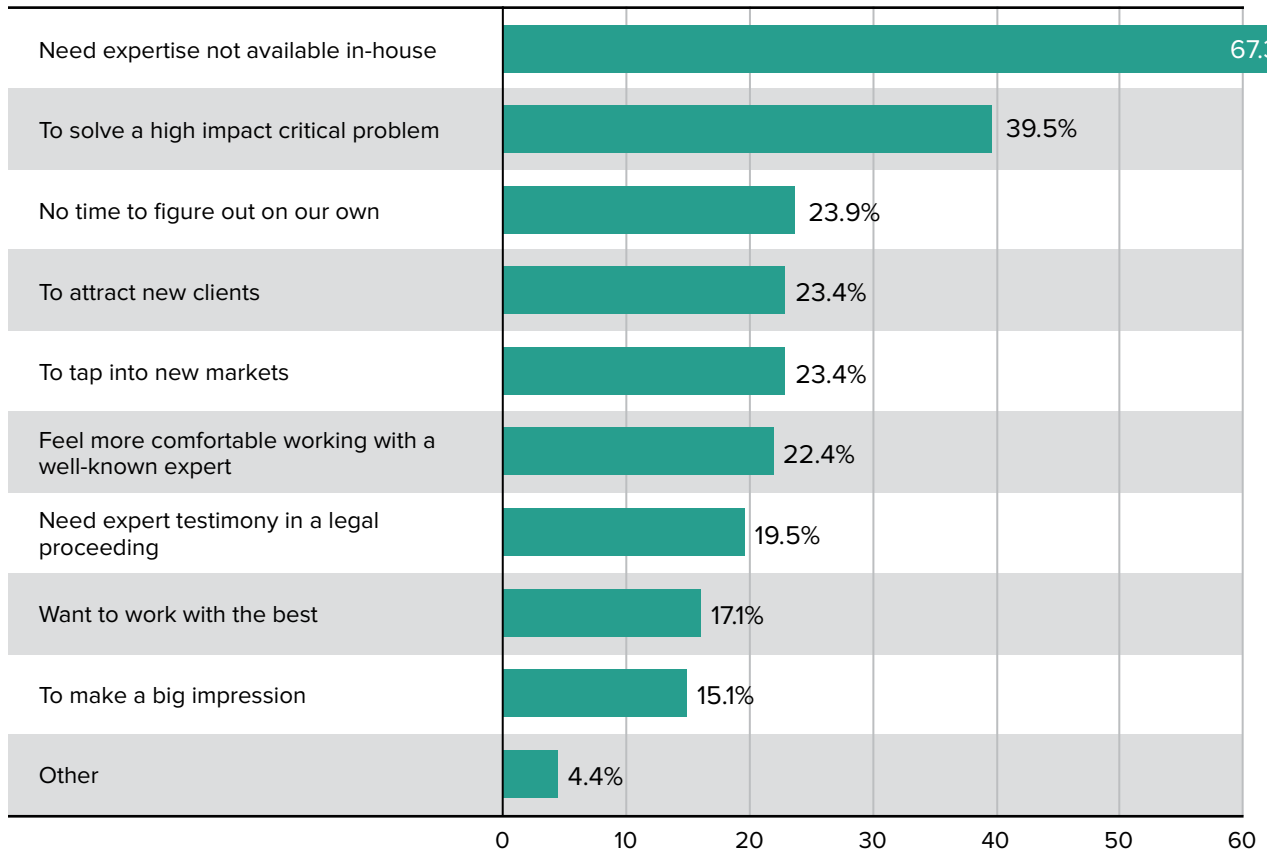
Level 5: The Superstar

Individuals who have broken out of a particular niche and become synonymous with an entire area of expertise, with major firms seeking to associate themselves with them.

The Client Experience and High Visibility Expertise

What motivates purchasers to seek out high visibility AEC expertise? When we asked the buyers in our research sample, respondents indicated that multiple factors influenced their search.

Figure 2. Why AEC Services Buyers Sought Visible ExpertsSM



A lack of in-house expertise is the most common motivator, but respondents' reasons for seeking an expert aren't reducible to a single need. The reasons cited generally fall into four categories:

Solving a critical problem

Reasons such as time constraints, the need to solve a high-impact problem, or a lack of internal expertise fall under this category and represent the three most common factors in a Visible Expert™ search.

Building the brand and winning new business

Some of the next most common factors are a desire to attract new clients and tap into new markets — in these cases, buyers look to high visibility experts to help shape their brand and bring in new business through their reputation and knowledge.

The confidence conferred by an expert

"We feel more comfortable working with a well-known expert." "We want to work with the best." These factors illustrate a powerful psychological phenomenon among buyers: engaging an expert creates a sense of confidence for the purchaser.

For a legal proceeding

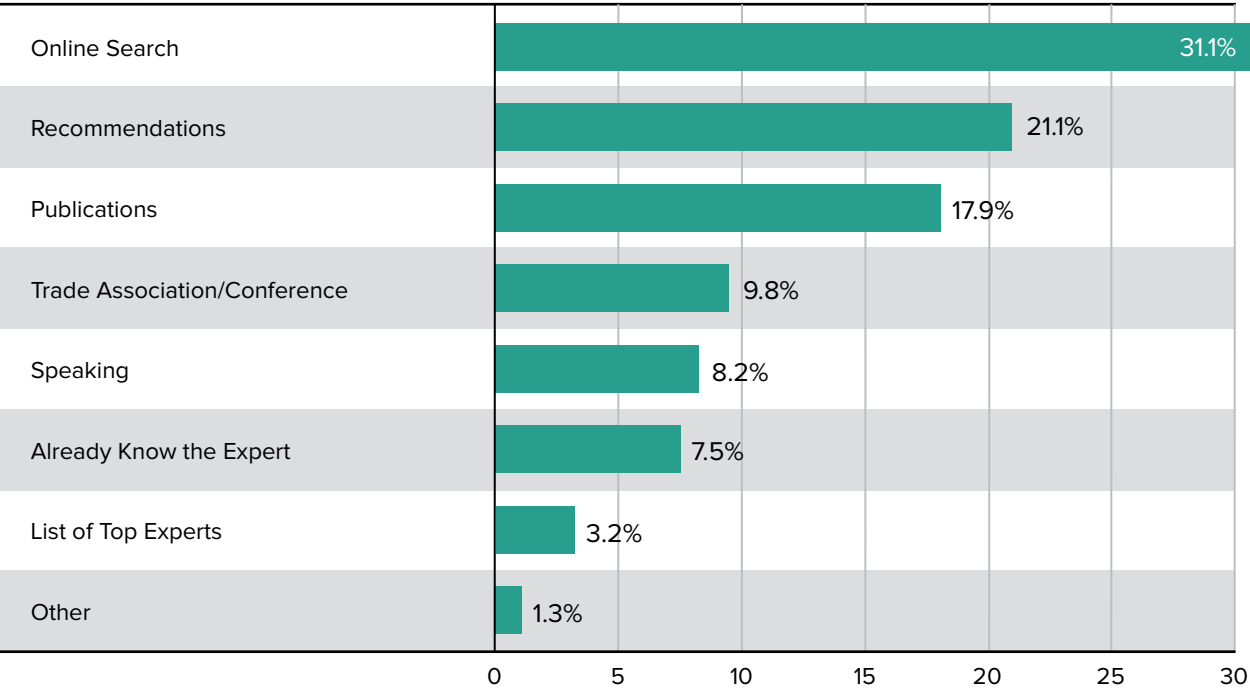
The final category for our respondents involves engaging an expert to give testimony in a legal proceeding.



How Clients Find Visible ExpertsSM

Our next question aimed to understand how buyers find Visible ExpertsSM. The results indicate a dramatic shift in the mechanics of reputation for AEC expertise:

Figure 3. How AEC Services Buyers Find Experts



Cumulatively, online techniques have eclipsed more traditional methods such as recommendations. The diversity and accessibility of information online has made tools such as online search, LinkedIn, webinars, and more increasingly fundamental.

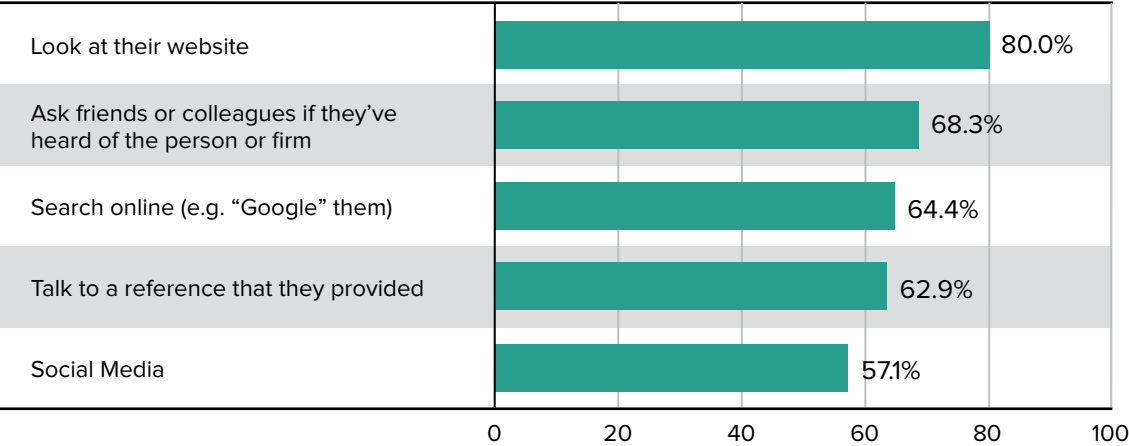
Offline, recommendations and publications remain significant ways for buyers to find experts. Recommendations, in particular, reflect the existing strength of an individual or provider’s brand.

Some experts have achieved such a prominence in their industries that they are already known, while others raise their profiles through industry events and speaking engagements.

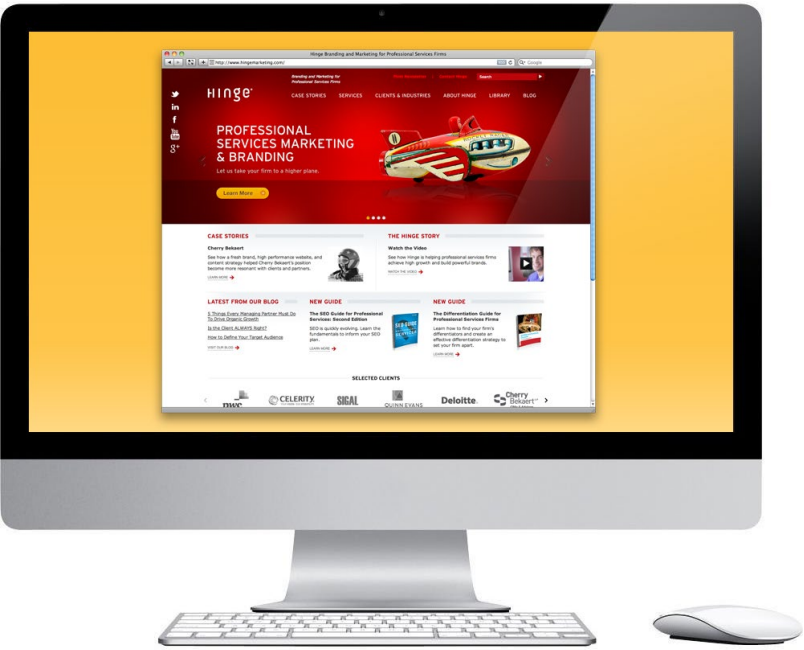
How Purchasers Check Out Service Providers

We asked buyers, "Before you hire a professional services provider, how do you 'check them out'?" As distinct from identifying a new provider, these searchers may seek to evaluate providers they have heard of or compare providers with whom they are familiar.

Figure 4. How Buyers "Check Out" AEC Services Providers



Most commonly, buyers looked at sellers' websites, consulted their own friends and colleagues, and searched online.



A provider's website was buyers' most common source of information.

Websites:

Sellers' websites are the most frequently used resource for these evaluations. About 80% of buyers are looking to the web to evaluate you as a potential service provider. Whether sellers are consciously shaping their online presences or not, buyers are looking there for information.

Friends and colleagues:

As the second most commonly cited resource, friends and colleagues play an important role. Buyers trust them already and can communicate with them relatively easily. These contacts' ability to speak to a seller's expertise will depend in part on the firm's visibility.

Online search:

The third most common strategy is online search, underscoring the significance of an online brand and the rising importance of search engine optimization. Even when a service provider's website serves as an effective public face, many buyers will only arrive on the site through a search engine.

References provided by the seller:

References provided by the seller remain important, with over 60% of firms using them, but they are a supplementary rather than central resource.

Social media:

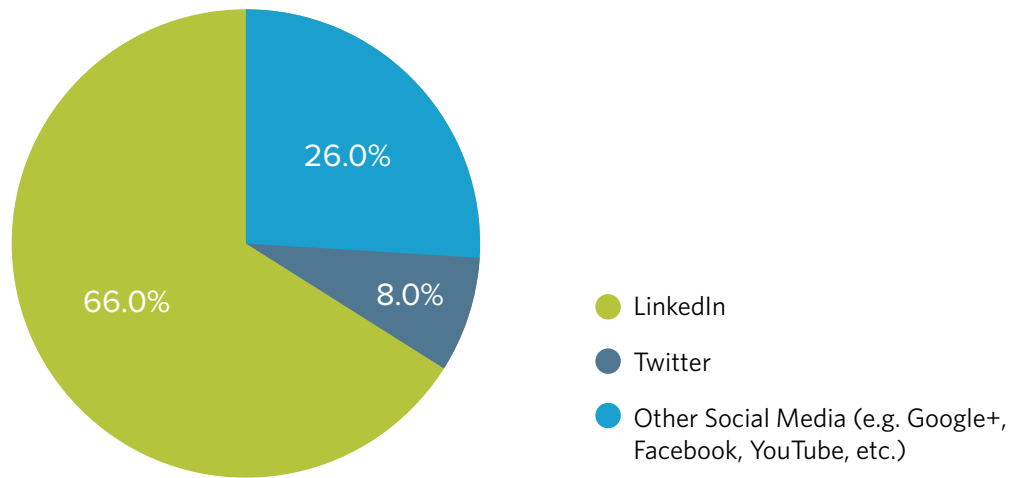
In the next section, we will explore the platforms buyers are using. Social media may be one method by which buyers seek information from friends and colleagues.

One explanation for this turn to the web is the ease of finding information online—in most cases, a buyer can Google your firm, check out your website, and explore conversation about your work on social media in less time than it would take to get in touch with a reference you've provided.

Types of Social Media Used

Which social media platforms do AEC buyers use? Our respondents reported the following usage:

Figure 5. Social Media Platforms Used by AEC Buyers



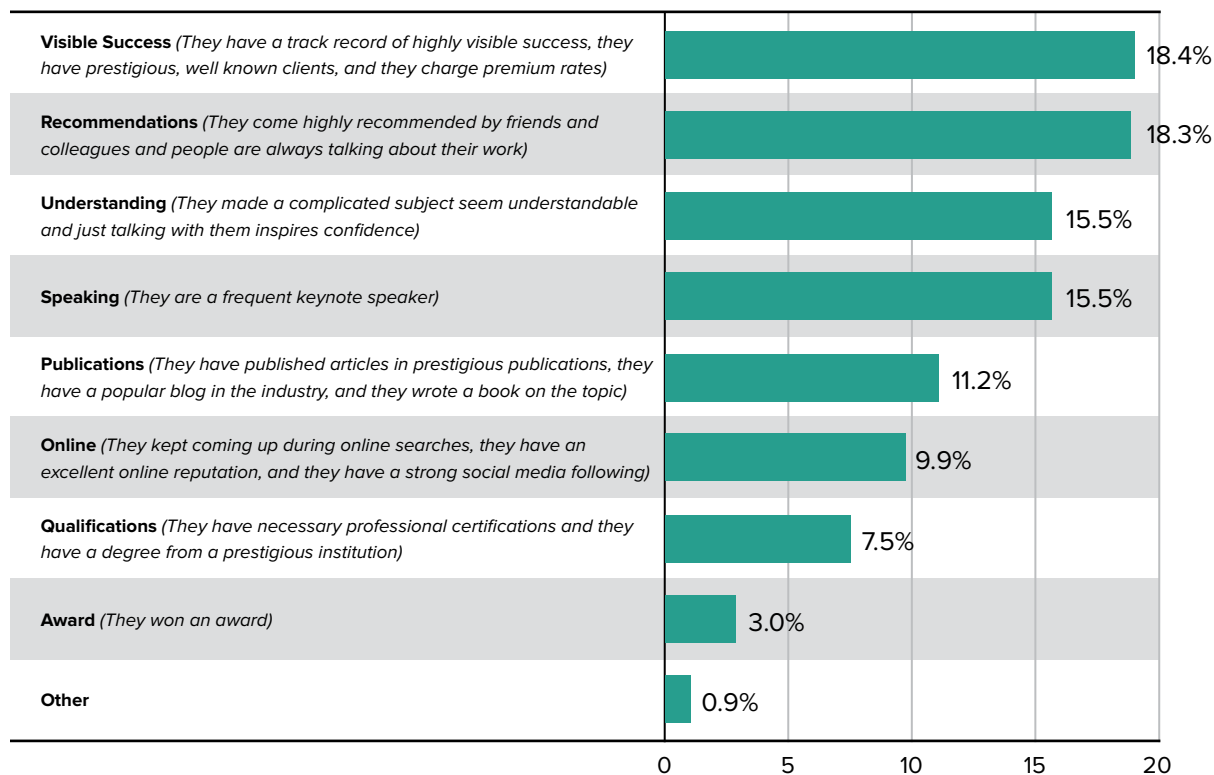
Among social media platforms, LinkedIn is far and away the most commonly used source of information on service providers. Given the platform's professional focus, this doesn't come as a surprise — and sends a clear message as to where sellers should focus their social media efforts. Notably, LinkedIn provides one venue in which buyers may easily turn to their friends and colleagues for advice.



What Convinces Clients You're a Visible ExpertSM

How do buyers evaluate Visible Experts? What convinces them that someone is an expert in the AEC industry?

Figure 6. What Convinces AEC Buyers that Someone is a Visible ExpertSM



An individual's track record of visible success is the single most important factor for AEC buyers, nearly tied with the recommendations of friends and colleagues. Buyers' perceptions of expertise can't be simplified to one or two factors, however.

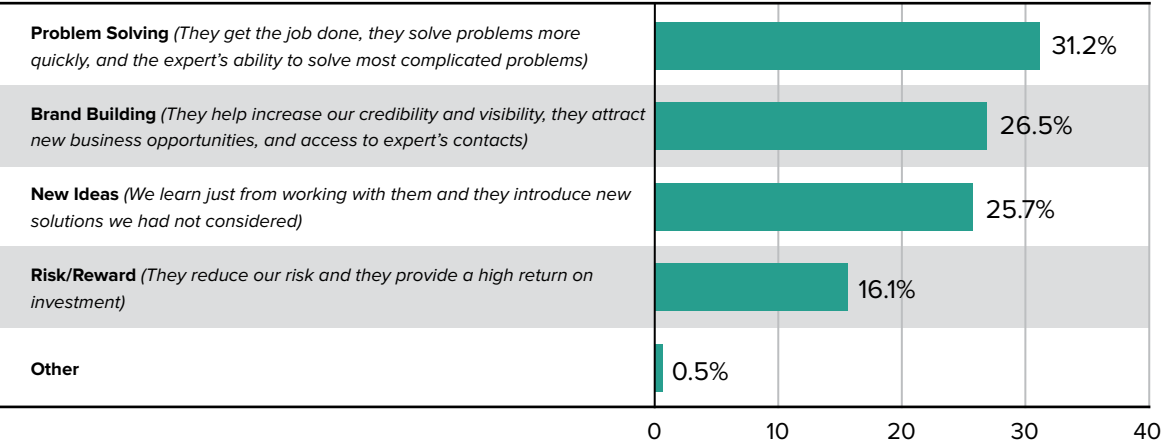
The next most persuasive characteristics of expertise are noteworthy. Over 15% of buyers are convinced by an expert's ability to make complex ideas understandable, or because simply speaking with the expert engenders confidence.

For Visible ExpertsSM, these "soft" communication skills are key. Indeed, they're a critical part of what makes their expertise accessible and therefore visible. Certifications matter, but they don't speak nearly as loudly as explanatory power.

How Clients Benefit from Working with Visible ExpertsSM

What benefits do purchasers find once they identify and engage a Visible ExpertSM?

Figure 7. Benefits of Working with a Visible ExpertSM in AEC



Paired with the previous chart, these results tell an interesting story. Buyers name many benefits, but these do not align consistently with the reasons they wanted Visible ExpertsSM.

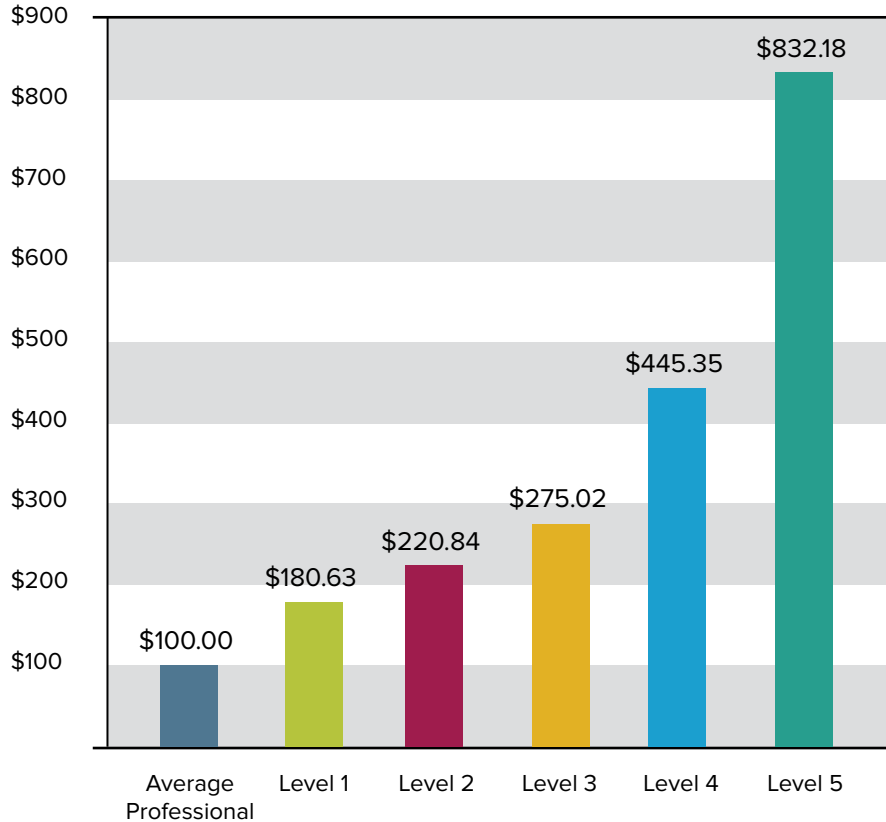
Note the high ranking of new learning. Clients didn't seek out Visible ExpertsSM for this purpose, but in retrospect they identify it as among the top benefits of the engagement.

For these clients, working with a Visible ExpertSM solved their problem quickly with an innovative solution, even if the problem was highly complicated. Overall, they increased their credibility and reduced their risk. In addition to all of these intended outcomes, they gained new knowledge that unveiled previously unconsidered paths.

How Visible ExpertsSM Impact Billing Rates

How much are AEC services purchasers willing to pay to engage a Visible ExpertSM? We baselined an average professional at an hourly rate of \$100, asking buyers how much they would be willing to pay for each level of visible expertise relative to this baseline. The chart below presents the averages reported by our respondents:

Figure 8. Hourly Rates Firms Will Pay for Visible ExpertsSM in AEC by Level



A Level 5 Visible ExpertSM commands over **8 times** the rate of the average professional.

Every level of visible expertise commands a premium rate, starting at 180% of the baseline for a Level 1 Visible ExpertSM. As an individual's level of expertise increases, the rate they may command rises dramatically. A Level 5 expert commands over eight times the rate of the average professional.

How In-House Visible ExpertsSM Impact Their Firms

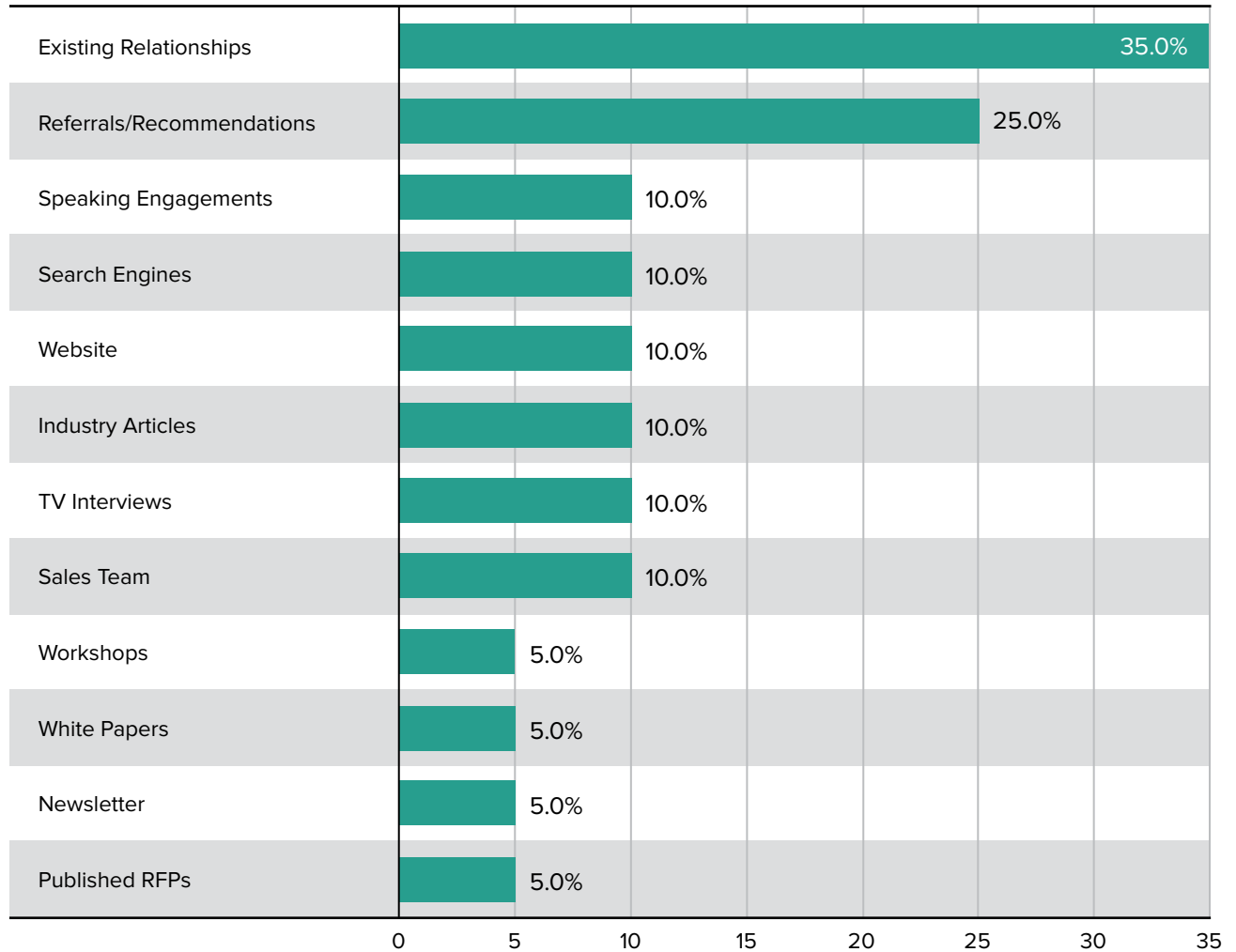
How do AEC professionals build their personal brands and achieve or bolster their Visible ExpertSM status? What are the most effective tools for building visibility, and where do Visible ExpertsSM focus their efforts?



What are the top lead sources for Visible ExpertsSM?

We sought to identify where experts found the most leads. We asked our respondents, "What are your top lead sources?"

Figure 9. Top Lead Sources Named by Visible ExpertsSM in AEC

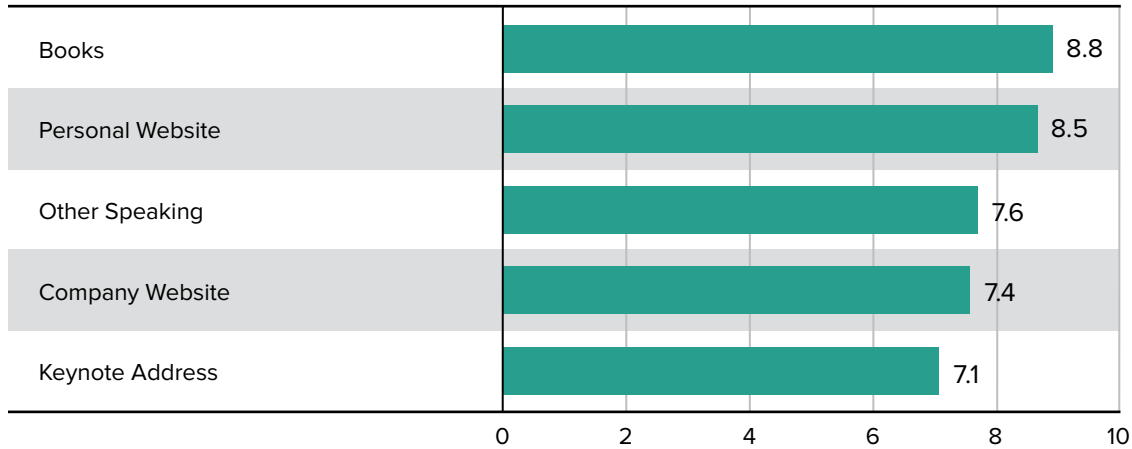


The results revealed that Visible ExpertsSM leads emerge from a variety of sources. Existing relationships are the most common lead source at 35%. Overall, Visible ExpertsSM in AEC saw a diversified range of lead sources.

What are the most impactful marketing tools for Visible ExpertsSM in AEC?

We wanted to find out which tools AEC experts perceived as having the greatest effect on their brands. So we asked respondents to rate the impact of each tool on a 0 to 10 scale, with 10 representing the highest impact.

Figure 10. The Most Impactful Marketing Tools for Visible ExpertsSM in AEC



Though books require a considerable degree of effort to produce, their credibility-building impact is high. AEC experts find both personal and company websites particularly impactful, as well as various forms of speaking engagements.

Although the tools represented above are not the only tools required for a comprehensive personal brand-building strategy, their high ranking indicates that these are core elements.

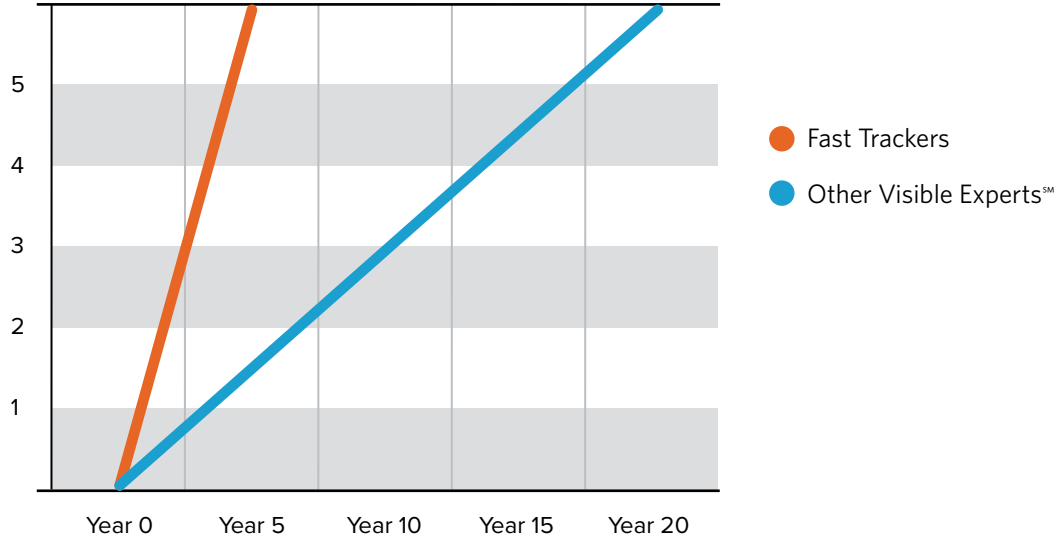
How Do Fast Trackers Ascend More Quickly?

As we analyzed the paths taken by our Visible ExpertSM respondents, we found something surprising. A subset of experts rose to high visibility at a faster pace than the rest.

This group of Visible Experts, the “Fast Trackers,” rose from the status of average expert to Level 5 in about five years, whereas the average Visible ExpertSM took about twenty years to reach the same point.

This phenomenon led us to wonder what Fast Trackers were doing differently. Were there consistent differences in the approaches of average Visible ExpertsSM and Fast Trackers? And if so, was the Fast Track approach replicable? We studied our results in greater depth and uncovered compelling answers about what sets Fast Trackers apart.

Figure 11. Average Speed of Ascent, Fast Trackers vs. Visible Experts



In this already elite group of experts, Fast Trackers exhibited a host of advantages over the average Visible ExpertSM.

Figure 12. Fast Tracker Advantages Over Other Visible ExpertsSM

The Fast Track Advantage

Compared to all other Visible ExpertsSM, Fast Trackers are:

- 4.5X more likely to receive speaking inquiries
- 3X more likely to charge higher rates
- 2X more likely to attract an audience that is already educated
- 1.4X more likely to attract more inbound leads
- 1.3X more likely to achieve more partnership opportunities

Fast Trackers were three times more likely than other Visible ExpertsSM to charge higher fees, and saw significant advantages in all aspects of their efforts: from an increased capacity for selectivity to a rise in speaking inquiries to an increase in inbound leads.



The Components of Fast Track Expertise

As we analyzed the activities of our Visible Experts™, we identified three characteristics that distinguish Fast Trackers from other Visible Experts™.

1. Focus on a Niche

Fast Trackers were 3.3 times as likely to focus on a target market as the average Visible Expert™.

We also observed that Fast Trackers were likelier to narrow their focus on a target market earlier in their careers. This focus makes it easier for Fast Trackers to differentiate themselves from the competition, which streamlines their branding and marketing efforts.

2. Embrace of Content Marketing

Educational content is an important visibility driver for all Visible Experts™, but Fast Trackers leveraged content more quickly, more frequently, and across more media.

Figure 13. Content Marketing Efforts: Fast Trackers vs. Visible Experts™

The Fast Track Advantage

Fast Trackers use content marketing earlier and more strategically, when compared to all other Visible Experts™.

- 4X more likely to blog and podcast earlier in their careers
- 2X more likely to create valuable content on a regular basis
- 1.9X more likely to use content to drive leads

3. Writing a Book

Nearly 85% of Fast Trackers have written a book focusing on their area of expertise. This was a strong trend among Visible Experts™ overall, and particularly among Fast Trackers; writing an authoritative book confers a tremendous degree of authority.

85%

of Fast Trackers have written a book.



VISIBLE EXPERTSM PROFILE

Sarah Susanka

When she launched a firm with her partner at the age of 26, architect Sarah Susanka (www.susanka.com) was already bucking the status quo. Unlike most major architecture firms, which made the bulk of their profits on major commercial projects, Sarah and her partner focused exclusively on the homeowner market. "There were very few large successful residential architecture firms doing single-family work," she says. "This struck me as strange because I knew that most people were fascinated by house design. There had to be a way to make services available and reasonably priced to reach them."

With the launch of her architecture firm, Sarah and her partner created a whole new business model, making a name for themselves at home and garden shows and other events where their target audience was likely to attend. "As well as exhibiting on the show floor, I also gave lectures at the Minneapolis Home & Garden Show, which became such a huge draw that they had to create a larger theatre space," she says. "It started a trend. Before our presence there, architects wouldn't consider exhibiting at a home show, but for many years now, the

Minneapolis events have to limit the number of architects because there are so many who want to participate. It's a great way to reach people trying to find information about house design services. Rather than the elitist attitude of *let people come to you*, I believe: *go where the people are.*"

The Book That Became a Movement

By 1996, the business Sarah helped found had grown to 45 employees and was one of the most sought-after residential architecture firms in Minnesota. Then in 1998 she wrote her best-selling first book, *The Not So Big House*. "The premise of the book is that houses are a reflection of ourselves," Sarah explains. "By making your house express the things that you care about, it reflects you back to yourself more effectively. So instead of thinking about 'resale value,' you should ask: what do I want? Build what you care about, and your friends will want to hang out there because it's an expression of you. It can be better rather than bigger, with dollars reapportioned out of square footage and into quality and character."

Visible Expert Profile: Sarah Susanka

The Not So Big House redefined the notion of “home” and became a cultural touchstone for a generation interested in sustainability, and smaller but better design for both home and community. Almost overnight, Sarah was launched into the spotlight, fielding media requests and being interviewed by heavyweights like Oprah, Charlie Rose, and Diane Rehm. “The book caused a huge shift in my life,” Sarah says. “I thought there would be an audience for it, but I didn’t realize how big. It was incredible to watch how, within 3 months of publication, I went from being known only in Minnesota to being known internationally.”

Sarah had reached a crossroads. “It was an important moment in my life,” she explains. “I thought, I can either keep doing what I am doing, or I can take the microphone that I’ve been handed and become a spokesperson for what I have written about, and this new movement I believe in so strongly.” She decided to take the big leap, leaving her firm in 1999 to dedicate herself to traveling, speaking, and writing in support of the *Not So Big* movement.

The book gave Sarah a platform to expand her *Not So Big* design principles into facets of life beyond the home: communities, the environment, and even how we live our lives. Although she still designs houses — most of them showhouses where the public can check out her *Not So Big* design principles for themselves — she spends much of her time sharing her ideas through public speaking and writing. She has been featured on Good Morning America, CNN, NPR, HGTV, and This Old House, and has been called upon for her insights on culture and design by *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times*. In between, she’s found time to write eight more books.

A Class of Her Own

In our research on Visible Experts, we found that specialization is critical to becoming a Visible Expert, and Sarah has recognized that truth in her own career. She explains it like this: “In order to be a Visible Expert, you have to stop caring what others will think of you. You have to break some rules, break out of what the world you are functioning in expects you to be. Unless you’re someone willing to think outside the box, you will be good at what you do, but you will not stand out beyond that convention.” This wisdom has been repeated by other Visible Experts in our research, from Tim Ash to Seth Godin. Bottom line? If you do what you believe in, you will automatically stand out from the crowd. Visibility comes from doing what you’re passionate about, and doing it without fear.

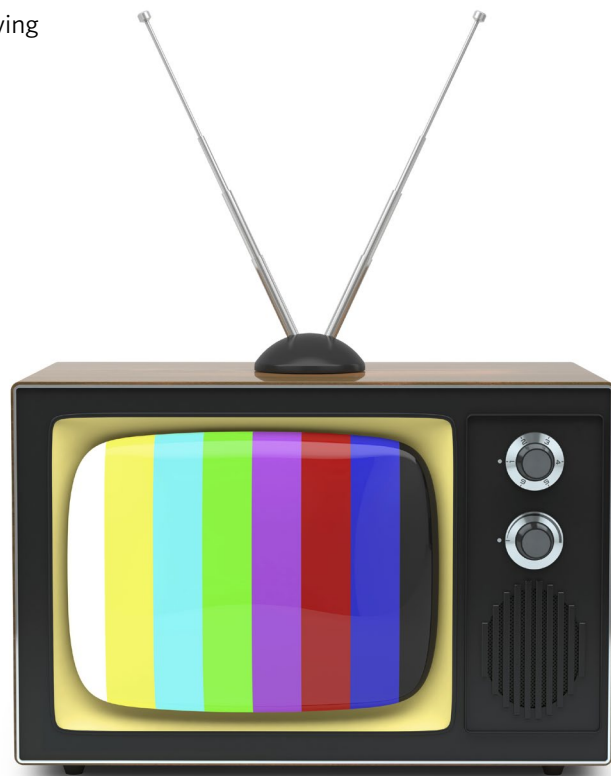
For others hoping to make their mark on the world, Sarah has some parting advice: “Whatever you focus on, that is what you become. If you focus on those nagging voices of doubt, that is what you become. So take the brakes off. It’s simply a matter of giving yourself the permission to say: *I really want to do this*. By giving voice to it, and taking the opportunities when they present themselves, it *will* happen.”

Conclusion

Building a reputation as an expert in the AEC field is a challenge — but it may be accomplished through the systematic process identified by our study.

By adopting a specialty, embracing content marketing, and pursuing visibility across a wide array of channels, AEC experts may rise quickly in stature. By doing so, they create a wide range of benefits not only for themselves and for their firms — raising billing rates and increasing leads — but also for their clients.

AEC firms seeking to build reputation and visibility for their firms as a whole should therefore consider cultivating Visible Expert™ status for the professionals in their organizations. The presence of high visibility experts helps firms build credibility and authority, driving higher growth and a stronger brand.



About Hinge



About the Hinge Research Institute

The **Hinge Research Institute** is a division of Hinge dedicated to studying high-growth professional services firms and their clients. We collect data and analyze marketplace trends to discover why some firms grow much faster than average while spending less on marketing. Our mission is to share this knowledge so that every professional services firm can prosper.

We invite you to explore our full library of research reports, books, and other publications at: www.hingemarketing.com/library

For more information about the Hinge Research Institute, please contact:

Research Director

Lee W. Frederiksen, Ph.D.
703.391.8870 | lfrederiksen@hingemarketing.com

How Hinge Can Help You

Hinge is a leading branding and marketing firm for the professional services. Our original research on high-growth firms and professional services buyers helps clients grow faster and be more profitable.

We provide a complete suite of services, including research and strategy, brand development, comprehensive online marketing programs, award-winning creative, content marketing, and lead-generating websites. We work with firms around the world with a special focus on architecture, engineering, construction, accounting, technology, management consulting, and legal services.

Like to keep it simple? Many of our clients choose to enjoy the cost benefit and ease of engaging with one of our multiple programs:

- Online Marketing Programs
- Branding Program
- High Performance Websites
- Visible ExpertSM Program

To find out how Hinge can help your professional services firm experience faster growth, contact us!

Hinge | 1851 Alexander Bell Drive, Suite 350, Reston, VA 20191
703.391.8870 | info@hingemarketing.com

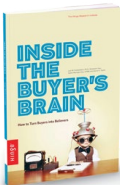
Additional Resources

Books:



The Visible ExpertSM: How to create industry stars. And why every professional services firm should care.

www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/the-visible-expert



Inside the Buyer's Brain: How to Turn Buyers into Believers

www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/book-inside-the-buyers-brain



Online Marketing for Professional Services

www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/online_marketing_for_professional_services

Executive Guides:



Visible ExpertsSM: How High Visibility Expertise Helps Professionals, Their Firms, and Their Clients

www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/visible-experts-how-high-visibility-experts-helps-professionals-their-firms



Becoming a Visible ExpertSM: A Guide for Professional Services Executives

www.hingemarketing.com/library/article/becoming_a_visible_expert_a_guide_for_professional_services_executives

Ask About Our Programs



Visible ExpertSM Program

Designed to help individuals cultivate an authoritative online presence in their area of expertise, the Visible ExpertSM Program delivers the tools and strategy required to build personal reputation and visibility in the marketplace. Based on extensive research, the Visible ExpertSM Program helps experts become recognized industry leaders.

Visible FirmSM Program

Designed to deliver more referrals, higher profits, and faster growth, the Visible FirmSM Program will build a powerful marketing platform to engage your audiences and build your visibility. Based on the most extensive research into high-growth firms ever conducted, the Visible FirmSM Program will ground your marketing in science and leverage your firm's expertise to draw in the right audiences.

High Performance Website Program

The High Performance Website Program makes your website into a lead-generating machine — bundling a beautiful new site with a suite of powerful of online tools. Designed from the ground up to attract the right visitors from search engines, a high performance site uses educational content, smart offers, and custom features to engage and convert qualified leads.

Branding Program

Our Branding Program is designed to carry your firm's reputation confidently into the marketplace by giving you a suite of powerful branding tools. Based on extensive research and analysis, our branding strategies increase your firm's credibility and visibility in your industry. The services will also differentiate your firm and provide clear, compelling messages for each of your target audiences.

For more information, call 703.391.8870 or email us at info@hingemarketing.com.